

Historein

Vol 19, No 1 (2020)

Global Labour History: Perspectives from East to West, from North to South



Efi Avdela, Dimitris Arvanitakis, Eliza A. Delveroudi, Evgenios Matthiopoulos, Socrates Petmezas and Tassos Sakellaropoulos, eds., Φυλετικές θεωρίες στην Ελλάδα: Προσλήψεις και χρήσεις στις επιστήμες, την πολιτική, τη λογοτεχνία και την ιστορία της τέχνης κατά τον 19ο και τον 20ό αιώνα [Racial theories in Greece: perception and use in science, politics, literature and art history in the 19th and 20th centuries]

Yannis Hamilakis

doi: [10.12681/historein.20182](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.20182)

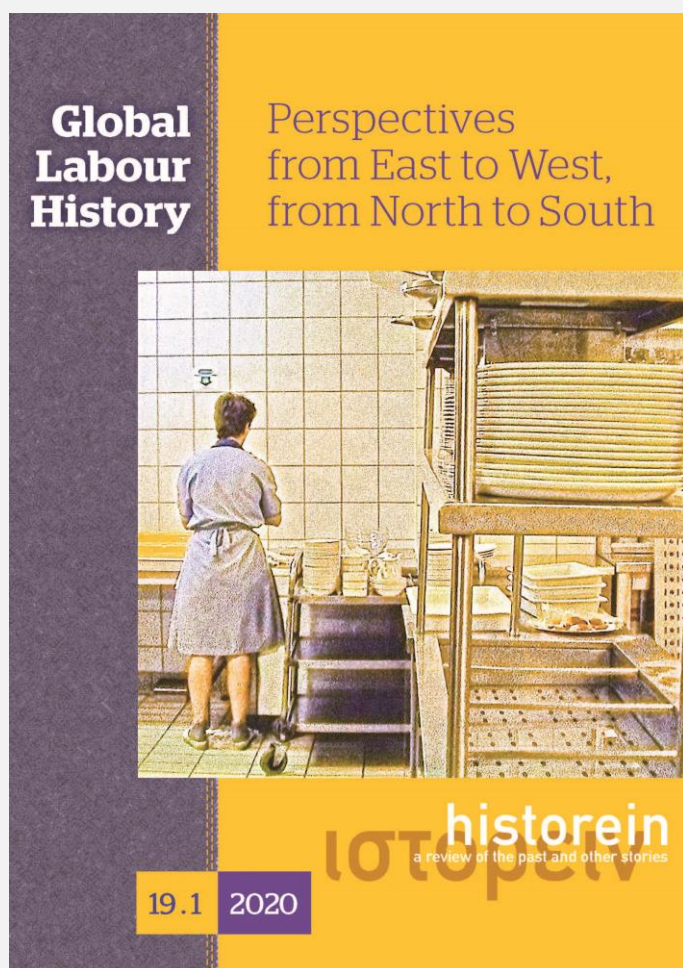
Copyright © 2020, Yannis Hamilakis



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Hamilakis, Y. (2020). Efi Avdela, Dimitris Arvanitakis, Eliza A. Delveroudi, Evgenios Matthiopoulos, Socrates Petmezas and Tassos Sakellaropoulos, eds., Φυλετικές θεωρίες στην Ελλάδα: Προσλήψεις και χρήσεις στις επιστήμες, την πολιτική, τη λογοτεχνία και την ιστορία της τέχνης κατά τον 19ο και τον 20ό αιώνα [Racial theories in Greece: perception and use in science, politics, literature and art history in the 19th and 20th centuries]. *Historein*, 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.20182>



Efi Avdela, et al. (eds.)
Φυλετικές θεωρίες στην Ελλάδα: Προσλήψεις και χρήσεις στις επιστήμες, την πολιτική, τη λογοτεχνία και την ιστορία της τέχνης κατά τον 19ο και τον 20ό αιώνα
[Racial theories in Greece: perception and use in science, politics, literature and art history in the 19th and 20th centuries]

Yannis Hamilakis

doi: 10.12681/historein.20182

To cite this article:

Hamilakis, Yannis. 2020. "Efi Avdela et al. (eds.), *Φυλετικές θεωρίες στην Ελλάδα: Προσλήψεις και χρήσεις στις επιστήμες, την πολιτική, τη λογοτεχνία και την ιστορία της τέχνης κατά τον 19ο και τον 20ό αιώνα* [Racial theories in Greece: perception and use in science, politics, literature and art history in the 19th and 20th centuries]". *Historein* 19 (1).
<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.20182>.

Efi Avdela, Dimitris Arvanitakis, Eliza Anna Delveroudi, Evgenios Matthiopoulos, Socrates Petmezas and Tassos Sakellaropoulos (eds.)

Φυλετικές θεωρίες στην Ελλάδα: Προσλήψεις και χρήσεις στις επιστήμες, την πολιτική, τη λογοτεχνία και την ιστορία της τέχνης κατά τον 19ο και τον 20ό αιώνα

[Racial theories in Greece: perception and use in science, politics, literature and art history in the 19th and 20th centuries]

Irakleio: Crete University Press and Philosophy School of the University of Crete Press, 2017. 520 pp.

Yannis Hamilakis

Brown University

I want to be clear from the start: this is a very important volume, one that we will be returning to for years to come. In all fairness, I also want to declare my personal connection with it: I too spoke at the conference on which the volume is based (Athens, January 2014), on the biopolitical dimensions of the physical anthropological-cum-archaeological work of Aris Poulianos, a topic I hope to return to. For reasons beyond my control, I was not able to submit the written version of the paper for this volume. I still recall the excitement that we all felt during the conference, the sense that we were opening up the discussion on a theme long neglected by scholarly work in Greece, despite some important studies such as those by Sevasti Trubeta.¹ We were also painfully aware that this endeavour is of the utmost urgency for more than scholarly reasons, in Greece and more broadly, given the fact that racist phenomena were (and are) in the news almost daily.

No wonder then that many awaited the publication of this book with great anticipation. And they were not disappointed. The editors are to be congratulated in assembling masterfully 19 chapters (plus a comprehensive and insightful introduction by Efi Avdela) written by scholars of anthropology, archaeology, history, history of art, literature, and other fields, and spanning the nineteenth century to the present. The book is divided into four parts. The first examines how racial theories have been implicated in the constitution of disciplines such as physical (Vangelis Karamanolakis, Georgia Kourtessi-

Philippakis) and social anthropology (Evthymios Papataxiarchis), medicine and public hygiene (Trubeta), and criminology (Advela); they also discuss racialised discourses and practices such as eugenics (George Kokkinos, Markos Karasarinis, plus many others). The second and the most extensive part is about the political uses of race in the work of key intellectuals such as Arthur de Gobineau, whose Greek connection is little known in the international discussion (Fotini Assimacopoulou), and Petros Vlastos (Paraskevas Matalas). It also examines racial discourse in Greek socialist thinking at the start of the twentieth century, focusing mostly on the reception of Darwinism by Marxists (Kostis Karpozilos). Other chapters deal with race, colonialism and empire in Greece during the First World War, given the presence of the Entente Forces there, which included troops from African countries (Effi Gazi); with race and craniometrics in Greek Macedonia (Tasos Kostopoulos); and with the racial undertones (primarily anti-Slavism and antisemitism) of anticommunism during the 1940s (Dimitris Kousouris).

The third part concerns the impact of racialised thinking in Greek literature and history of art. It includes chapters on literary writing and biosciences in the interwar years (Fragiski Ampatzopoulou), on Karagatsis (Miltos Pechlivanos), on race and nation in the discourses on art (Evgenios Matthiopoulos), and on Polish Austrian art historian Josef Strzygowski (Nikos Daskalothanasis). The final part, more eclectic than the rest, deals partly with the contradictions of racial thinking and partly with antisemitism. It also brings the discussion all the way up to the present day. Chapters here include a discussion on legal discourses, racial thinking and definitions of Greek nationality (Lambros Baltsiotis and Dimitris Christopoulos); public discourse on race and antiracism in Greece from the 1990s to the present in the light of wider cultural theory (Ioanna Laliotou); the reception of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, that well-known forgery which refuses to die and which is still popular in Greece (Dimitris Psarras, based on his book on the same theme); and antisemitism and the Greek church in the twentieth century (Stavros Zoumboulakis).

The book ends with a useful name index, although a thematic index and authors' biographies would also have been useful. While some authors situate their material in the broader international scholarly context, others limit the discussion to Greek sources and texts, a reflection of the diversity of their background and traditions. There is some overlap in the chapters, which was to be expected, but this does not distract from the value of the book. More often, the reader senses an internal dialogue among the different chapters, even a creative tension in which diverging views surface, enriching a debate which has only just started. In this respect, it would have been useful to have one or two conclusive-commentary chapters, pulling the threads together, pointing to emerging conclusions, and foregrounding topics for further research and discussion.

It is impossible to do justice to the richness of this book in a short review, and I would not even attempt to summarise it here. There are a couple of points, however, that are

worth stressing; no doubt subjective impressions, hopefully they will be useful in the urgent and politically pertinent debate that needs to commence. It seems that we, as a scholarly community working on Greece, had underestimated the extent and the impact of racialised discourses in various fields, although, as is pointed out time and again in the book, part of the problem is that race has often been hidden within the narratives on nation. But I would go further than that, and suggest that part of the problem in our critical discourses has been linguistic (or rather, sociolinguistic), as implied but not clearly discussed, in several chapters. When Greek politicians, intellectuals or lay members of the public use the word *φυλή*, they may mean many different things, and not necessarily race (as used, for example, in English). We have been walking on linguistic quicksand, given that we have inherited this word from ancient Greek, a context in which the word meant a clan or tribe, often defined by geographical location. Ancient Greece, however, and its legacy, as we know, formed the ideological cornerstone for both western, racialised and colonial modernity, as well as the Hellenic (or “modern Greek”) national imagination. On the top of this, the word *φυλετισμός*, as Daskalothanasis very usefully discusses (426–27), was invented in the ecclesiastical circles of the Patriarchate in Constantinople in the 1860 and 1870s, in the context of the schism of the Bulgarian Church from the Ecumenical Patriarchate. It was used since then by the church to denote opposition to the spread of the ideas of the nation.²

Furthermore, what are we to make of the term *ελληνική φυλή*, used in the first half of the twentieth century by Nazi sympathiser and key physical anthropologist at the University of Athens Ioannis Koumaris, as well as other scholars and intellectuals? Is this another name for the nation, albeit with clear biological rather than purely cultural features (given their emphasis on the Greek blood, and the need to maintain its purity)? Is it an attempt to juxtapose Greekness (in its continuity since antiquity) with the concept of the Aryan race used by their ideological and political allies, defending the purity of the nation and reminiscent of its cultural achievements while staying at the same time within the domain of biology and racialised science? And what about the use of the term “communist race” by anticommunist authors such as Stratis Myrivilis during the Greek Civil War (326)? The plasticity of the Greek term for “race” has been commented on by several authors but I feel that the only way to answer these questions is to carry out a detailed, contextually sensitive reading of the corpus for all key protagonists, as well as a study of its circulation in the public sphere. The chapters of this book are only the beginning of such an effort.

This close entanglement of race and nation, however, points to an underlying theme of this volume, and a necessity, which has not been openly addressed, save for a couple of chapters such as those by Gazi and Laliotou: that it is about time we situate Greek nationalism, with its specificities and peculiarities, within the broader field of colonial *and* racial modernity. That we link it to the social and intellectual production of whiteness and blackness,³ as well as to the various racialised hierarchies within such broad biological fictions which have become pertinent social facts. Racialised, colonial (or crypto-colonial)

modernity is no less relevant to Greece than to areas we consider colonies (or ex-colonies) proper, despite the social and historical differences. Greece as a country which carries the burden of Hellenism (western or indigenous)⁴ provides a privileged ground for such a study – after all, the best-known nineteenth- and early twentieth-century textbooks on the hierarchy of races used depictions of ancient Greek sculpture (often in Roman renderings) to illustrate whiteness, as the cover of this book reminds us. Such a reframing of the discussion on nation to include colonialism, whiteness and blackness, as well as their intersection with class and gender, is topical and urgent. Not only will it reinvigorate the scholarly discourse on identity but it will also help us understand contemporary white European and Greek responses to one of our era’s crucial challenges, mass migration from the Global South.

Finally, as the editors note, the volume contains relatively little on *contemporary* scholarly and public discourses on race. And yet, it provides an excellent historical background to study them. What are we to make, for example, of the popularity of recent ancient DNA studies, especially those that claim to have found genetic continuities between “Minoans” or “Mycenaeans” and contemporary “Greeks”?⁵ Or of those that claim to have genetically refuted Fallmerayer’s ideas?⁶ Critical, serious and sustained scrutiny of such studies is long overdue, and it needs to expose their often racialised logic,⁷ despite the different terminology used and the authoritative discourse of genetic science. For example, in what way are Koumaris’ convictions and concerns (between the 1930s and 1970) on the purity of Greek blood and the risk of it being “racially” mixed up connected with the claims of one of the key authors of these DNA studies, the academician George Stamatoyannopoulos? This scientist, in an interview for *Ta Nea* newspaper in 2010, stated that the talk about “the purity of the Greek race is nonsense”, but, at the same time, that “We have to hurry up” as “in a few years, we will be so mixed up, it will be hard to make any sense. We have to preserve, at least in the laboratory, the genetic specificity of populations. Including the Greek ones.”⁸

Further, why is it that ancient DNA studies use, for periods such as the Bronze Age, homogenising categories framed as ethnonyms like “Minoans” and “Mycenaeans” to label human skeletons, reproducing thus the scheme “pots equals people”, long abandoned by most archaeologists? Moreover, beyond this scholarly critique, a study of the Greek social life of archaeo-genetics, their popular renderings and appeal, is urgently needed.⁹ A stark and bleak reminder of such a need is the fact that the DNA study on the “genetic origins of the Minoans and Mycenaeans”, which also made claims that “modern Greeks resemble the Mycenaeans” (and its authors spoke in the media about direct linear, genetic continuity), made it to the front page of the Nazi Golden Dawn website, and was reproduced extensively by countless other nationalist and fascist ones.¹⁰

- ¹ See, for example, Sevasti Trubeta, *Physical Anthropology, Race, and Eugenics in Greece (1880s–1970s)* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).
- ² Cf. Paschalis M. Kitromilides, “‘Imagined Communities’ and the Origins of the National Question in the Balkans,” *European History Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1989): 149–92, esp. 181.
- ³ Cf. Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. and intro. by Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
- ⁴ Yannis Hamilakis, *The Nation and its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology, and National Imagination in Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- ⁵ Iosif Lazaridis et al., “Genetic origins of the Minoans and Mycenaeans,” *Nature* 548 (2017): 214–18.
- ⁶ George Stamatoyannopoulos et al., “Genetics of the Peloponnesean Populations and the Theory of Extinction of the Medieval Peloponnesean Greeks,” *European Journal of Human Genetics* 25 (2017): 637–45.
- ⁷ Jonathan Marks, *Is Science Racist?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).
- ⁸ Viki Harisopoulou, “‘Σκάβει’ το DNA των Μακεδόνων” [He “digs” the DNA of the Macedonians], *Ta Nea*, 19 November 2010, accessed 26 October 2019, <https://www.tanea.gr/2010/11/19/lifearts/culture/skabei-sto-dna-twn-makedonwn/>.
- ⁹ Cf. Alondra Nelson, *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation after the Genome* (Boston: Beacon, 2016).
- ¹⁰ Cf. Yannis Hamilakis, “Who are you Calling Mycenaean?” *LRB Blog*, 10 August 2017, accessed 26 October 2019, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2017/08/10/yannis-hamilakis/who-are-you-calling-mycenaean>.