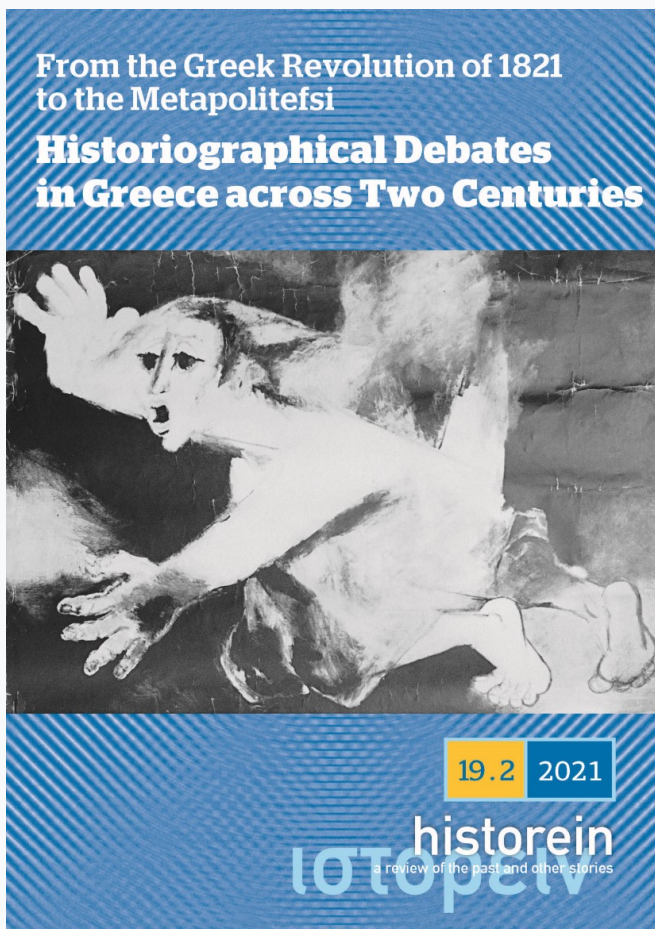


## Historein

Vol 19, No 2 (2021)

From the Greek Revolution of 1821 to the Metapolitefsi: Historiographical Debates in Greece across Two Centuries



Leda Papastefanaki, Η φλέβα της γης: Τα μεταλλεία της Ελλάδας, 19ος–20ός αιώνας [The vein of the earth: The mines of Greece, 19th–20th centuries]

*Christos Karampatsos*

doi: [10.12681/historein.21733](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.21733)

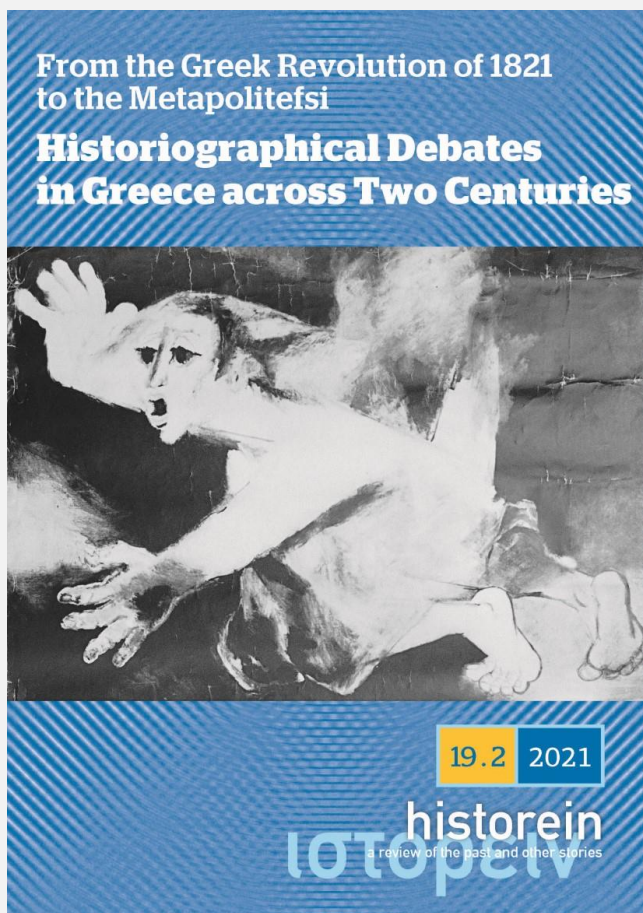
Copyright © 2021, Christos Karampatsos



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:

Karampatsos, C. (2021). Leda Papastefanaki, Η φλέβα της γης: Τα μεταλλεία της Ελλάδας, 19ος–20ός αιώνας [The vein of the earth: The mines of Greece, 19th–20th centuries]. *Historein*, 19(2). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.21733>



**Leda Papastefanaki**  
*Η φλέβα της γης: Τα μεταλλεία της Ελλάδας, 19ος–20ός αιώνας*  
[The vein of the earth: The mines of Greece, 19th–20th centuries]

**Christos Karampatsos**

doi: [10.12681/historein.21733](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.21733)

To cite this article:

Karampatsos, Christos. 2021. “Leda Papastefanaki, *Η φλέβα της γης: Τα μεταλλεία της Ελλάδας, 19ος–20ός αιώνας* [The vein of the earth: The mines of Greece, 19th–20th centuries]”. *Historein* 19 (2).

<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.21733>.

Leda Papastefanaki

*Η φλέβα της γης:*

*Τα μεταλλεία της Ελλάδας, 19ος–20ός αιώνας*

[The vein of the earth:

The mines of Greece, 19th–20th centuries]

Athens: Vivliorama, 2017. 392 pp.

Christos Karampatsos

Institute of Mediterranean Studies

Extractive activities occupy a crucial node in the capitalist division of labour. Since the beginnings of the sixteenth century, the scope and materiality of such activities have shaped mining companies into industrial behemoths employing a wide array of human capital, ranging from top-notch engineering talent to vast spatial concentrations of workers who are faced daily with a notoriously harsh and dangerous working environment. Their large size, strategic significance and labour-intensive character have often placed mining companies at the forefront of technological innovation, as well as to the epicentre of social unrest and environmental degradation. Mining companies conduct their extractive activities locally, yet they are often multinational and invariably export-oriented, a fact which endows them with a dual localised and delocalised nature, while facilitating the existence of a distinct speculative character. Last but not least, extractive activities are inherently connected to the subsoil, hence to the national territory and the nation-state's control over that territory.

Unsurprisingly, any historical study of mining is bound to be positioned in a particularly complicated junction between economic history, business history, diplomatic history, labour history, environmental history and the history of technology. Leda Papastefanaki's *The Vein of the Earth* is no exception. Its goal, as stated in the introduction, is "to study mining-extractive activities in Greece from 1830 to 1960, taking into account the role of the state, business activities, Greece's place in the international division of labour, the formation of labour relations and labour markets, technology, the technical administration and organisation of mining ventures" (27). This ambitious, multifaceted project is then conducted over six chapters, each of them pertaining to a particular aspect of the history of mining in Greece.

The first chapter focuses on the emergence of state institutions and legislation concerning mining activities. The institutions studied here are the Mining Office of the Ministry of Economics, a body that existed in various forms since 1833, as well as the several miners' pension and insurance funds that emerged in embryonic form, along with health and welfare concerns, during the first decades of the twentieth century. The chapter's narrative is reinforced by a comprehensive historical discussion of the labour legislation that framed extractive activities in Greece since the 1830s. Here, the emergence of notions such as "workplace accident", "work-related disease" and "women's protection" after 1900 is critically approached as a disciplinary process with acute class and gender overtones. This process aimed at the creation of a "control framework" aiming at "assigning the responsibility for accidents and health preservation to the (male and female) workers themselves, while at the same time disassociating wage labour from the social relations producing it" (64). Interestingly, in the case of the mining industry, this task was customarily assigned to engineers, excluding other experts such as medical doctors or social scientists.

The second chapter deals with the emergence and activities of mining companies in Greece between 1830 and 1940. Here, a myriad of small, short-lived mining projects coexisted alongside "two or three large corporate ventures" (106). The speculative character of extractive activities was reinforced by a pervasive "mineral fetishism" ideology, which is – often amusingly – evident in the primary sources (23, 74). The result was an industrial sector that, until the Second World War, was characterised by an acute geographical dispersion, a lack of investment, a dependence on exports, low productivity, technological stagnation and low added value (88), often resulting in particular ventures of "cursory, even predatory subsoil exploitation" (100). Papastefanaki resorts to the notion of the "international division of labour" to imply that even the largest mining ventures, often praised as the quintessential Greek industrial pioneers, actually relied on "cheap labour instead of technological innovation and the rational organisation of production" (111), in order to maintain international competitiveness in times of high demand and to minimise losses in times of crisis. As a result, Greece remained a country of raw material exports and capital goods imports, at least until the 1950s and the postwar re-evaluation of Greece's place in the international division of labour.

The third chapter is a significant contribution to the history of engineers in Greece. Partaking of the French *École des Mines* archives, Papastefanaki produces a history of the Greek mining engineers educated in this famous engineering school from 1818 to 1940. She also makes wide use of relevant works, resulting in a detailed account that ranges from comprehensive, informative tables to extensive biographies of Greek mining engineers, the most prominent among them being Fokion Negris, Petros Protopapadakis and Themistocles Haritakis. The "appropriation of technology" notion is used, together with extensive reference to the political careers and writings of Greek mining engineers, to point

out that their work, motives and contributions should not be deemed to be exclusively “technical” or “scientific”. On the contrary, Greek mining engineers are approached as “active historical subjects” (181), meaning a predominantly male and bourgeois occupational group engaged in a wider political project of diffusing “useful knowledge”. Far from being “neutral” or “objective”, this “useful knowledge ... was used as a means of manipulation, aiming at the middle and lower social strata, and reproducing existing power relations” (167).

A large part of the book, comprising chapters 4 to 6, is dedicated to the history of the men and women working in the mines. A principal question raised here is obviously “the search for the reasons that hampered industrial development in Greece” (183). Papastefanaki’s analysis falls in line with recent attempts to divert the conversation away from this old question and towards the production of historical accounts focusing on the emergence and characteristics of the “labour market” in Greece. This adoption of the “labour market” notion leads to new historiographical questions regarding the processes that transformed former free producers into wage labourers, their accommodation to the needs of the new social relations of production, the consolidation of work discipline, the relation between work organisation, the formation of the labour market and workplace hierarchies, and finally the ways in which gender, age and ethnicity affected one’s integration into the labour market (184).

Indeed, the fourth chapter describes the formation of a “mining” labour market that took place between the formation of the Greek state and 1940. Early mining ventures employed skilled foreign workers, internal migrants organised under contract work, even convicts working under various forced labour regimes. Yet, in the following decades one can note the emergence of “a significant core of workers” (208) whose subsistence was predicated mainly on mining employment. Such workers originated from major mining areas such as Lavrio and the Cyclades, demonstrated significant mining skills, exercised the familial mining occupation for generations and often moved around the country seeking employment in the various short-lived mining ventures mentioned above.

These miners are the subject of the book’s fifth chapter. Information derived from the archive of the Miners’ Fund (Tameio Metallefton), kept in the General State Archives, is meticulously processed in order to produce short workers’ life stories of a kind rarely found in Greek historical accounts. At the same time, their work organisation, habits and hierarchies are convincingly outlined. Apparently these workers were often organised in putting-out groups and were employed by mining companies under various regimes of contract work. Their groups used familial ties and a gender and age division of labour in order to establish strict internal hierarchies (217). Papastefanaki claims that this system was rather advantageous to the mining companies; it conveyed familial age and gender hierarchies inside the workplace, thus relieving the companies from a host of recruitment, education and disciplinary costs (218), the downside being a prevalent disregard for rational technical administration and technological innovation. Eventually the mining workplace is

described as a gendered field where “skill” took on a multiplicity of meanings that derived, not only from work aptitude but also from gender power relations, as demonstrated by the intimate connection between manliness, risk and “skill” (225). In this context, the emergence of legislation concerning the exclusion of women and children from underground work should be understood as “the creation of a protective net for the male mining labour market via the exclusion and relegation of women’s and children’s labour” (64).

The sixth chapter is dedicated to miners’ collective action and struggles. It mainly focuses on the workers’ struggles in the Lavrio mines and the 1916 miners’ strike on Serifos island. This is a careful account, produced by cautiously avoiding the customary praise of miners and their leaders as “revolutionaries”, “proponents of a Greek Soviet”, etc. Interestingly, the Lavrio miners’ union is found to have occasionally “placate[d] conflicts resulting from labour-capital relations, while at the same time regarding the state as a natural mediator for the establishment of peace between the classes” (247). The controversial labour leader Kostas Speras is also brought to the fore; a careful re-evaluation of his writings and relevant government correspondence casts doubt on his motives by emphasising his relations with various state actors such as the British and French states (259). Of course this demystification of the miners’ leaders does not negate the massive character of the miners’ struggles, their acute social and political significance, or the fact that they were customarily repressed by the Greek army (239).

The scope of this work gives rise to new questions and research directions. For example, the intimate relations between the mining companies and various state actors is a recurring theme, from “the monthly allowances paid to police officers and personnel by mining companies at least until 1912” (54, 242), to the constant brutal repression of miners’ strikes by the Greek army, to the affinities of Speras with foreign states and the French flags waved by miners during the Serifos strike (256). Needless to say, this is a research direction worthy of further study.

Another question posed by this book concerns the formation of the working class in Greece, the process through which “former free producers are led to wage labour and become accustomed to new work habits necessitated by the new relations of production” (184). This matter appears again and again in relevant engineering reports as a never-ending lament about “miners working on their own accord”, “irrational methods”, “lack of serious foremanship” (39), reliance “on the whims of the miners” (41), “projects regrettably managed by nonexperts” (90), “primitive methods” (108) and “elementary work tools” (110). True, such descriptions can be perceived as pointing to “a reliance on cheap labour instead of technological innovation and the rational organisation of production” (111). On the other hand, one cannot help but wonder whether this reliance on “primitive”, “archaic” and “irrational” methods derived exclusively from corporate strategies, or was it imposed on the

companies by the workers, a necessary evil resulting from the turbulent accommodation of “former free producers into new social relations”.

A study of mechanisation attempts could prove to be particularly relevant here. Unlike other technical innovations, the introduction of aerial tramways seems to have been a constant concern for the mining companies and engineers (91). Such tramways were internationally used and their introduction was no small task, demanding as it did careful engineering studies, large-scale construction and the displacement of horse-drawn carriages. The eagerness for their introduction could be matched against the “technological stagnation” detected by Papastefanaki, reinforcing her findings concerning Greece’s place in the international division of labour (after all, aerial tramways were a means of transporting raw materials to the sea), and posing new questions about the displacement of workers by machinery.

To summarise, this is a work wide in scope, rich in detail and – surprisingly– not too cumbersome in length. It utilises of a host of archival and secondary sources and, as a general history of mining in Greece until the 1940s, it is quite unique among Greek historiographical accounts. This makes it essential reading for economic historians, business historians and anyone engaged in Greek history, particularly those interested in the history of the working class in Greece. Above all, it leads to new questions, which is the most one can expect from a historiographical venture.