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Mathieu Grenet, La fabrique communautaire: Les Grecs à Venise, Livourne et Marseille, 1770–1840

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Mathieu Grenet

La fabrique communautaire:

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Athens: École française d'Athènes; Rome: École française de Rome, 2016.
456 pp.

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The main question I had when I started reading this book was whether it is any different from the venerable tradition of Greek diaspora studies. Does it add anything that has not already been addressed by the plethora of informative works that have long shaped the field, works such as those by Katsiardi-Hering, Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou, Vlami, Hassiotis, Kardasis, Seirinidou, Sideri and others?¹ The answer I have come up with is twofold: it does; and, in some ways, it does not.

Let's start with the first part of my answer. To begin with, unlike the aforementioned works, this is not a book about the Greek diaspora. As its title in fact suggests, it is a book about the sociological question of what makes a community (*la fabrique communautaire*). The Greek diaspora communities in Venice, Livorno and Marseilles between 1770 and 1840 serve, essentially, as an observatory from which to examine this question. And the author does so with remarkable depth and clarity. Second, the field of Greek diaspora studies is not Grenet's primary point of reference. His work is inscribed instead within the relatively recent revisionist historiography on Jewish Mediterranean diasporas, with the work of Francesca Trivellato taking centre stage.² As a result, this double reframing brings a number of fresh insights into the subject under scrutiny.

Grenet's strongest point is that he does not take communities for granted, as natural categories existing outside of time and space; and he has the patience and, of course, the research expertise (this book is founded on archival research conducted in three countries and at least four languages) to demonstrate as much in exhaustive detail. Communities, he tells us, are created through constant renegotiation of their frontiers. They are dynamic and mobile formations which are shaped and dissolved incessantly through the multiple and ever-changing webs of human interaction. One is not born a member of the "Greek" diaspora; one becomes one (or does not). Here, Greekness is treated as a situational and relational quality, one always perceived in context. The author manages to successfully de-

essentialise the Greek diasporic communities by following a number of paths. Let's explore some of them.

First of all – and in the vein of the work historians have done on the Venetian Jewish ghetto – Grenet argues that what we describe as “Greek” communities abroad were, in reality, an amalgam of people coming from different parts of the Ottoman, Venetian and Russian worlds; they were plural communities consisting of different (sometimes entangled, sometimes separate or even competing) ethnicities, cultures and languages. Strong regional identities persisted throughout the early modern and modern periods. Thus, for example, a bylaw voted by the Greeks of Venice in 1572 divided the community of the city (*nazione greca*) into six different *patrie*: Crete and the Archipelago, Nafplio and Monemvasia, Zakynthos and Kefalonia, Corfu, Cyprus, and “Upper Greece” (*Grecia Superiore*), corresponding more or less to the geography of the Venetian *Stato da Màr*. The conflicts between regional groups within the Greek diasporas (especially Ionians, Chians, Peloponnesians, Cretans, Cypriots and Epirots) might not have been as intense as those between the different Jewish *nazioni* (Sephardic, Ashkenazi, Italian, German, etc.), but they certainly defined the ways Greeks composed and recomposed their individual and collective identities. What is more, Grenet discerns the plural character of these diasporic communities in the multiple and shifting political allegiances, as well as the different belongings, developed by their members. An illustrative example comes from a certain Isaiou in 1798 Marseilles: a “*Grec de nation*”, he was at the same time described as a “Smyrniot”, an “Ottoman subject”, an individual “under Swedish protection” (*protégé suédois*), who was a Catholic in religion and married to a Protestant (255–60).

This latter point connects to the author's second exploratory path: if the Greeks were so diverse in terms of political belonging, geographical origins, culture and even language, was there not perhaps one thing that kept them together, namely religion? Well, not really. Behind the facade of religious homogeneity – the author tells us – there was a great deal of nuance and diversity in the Greek communities' religiosity. Take Marseilles. The majority of the Greeks who arrived there with the Napoleonic army in 1802 were Catholic. Or Livorno, which in the sixteenth century hosted a Greek population made up principally of Catholics and Jews, while with the passage of time the Greek Orthodox came to outnumber them. Consequently, the presence of Catholic Greeks (Uniate, Melkite or Roman) and Greek Jews in their ranks leads us to question whether Greekness can be exclusively defined on the grounds of the Orthodox religion (30–39). But even in cases where the majority of the community's population was Greek Orthodox, as in Venice or throughout the Greco-Venetian *Stato da Màr*, what this “Greek Orthodoxy” meant is a much more complicated story than we nowadays assume. Echoing recent studies on this issue, Grenet recalls that until at least the late eighteenth century, religion was a malleable space of identity, one characterised by continuous transgressions and personal and local syncretism (219–20).³

Another commonplace the author takes issue with is the stereotype of “the Greek merchant”. He argues that the social composition of these groups was far too diverse to fit comfortably under the long-cherished label of “trade diasporas”. The “marine proletariat” – captains, sailors, stevedores and other temporary migrants and people of the ports – are a case in point (78–87).

Finally, against the heroic reading of the Greek “colonies” as the laboratories of Greek independence, Grenet shows that not everyone in these communities was in favour of such a thing. As is only natural, the responses to the Greek Revolution were as diverse as the people inhabiting these communities. They ranged from wholehearted support for the Greek cause – with people taking up arms in defence of the revolutionaries, or risking arrest for helping Greek refugees find their way to Italian-Habsburg shores (I could not help but be reminded here of today’s Italy with Salvini’s anti-refugee laws) – to hostility against the resurgent Greeks for the interruption they had caused to commercial activities in the Levant and for the proliferation of piracy (327–31, 343, 361–63).

It would be altogether unjust to halt my praise of this book here. Among the many merits of this work, let me simply list three: first of all, unlike most works on diasporic communities, this one adopts a comparative approach. Grenet does so not by treating the three cities, Venice, Livorno and Marseilles, in separate chapters, but by merging the space and walking the reader from one city to another and then back again. Second, this book contains a convincing criticism of the celebratory myth of “cosmopolitanism” and early modern “tolerance” (114–17). Echoing the words of Pamela Ballinger in an equally excellent treatment of the same topic, Grenet effectively shows that “this ‘crossroads’ of peoples and cultures was the product of state engineering with the design of utility and profit, not tolerance for its own sake or a celebratory multiculturalism as we often think of it today”.⁴ Then as now, peoples coexisted, but did not really live together. And this brings me to my last point: what I particularly liked about this reading is its territorialisation of the Greek presence. Leafing through the pages of this book while I was in Venice, I felt that the multiple Greek topographies of the city were coming back to life: the *calli* in which the Greeks wandered, the sound of the bells of San Giorgio dei Greci, the smell of their hospital, the passage of their funeral processions. Grenet’s detailed research of the topography of the Greek communities in these three cities reminded me indeed that all history is embedded in space and only through a study of/on location can it be fully understood (135–79).

Yet, there is always room for criticism. As I implied in the beginning, there is an aspect of this work that left me dissatisfied. Much as the author does an excellent job in deconstructing the *fait communautaire*, I believe that he is only half-way through doing the same with the *fait diasporique*. In other words, communities are convincingly de-essentialised, while diasporas for their part are not. The basic framework for understanding the notion of “diaspora” here remains much the same: they are understood as organised communities abroad, in places far away from a presumed national core. While the author

takes care to show the multiple meanings of Greekness, the Ottoman (with an interesting reference to the “*nation grecque-ottomane de Marseille*” [26]), Venetian, French, Habsburg and Russian allegiances of the Greeks (with a remarkable section on the Russian sway over the Greek diasporic communities under scrutiny [279–87]), he does not overtly challenge the paradigm of “Greek diaspora” as it has been transmitted to us by conventional historiography. Why are these diasporas “Greek”, rather than Venetian or Ottoman, or Chiot, or even Mediterranean? Was there really, before the establishment of the Greek state, a Greek “centre” from where these people were “dispersed”? It is my conviction that Greeks (like most peoples for that matter) always circulated, created networks and settled in certain places – and these places, these flows, became in turn their homes. They came to be seen as “diasporas” only with the Greek Revolution and the creation of the Greek state (regardless of the fact that – as the author rightly points out – a number of them were never identified with that state [363]). I would love to see these points more clearly and convincingly spelled out.

My final word here concerns the narrative qualities of this book. I confess I did not expect much in this regard since I knew that the book was based on Grenet’s PhD thesis (completed in 2010 at the European University Institute of Florence). No one is a master storyteller in their PhD. But as I went through its approximately 400 densely written pages, I often found myself struggling with the author’s highly theoretical and methodological writing: too sociological for the tastes of someone who, like me, understands history as humanities rather than social sciences. But these are, I guess, personal tastes. When all is said and done, I feel myself to be richer for having read this book.

¹ Ioannis K. Hassiotis, Olga Katsiardi-Hering and Evridiki Ambatzi, eds., *Οι Έλληνες στη διασπορά: 15ος–21ος αι.* [The Greeks in the diaspora: 15th–18th centuries] (Athens: Greek Parliament, 2006); Olga Katsiardi-Hering, *Η Ελληνική παροικία της Τεργέστης (1751–1830)* [The Greek community in Trieste, 1751–1830] (Athens: University of Athens, 1986), 2 vols; Artemis Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou, *Η ελληνική κοινότητα της Βενετίας (1797–1866): διοικητική και οικονομική οργάνωση, εκπαιδευτική και πολιτική δραστηριότητα* [The Greek community of Venice, 1797–1866: Administrative and economic organisation, educational and political activity] (Thessaloniki: Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 1978); Despina Vlami, *Το φιορίνι, το σιτάρι και η οδός του κήπου: Έλληνες έμποροι στο Λιβόρνο 1750–1868* [The florin, wheat and the street of the garden: Greek merchants in Livorno, 1750–1868] (Athens: Themelio, 2000); Vassilis Kardasis, *Diaspora Merchants in the Black Sea: The Greeks in Southern Russia, 1775–1861* (Lanham: Lexington, 2001); Vaso Seirinidou, *Έλληνες στη Βιέννη: (18ος–μέσα 19ου αιώνα)* [Greeks in Vienna, 18th–mid–19th centuries] (Athens: Irodotos, 2011); Aloï Sideri, *Έλληνες φοιτητές στο Πανεπιστήμιο της Πίζας (1806–1861)* [Greek students in the University of Pisa, 1806–1861] (Athens: Historical Archive of Greek Youth, 1989), 2 vols.

² Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); but also Evelyne Oliel-Grausz, “Networks and Communication in the Sephardi Diaspora: An Added Dimension to the Concept of Port Jews and Port Jewries,” *Jewish Culture and History* 7, no. 1–2 (2004): 61–76; Mathilde Monge and Natalia Muchnik, *L’Europe des diasporas (XVIe–XVIIIe siècles)* (Paris: PUF, 2019); Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid, eds., *The Jews of Early Modern Venice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

³ Theodossios Nikolaidis, “‘Local Religion’ in Corfu: Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 29, no. 2 (2014): 155–68; Daphne Lappa, “Ma pure vi è questa strada di mezzo: Χριστιανοί του Ανατολικού Δόγματος στην πόλη της Βενετικής Κέρκυρας: Μια θρησκευτικότητα της μεθορίου (16ος–18ος αι.)” [Eastern-rite Christians in the city of Venetian Corfu: A religiosity of the frontier, 16th–18th centuries], *Mnimon* 36 (2019): 83–118.

⁴ Pamela Ballinger, “Imperial Nostalgia: Mythologizing Habsburg Trieste,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2003): 93.