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Gender and Identity in Contemporary Greece

**Graduate Conference,
18 October 2008**

**by Eirini Kotsovoli
and Nikolaos Papadogiannis***

University of Oxford
and University of Cambridge

The graduate one-day conference on 'Gender and Identity in Contemporary Greece' took place in Oxford on 18 October 2008, convened by Eirini Kotsovoli and Nikolaos Papadogiannis. It attracted nine papers from graduate students, studying at or connected to British universities, as well as two keynote lectures, by Efi Avdela and Peter Loizos. The presentations explored the forging of gender identities from the perspectives of various disciplines: literature, history, political science, social/cultural anthropology and sociolinguistics. A common concern was the difficult task of employing a conceptual framework that would allow a de-essentialised approach of gender, which would not equate the latter with either 'women' or 'heterosexual women and men', as has often happened in historiography and the humanities in general; such a viewpoint would help encompass a broad variety of femininities and masculinities, homosexual and heterosexual. Besides that, all the papers addressed the issue of how the category

of gender should be approached, especially in relation to class, race, age and national identities. In this vein, the conceptual framework offered by Judith Butler as well as the recent revision of the notion of 'hegemonic masculinity' put forth by Connell and Messerschmidt were addressed in various papers. Moreover, the discussions during the conference allowed a more comprehensive examination of the deficits of the 'modernisation' paradigm in the analysis of gender relations in post-Second World War Greece.

The panels began with presentations revolving around the question of what the interrelation of film and literature with sociohistorical factors is. Eirini Kotsovoli and Victoria Reuter examined gender representations in the works of Maro Douka and Eugenia Fakinou, analysing a gamut of subject positions, such as that of the 'politicised woman'. Reuter, concentrated on the female body as presented in Fakinou's *The Seventh Garment*; how through the use of magical realism the body is transformed as a storytelling agent, connecting past and present, while narrating history as part of the subjective narrative, thus becoming the interface and the context from which history is remembered and produced. The male voice and body fades away in Fakinou's literary narrative; in doing so the author is able to focus on the ways in which the feminised experience of history differs from absolutist versions of nationalist historical narratives. Kotsovoli presented how author Maro Douka forms a cultural representation of the female experience with social and political overtones. By reflecting on the female subjectivity of the late 1960s–early 1970s, the author addressed how the female gender identity evolves within hegemonic masculinities – entrenched in Greek society and politics of the time. Using Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*, the paper ultimately examined how the literary narrative deconstructs

the subject's formation of gender identity in the given period. By creating narratives that reveal tendencies for subjective and collective reflexivity, Douka formulates a commentary on the modern Greek female experience, one that stems from and ultimately returns to the self-assertion of the gendered Self. Achilleas Hadjikyriacou investigated the interaction between social and filmic worlds in Greece in the period from 1949 to 1967, aiming to provide insights into how masculinity and gender relations as social, cultural and visual products were negotiated and transformed. In particular, he highlighted the 'eroticisation' and 'objectification' of the feminine body in popular cinema and women's magazines in the 1960s. Eirini Theodoropoulou examined the intersection of class and gender representations in a number of very recent TV series and novels such as *Latremenoï mou geitones* and *Mykonos Blues* respectively, locating differentiations in linguistic expression. Drawing from research findings, Theodoropoulou explored gender resonating with the social constructivist paradigm from a sociolinguistic perspective. Using the representations of northern suburban Athenian women, she illustrated the stylistic and social practices they abided by within Greek popular culture.

The issue of politicisation was brought into the fore by other papers. Katherine Stefanos drew upon the argument by Anastasia Vervenioti that a form of sociopolitical 'ostracism' was, in many cases, instigated not only by the state, but also by the Communist Party in post-Civil War Greece, to focus on the examination of the construction of femininity in the hegemonic nationalist discourse of that period together with the suffering and traumatising experienced by women who had served in the Democratic Army of Greece. Nikos Papadogiannis examined the sexual relations that developed within the

framework of communist youth identities in Greece in the first period of the *Metapolitefsi* (1974–81). His analysis challenged the drawing of conclusions merely from prescriptive, normative texts and indicated varieties in the reception of the official language of communist youth groups by members of different class, age and rank. Thus, he argued against the diffusion of the 'sexual liberation' model, which is the dominant paradigm in the analysis of youth cultures of the 1960s and 1970s in Europe, and in favour of discerning multiple and ambiguous models of transformation of sexual relations, even within the same national context. In particular, he explored the ambiguous impact of the intense politicisation of the immediate post-dictatorship years, which helped both disseminate premarital sexual relations as well as constrain them, and situated them within the framework of the heterosexual couple. He also analysed alternative forms of sexual relations, which were brought to the fore by politicised subjects, which appeared in the late 1970s. These patterns, however, as he claimed, also reproduced gendered hierarchies at the expense of heterosexual women and homosexual men.

Despite the fact that the papers limited their scope to the case-study of Greece, the latter was not approached as a fixed entity. On the contrary, the flows of people and cultural products which made and remade the borders of 'Greekness' were explored. Elizabeth Hough analysed the cultural impact of long-term relationships between local men and tourist women on the Greek island of Symi. Her paper traced the effects of these relationships on the gender identities of both Symiot men and women, highlighting how gender can serve as a vehicle for demonstrating personal qualities associated with "modernity" and "Europe" and, in doing so, create a means of social differentiation and distinction. As such, it re-

flects broader debates in the local society regarding the impact of tourism and the need to balance 'tradition' with 'modernisation'. Nayia Kamenou explored how 'Cypriotness' is positioned towards 'Greekness' in the Republic of Cyprus in the 2000s by a number of collective subjects and what are the implications of this relation for representations of femininity and masculinity. She argued that the nationalism–gender–sexuality axis should be understood as a circular and reciprocal rather than a linear and one-sided relationship. By taking into consideration the effectiveness – or not – of regional and international legal and political mechanisms on national identities and societal attitudes, she criticised what she labelled as queer theory's totalising tendencies, which she described as manifest in its rejection of a strategic employment of human rights, gender and sexuality political identities. As a solution, she argued in favour of the redirection of theoretical debates pertaining to identities and subjectivities and calls for a bottom-up educational ethic, which, as she claimed, promises to neutralise current understandings of 'gender', 'sexuality', 'agency' and 'human rights'. Eleni Stamou showed how female, first-generation Albanian immigrant, high-school students experienced their distancing from young female immigrant socialities as a form of 'sexual liberation'. These papers discussed extensively Sofka Zinovieff's contribution on *kamaki* as well as the introductory and the concluding articles of the 1991 volume *Contested Identities*.¹

It should be stressed that there was a constant dialogue among the papers and the keynote lectures. In her comprehensive presentation of the state of art of the use of gender in history and social anthropology in Greece, Avdela described a number of issues, such as the formation of masculinities in post-Second World War Greece, as having attracted little

interest in scholarship up to now; it is noteworthy that masculinities in 1960s and 1970s Greece were actually addressed in a couple of papers from the perspective of history in the conference. Loizos took the opportunity to draw upon the papers which addressed the flows of people from and to Greece in order to discuss the outcome of a research program he is supervising concerning the varied impact of forced migration of subjects of different geographic origins to the Republic of Cyprus, on gender relations among immigrants and members of the recipient society.²

The enthusiastic response of graduate students to the conference together with the high turnout shows that the ground is fertile for more discussion and that the conference could be the beginning of an ongoing student effort to organise and establish dialogue on the given issues within the realm of British universities.

NOTES

* We would like to thank Prof Efi Avdela, Dr Athina Syriatou, Achilleas Hadjikyriacou, Elizabeth Hough and Nayia Kamenou for their comments on the initial version of this report.

1 Peter Loizos and Euthymios Papataxiarchis, *Contested Identities: Gender and Kinship in Modern Greece*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP: 1991.

2 The outcomes of this research program are published in Peter Loizos, *Iron in the Soul: Displacement, Livelihood and Health in Cyprus*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008.

Memory Studies and Oral History

**University of Athens,
24–25 April 2009**

by Maria Papathanassiou

Hellenic Open University

A two-day workshop entitled “Memory Studies and Oral History”, which explored the relationship between the two fields, took place at the University of Athens on 24 and 25 April 2009. It was organised by the Department of History at the University of Athens in collaboration with the Hellenic National Audiovisual Archive as well as the Netherlands Institute at Athens, within the framework of the European Doctorate in Social History.

Thirty-one scholars took part in the workshop, presenting or discussing papers. The meeting had a clear international and a very strong interdisciplinary character. It brought together scholars from numerous Greek universities and institutions but also from universities and institutions in a number of other European countries, such as Britain, Italy, France, Belgium and Sweden. Participants were mainly historians and social anthropologists but also included folklorists, museologists and scientists working on relevant projects. The workshop encouraged interaction among scholarly generations since both senior and junior scholars (among them PhD

candidates and postgraduate students) had a prominent part in it. Furthermore, on both days the meeting was well attended, not only by academics and researchers but also by many undergraduate and postgraduate students at various Greek universities.

Twenty papers were presented in seven sessions that explored, as their titles went, “public memory as a contested arena”, “memories of working lives”, “memory sites”, “memory and visibility”, “museums, monuments and memory”, “memories between silence and oblivion” and “migration and memory”. Though invisible in session titles, oral history was clearly present in most papers, since questions on “memory” and “memories” were for the most part dealt with on the basis of individual oral autobiographical accounts of the near or recent past. Furthermore, there was, as Stuart Woolf noted in his concluding remarks, an emphasis on twentieth and twentieth-first century Greece, but the geographical scope of the papers was, on the whole, a broader one.

A relatively young field in history, memory studies has initially and primarily dealt with the public memory of ‘major’ historical events, events that were accompanied by abrupt and major changes for societies and states. As one would expect, the conference opened with a session on public memory. In his welcoming speech, Hagen Fleischer pointed to the selectivity and flexibility of memory, stressing the need to differentiate between “the memory of an average citizen, scholarly research and an official ‘memory culture’ formed by collectivities and political interests”. All three papers of the session suggested that public memory be studied in a broader perspective, taking rhetoric and narratives of different and, at times, competing social and/or political groups into account.

Antonis Liakos proposed that recent conflicts concerning history textbooks and major twentieth-century historical events in Greece should be seen as efforts to have one's experiences and memories institutionalised and thus legitimised. Eric Sjoeborg presented possible ways of studying the recent Macedonian name dispute in the Balkans within the framework of the analysis of public memories and stressed the importance of oral history methods, reflecting upon their implementation as well as the evaluation of oral testimonies. On the basis of extensive oral history research on children's transferences during the Greek Civil War, Riki van Boeschoten proposed bridging the gap between oral history and memory studies by exploring relations between what she called "experiential" and "political communities of memory", whereby narratives are mainly structured by lived experience in the former and political ideologies in the latter.

Oral narratives structured by lived experience were central to the following session, which concentrated on analysing working people's non-public (but, one may note, potentially public) memories. Timothy Ashplant traced identities and social roles in the life course of a late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century British worker, emphasising the need for contextualisation of individual life stories. Dimitra Lambropoulou brought the gender aspect strongly to the fore and explored how former construction workers in postwar Athens relate themselves to their "working lives" through memory, associating them with such masculine properties as bodily performance and the acquisition of skill. In a paper full of theoretical references Pothiti Hantzaroula looked at narratives by former domestic servants in postwar Athens to trace the emergence, bodily expression and functioning of emotions such as shame

that contributed to the making of subordinate subjects; within this context, she pointed out that the narration of such experiences leads to "desubjectification", turning the subject into an agent.

On the same (first) workshop day, papers in both afternoon sessions dealt with ongoing collections of oral evidence within the framework of broader digital archives, and reflected upon oral history methods as well as techniques: The history, function and purposes of the Visual History and the Centropa digital archives, both focusing on Jewish experience and Holocaust memory, were thoroughly presented by Rena Molho, who suggested that this material could lay the foundations for a new collective memory and serve educational purposes, particularly in Greece. The recent history and the purposes of the Hellenic National Audiovisual Archive, which focuses on collecting Greek newsreels (and saving public memories), were vividly described by Georges Bolanis and Dimitra Kitsiou, two non-social scientists who have become "informal" historians; the absolute necessity of using oral testimonies (and thus memories) to build an archive of newsreels together with problems of evaluation (such as the self-heroisation of interviewees) came up clearly in their paper. For his part, Björn Rzoska presented the Flemish Institute of Oral History in Belgium and commented on silent memories that turn into voices when circumstances allow for it – as happened with Allied bombing experiences in Belgium during the Second World War. Silent memories that turn into voices came up in Margaret Kenna's paper too; she talked about her experience with interviewing people who had been exiled to the island of Anafi in the 1930s during the Metaxas dictatorship in Greece and about ways of "describing" people's "script" narratives by confronting them with photographs that elicited hidden memo-

ries; her paper gave rise to a vivid discussion concerning interviewing techniques. Beyond the realm of oral history, Mitsos Bilalis' paper on personal webpages that include photos which apparently encapsulate memories reminded the audience of the internet's potential for the human sciences.

On the second workshop day, the shaping of public memory through memory sites was extensively discussed in the first morning session: Results from a postgraduate research project on memory sites in various towns or neighbourhoods in Greece and Cyprus were presented by Constantina Bada who coordinates the project at the University of Ioannina. Drawing on field research (including oral interviews), she described public monuments and statues as not simply representing official national memory and identity, but also constituting "dynamic fields" of "other, unofficial, collective memories and cultural identities". In a way her paper brought us back to the first session and its different communities of memory. Villy Fotopoulou, from the Greek ministry of culture, drew a vivid picture of constructing and organising the new "Museum of Democracy", a museum devoted to political exile(s) in twentieth-century Greece, in the former exile camp of Ai-Stratis, an island northwest of Lesbos. In her paper she contemplated the active role former political exiles themselves could play in the museum and stressed the significance of oral evidence for it, noting, however, that currently oral testimonies have an auxiliary role in a place dominated by material artefacts. Anna Maria Droumpouki compellingly argued that places in Athens related to the German Occupation, such as prisoner or execution camps, remain almost abandoned and invisible, noting that this is generally the case with memory sites of the 1940s, a particularly controversial decade at the level of

public memory. She related this situation to a post-Civil War policy of oblivion, reflected in official discourse. In the course of the discussion, attendees were much interested in ways of making memory sites accessible to visitors while preserving their character.

Oral interviews and ways of remembering were at the centre of the first afternoon and, on the whole, sixth workshop session, which took place on the second day. Vividly and thoroughly picturing the interaction between himself as interviewer and the interviewees, Iason Handrinos examined ways in which former members of the notorious Security Battalions in German-occupied Greece wove their legitimising stories and self-representations, taking the historian by surprise and overturning bipolar schemes. In a particularly thoughtful paper, Vieda Skultans, after relating her own (Latvian) family life story to her research, reflected on the dual nature of life stories and emphasised their literary genre aspects. She then looked at the forms in which traumatic experiences of expropriation, collectivisation, exile, deportation and imprisonment in Soviet Latvia were recalled, and thus at their functioning as "a raft that enables people to survive".

In similar ways, the papers in the last session, delivered by social anthropologists conducting research in the field of migration and refugee studies, brought attention to the significance of listening to immigrants' accounts and reading their internalised truths; dealing with a major, global social issue, they thus all had an openly political character. Effie Voutira used findings from literature as well as data from a research project funded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to "consider ways in which asylum seekers' oral testimonies serve as evidence in the asylum determination procedure" in Greece; further-

more, she pointed to the literary deconstruction of refugee narratives as a possible path towards better understanding immigrants and towards changing erratic Greek policies that perceive Greece as a 'transit' asylum country. Marita Eastmond discussed the strengths and limitations of refugee narratives. Drawing on a rich ethnographic literature on various cases, she pointed to narratives reflecting "a dynamic interplay between life, experience and story" and explored ways in which individual and collective narratives challenge schematic views about refugees and help them create a sense of selfhood as well as collectivity while coping with experiences of violence, disruption, material suffering and the increasing suspicion they are met with in reception countries. Emilia Salvanou, who has been conducting research on (and with) Pakistani immigrants in Athens, reflected on ways in which their identity (especially their collective, communal identity) is being shaped through narration of their past and the dynamic function of memory or oblivion; she pointed out that the immigrants' collective memory has "already" been "altered in the context of migration".

In his concluding remarks, and from a historian's point of view, Stuart Woolf brought attention to microhistorical analyses of a past more distant than the one accessible to oral history method and emphasised the need for scholars who make use of oral accounts to go beyond textual analyses by looking deeper into contexts (a desideratum mentioned, more or less strongly, in several papers).

Timothy Ashplant, Riki van Boeschoten, Antonis Liakos, Dimitra Lambropoulou and Effie Voutira took part in the roundtable discussion on the future of memory studies and expressed their optimism, stressing, among others, the need for learning more about the

workings of memory as well as the need to integrate oral history into historical studies.

This was a workshop with a notable political character in the broader sense of the term. It made clear that scholars are not without authority in the public sphere: they may influence or at least attempt to influence policies on migration and refugees. They may, furthermore, play a central role in cultural politics by participating in the construction and/or use of public museums, memory sites or archives and thus interfere in the official shaping of public memory. They may also undertake a social, therapeutic role, helping individuals to cope with traumatic experiences through narration. On the strictly scholarly level, it was made clear that we cannot study the shaping of public memory in the near or recent past by ignoring oral accounts; that public memory is neither static nor identical with official memory but may be reshaped by collectivities and individuals whose narratives reveal its complexity; and furthermore, that making oral history requires taking the workings of memory as well as the representational aspects of narratives into account. For historians who use oral history methods in order to explore aspects of the past (not a naively ontologised but, still, an existing, memory-moulding and thus traceable past), this interdisciplinary meeting was also a great chance to reflect once more on methodological problems and, to borrow a phrase from one of the organisers (Antonis Liakos), to "return to social history" with some refreshed views.