

Historein

Vol 19, No 1 (2020)

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



Leonidas Karakatsanis and Nikolaos Papadogiannis, eds., *The Politics of Culture in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus: Performing the Left Since the Sixties*

Alexis Rappas

doi: [10.12681/historein.20243](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.20243)

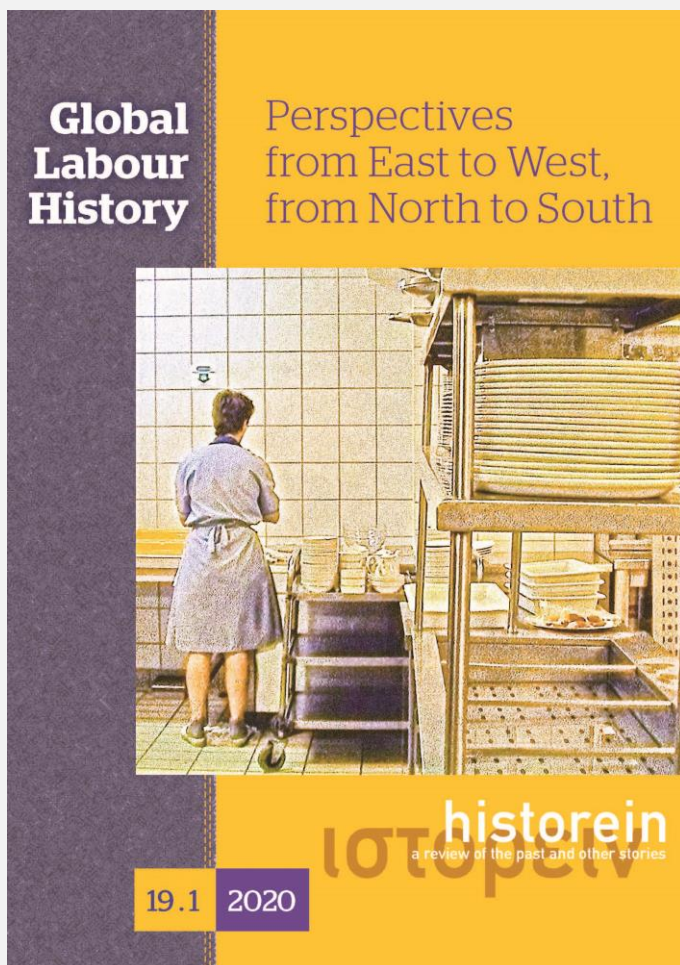
Copyright © 2020, Alexis Rappas



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:

Rappas, A. (2020). Leonidas Karakatsanis and Nikolaos Papadogiannis, eds., *The Politics of Culture in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus: Performing the Left Since the Sixties*. *Historein*, 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.20243>



Leonidas Karakatsanis and Nikolaos Papadogiannis (eds.)
The Politics of Culture in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus: Performing the Left Since the Sixties

Alexis Rappas

doi: 10.12681/historein.20243

To cite this article:

Rappas, Alexis. 2020. "Leonidas Karakatsanis and Nikolaos Papadogiannis (eds.), *The Politics of Culture in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus: Performing the Left Since the Sixties*". *Historein* 19 (1). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.20243>.

Leonidas Karakatsanis and Nikolaos Papadogiannis (eds.)
*The Politics of Culture in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus:
Performing the Left Since the Sixties*
London: Routledge, 2017. 321 pp.

Alexis Rappas
Koç University

Within the last ten years, leftwing movements in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus successively ignited hope and provoked disillusion. Winning the 2008 presidential elections, the communist Progressive Party of the Working People (Akel) was seen as the political force which would bring about the reunification of Cyprus. That dream, however, remains elusive. In May 2013, protests against government-sponsored urban renewal and for the right to the city in Istanbul quickly escalated into quasi-nationwide demonstrations against the authoritarianism of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Having brought to the fore multiple, interrelated concerns regarding democratic governance, civil rights, the environment and free media, the Gezi Park movement was repressed some three months after it began. Finally, amid a worsening economic and social crisis, the 2015 elections in Greece brought Syriza to power, with promises of renegotiating the draconian austerity measures imposed by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund. Instead, Syriza carried on with austerity, disregarding in the process the results of the July 2015 referendum they had themselves called and which rejected the terms of the financial assistance offered by the EU and IMF.

Against such a context, *The Politics of Culture in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus* may be seen as a corrective to declinist visions of the left. Suitably published in Routledge's recent *Advances in Mediterranean Studies* series, the main focus of this collective volume is on the performance of the left in/as culture in the three southeast European countries that never passed under communist rule and which all experienced a difficult democratic trajectory. The period covered spans from the 1960s to the present and the leftwing movements scrutinised share, despite their varying iterations, an attachment to the militancy of the 1960s with its distinctive antiauthoritarianism, antiimperialism and support for national liberation movements in the Global South. The approach adopted in the essays is phenomenological and decidedly not institutional or normative. Indeed, the book

examines manifestations of cultures of the left, as well as the different cultures running through these various performances, regardless of whether these self-identify or are identified as being of the left. This flexible framework reveals the left in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus as an adaptable, regenerative force, which has remained relevant irrespective of the electoral fortunes of the official parties and formations that claim to represent it.

The book is remarkably coherent in its analysis of “performances of left-wing culture and/or broader cultures *in* left-wing performance” (308), despite the vast diversity of the contributors’ disciplinary backgrounds and of their specific angles of approach. The volume is divided in four large parts comprising three chapters each, as it examines, broadly, the role of memory (Part 1), art (Part 2), the tension between modernity and tradition (Part 3), and space (Part 4) in performances of the left. The editors provide a general introduction and a “Beyond Concluding” part containing an interview with scholars/activists Foti Benlisoy of Istanbul and Nikos Moudouros of Nicosia as well as their own afterthoughts. The organisation of the book is balanced from both a regional and a thematic point of view. Hence, each of the four parts covers the three countries, which are studied every time through an effective combination of perspectives productively complementing each other. For example, in Part 2 leftwing culture in art is approached through the Kurdish music scene (in a chapter by Alev Kuruoğlu and Wendelmoet Hamelink), three Cypriot museum exhibitions (in a contribution by Despo Pasia) and a chapter by Esra Yıldız on “Genç Sinema” (Young Cinema), a collective of militant Turkish filmmakers influential in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A largely shared theoretical framework further reinforces the unity of the volume, as most contributions rely on the same references drawn from cultural theory, radical political theory, critical geography or gender theory but not, tellingly, political science.

The structure of the book is perfectly compatible with its stated aims. I will, however, highlight the four larger contributions which, in my view, clearly stand out. The first of these contributions is the manner in which an approach focused on culture discloses the left as a dynamic, adaptable and multilayered movement largely transcending its institutional enunciations. Hence, Andreas Panayiotou shows how in Cyprus, from the 1940s onwards, *silloyi* – multipurpose village and city cultural clubs – functioned as incubators where leftism could grow under conditions of illegality (after the British colonial authorities outlawed Akel in 1955) but also above and outside the party line. In his study of urban activism in the *gecekondu* (slums) of Istanbul from 1975 to 1980, Christopher Houston expounds the difference in strategy between the established left, represented here by the Turkish Communist Party (TKP) and the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions, and smaller radical formations such as the Maoist People’s Liberation Army (Halk Kurtuluş) and Revolutionary Path (Devrimci Yol). While the former used strikes as an instrument of mass mobilisation, the latter sought to improve the living conditions of *gecekondu* inhabitants. For

them “learning to be an activist involved an apprenticeship in spatial politics, developing practitioners’ awareness of the urban environment and its affordances for action” (240). In his own chapter, Murat Erdal İlican analyses the Occupy Buffer Zone (OBZ) movement in Cyprus, which established itself in the UN-guarded no man’s land (or buffer zone) separating the Greek Cypriot south from the Turkish Cypriot north from October 2011 to May 2012. This “glocal performance of radical politics” (250) expressed disappointment in the failure of the traditional left north and south of the Cyprus divide to deliver on their promise to reunify the island. It also constituted a radical critique of the concepts, such as “sovereignty”, and injunctions, such as the necessity to choose a neatly-bound identity, which so far have structured the debates on the Cyprus question. Finally Maria Doukakarou examines how two more or less clearly identifiable groups of students at the University of Crete in Rethymno (Panhellenic Wing for Student Struggle [PASP] and Leftwing Unionist Intervention [AEP]) articulated their leftwing political identity through varying appropriations of the notion of autonomy in the early 2000s.

Exceeding the confines of institutional representation or ideological dogmatism, regional leftwing movements also connect with one another across national borders. The second major contribution of this volume – although one perhaps underrepresented in the book – concerns precisely the entanglements and cross-fertilisation between leftwing movements in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus. Certain chapters explicitly take up this theme. For instance, Leonidas Karakatsanis’ essay follows the symbolic trajectory and successive recoding of a famous 1965 picture showing the seemingly embracing bodies of Turkish Cypriot Akel member Derviş Kavazoğlu and Greek Cypriot trade unionist Kostas Misiaoulis. This was taken immediately after they had been shot by the Turkish Cypriot nationalist militia Turkish Resistance Organisation (TMT). The author thus focuses on the various political significations attributed to this image, and its role in the construction of a “transnational memory of violence as an alternative means of bonding and performing the politics of friendship” (75). Hence, he considers specific uses of the picture, for example in the publication of a booklet by the Association for the Solidarity between the Peoples of Turkey and Greece (EAMLET) in Athens in 1985 or in a 1988 trial in Ankara of leftwing activists. Such regional leftwing entanglements are also evoked in the book’s closing interview, for example when Benlisoy underscores how Alexis Grigoropoulos and Berkin Elvan, teenage victims of police violence in Athens in 2008 and Istanbul in 2014, respectively, became transnational symbols of the left in Greece and in Turkey.

As Karakatsanis shows in his contribution, the process by which Kavazoğlu and Misiaoulis were transformed into an emblem of an eastern Mediterranean transnational left involved some historical editing and a silencing of contentious aspects of this event likely to compromise the solidarity between activists of different ethnic and national backgrounds. Indeed, the third overarching contribution of this book concerns the ambivalent relations between leftwing activism and nationalism. Mary Ikoniadou thus examines *Pyrros* (Torch), an illustrated magazine published by the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) in the 1960s

and aimed at the political refugees established in the German Democratic Republic after the end of the Greek Civil War. *Pyrros* promoted the KKE's version of Greek patriotism, meant to counter the official, strongly anticommunist nationalism enforced by the government in Athens. As Ikoniadou explains, however, this remained exclusionary, particularly in its nostalgic representations of the Aegean Sea, which ignored the presence of Turkey. Indeed as Nikos Christofis confirms in his own chapter, by the end of the Second World War patriotism had imposed itself as the seemingly insuperable horizon of political debate. He thus compares the discourses of resistance developed in the 1950s and 1960s by the leftwing Union of the Democratic Left (EDA) in Greece and Turkish Workers Party (TIP) against the rightwing governments of these countries. He shows that both cases drew on mutually exclusive histories of national resistance, be it the Greek War of Independence or Kemalism.

History is indeed used, reconfigured and appropriated by the left in its strategies of both local and transnational legitimation. Indeed, a final overarching theme that stands out in the volume concerns the manner in which every performance of the left is, or relies on, a reenactment of a memory. Maria Michou's essay thus explores the function of the memoirs of Ourania Staveri and Kitty Arseni, both focusing on their incarceration and torture at the hands of the Greek government as a result of their communist activism, the former during the civil war and the latter under the military junta. This allows the writer to examine "minority remembrances written from the multiple margins of the nation of being women, politicized and left-wingers" (34). Alice von Bieberstein studies the contradictions besetting the Turkish 2008–2009 "I Apologise Campaign", captained by academics and intellectuals seeking to open a public debate on the question of the Armenian genocide. Putting themselves at risk, both official and unofficial, these activists who, for a great part, had suffered state repression following the 1980 military coup, nonetheless ended up aligning themselves with the unchanging core of the state's position on sovereignty. This derived from their decision to promote the notion of the "Great Catastrophe" as a substitute for "genocide" and of "Anatolianism" for an imagined foundational identity shared by Turks and Armenians. This episode illustrates what Karakatsanis characterises, in his own chapter, as a process, recurrent in the region, whereby "discourses of reconciliation" evolve into "monologues of friendship" (93).

In concluding this review, I will insist on the volume's singularity of purpose and overall coherence despite the wealth of the topics covered and the diversity of the academic profiles of the contributors. Of note is also its innovative regrouping in the same analytical field of the left in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus and the cogency of each individual chapter. The transnational exchanges between the leftwing movements of the three countries could perhaps have been scrutinised more systematically. Yet, the fact that they were not is a statement in itself, particularly when we consider one of the arguments of the

book, according to which performances of the left in the broader region still take on a national form. This volume will undoubtedly become a reference for scholars of the left in the eastern Mediterranean, whether they are historians, anthropologists, cultural theorists, film and media experts, or curators.