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Metapolitefsi: From the Transition to Democracy to the Economic Crisis, Athens, 14–16 December 2012

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The conference on “*Metapolitefsi: From the Transition to Democracy to the Economic Crisis*”, organised by *Historein* in collaboration with the Free University of Berlin and held in Athens on 14–16 December 2012, sought to offer a first systematic account of the historical period from the fall of the Greek military dictatorship (1974) to the recent economic crisis. This postauthoritarian period in Greek politics and society is frequently referred to as the *metapolitefsi*.

The term *metapolitefsi* has often been used to describe the moment of the collapse of the military junta and the transition to a new democratic era. It has also lent its name to an overarching social and political constellation. To that end, the historicisation of the *metapolitefsi* seeks to lay bare the foundations of this new period while keeping a distance from the dismissive or idealising uses of the term in current political discourse. Such an endeavour purports to uncover the ideological premises of current accounts that blame “the culture of the *metapolitefsi*” for all the ills of the Greek body politic.

Historein’s open call for papers was welcomed by a great number of young Greek scholars working on different areas of the humanities and social sciences. The bulk of the papers revolved around questions of political, cultural and intellectual history, the history of institutions and the study of collective action and contentious politics. Despite the plurality of the research topics presented at the conference, the considerable absence of papers regarding the economic transformations or the gendered configuration of Greek society can be seen as a mere indication of the preferences of the young generation of Greek scholars.

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These shortcomings were counterbalanced by accounts that placed greater emphasis on the comparative dimension of the *metapolitefsi* against the backdrop of the democratic transitions of the 1970s in Spain and Portugal and broader debates regarding recent transitions in Turkey and Eastern Europe. The Romanian political scientist Cornel Ban put forward a challenging critique of the academic field of “transition studies” by offering a contrapuntal reading of the academic discourse on the democratic transitions of the 1970s and more recent accounts on the consolidation of eastern Europe in the 1990s.

The Turkish political scientist Büşra Ersanlı gave a more personal account of the seesaw of democracy and authoritarianism in Turkey. Her recent nine-month imprisonment for participating in a “terrorist organisation” – another word for her active political engagement with the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) – is testament to the challenges and the subversive potential of critical historical discourse. Ersanlı’s recent conviction comes as a sequel to earlier convictions and tortures from the 1970s. Her overall trajectory serves as a reminder of the historian’s political role, stemming from research projects such as her *Power and History: The Creed of “Official History” in Turkey* (1992).

At the time of Ersanlı’s first imprisonment, in neighbouring Greece the break with the military junta signalled the advent of a new era of democratisation and widespread radicalism. Yet, successive historical periods are characterised by both ruptures and continuities depending on the logic of periodisation. Thus, from the perspective of the production and circulation of books and other publications, it has been asserted that the break lies not in the moment of the actual regime change in 1974 but a couple of years earlier at the time of the lifting of pre-emptive censorship in 1969. What is more, from the standpoint of the study of popular mobilisations, it has been argued that the survival of the heritage of the short-lived Greek sixties in the initial postauthoritarian period was largely due to the role of the Cyprus question as a vehicle for the mobilisation of hitherto marginal social groupings.

A schematic account of the 50 conference papers identifies four broad areas of inquiry. Firstly, a number of papers focused on the question of the articulation of past memories of the German occupation and the subsequent civil war in the Greek public space. The enquiry turned to aspects of political discourse, to local practices such as the renaming of streets and regional significations and to a recounting of the trajectory of the Greek–German relations. There were also attempts to trace the ideological coordinates of debates on Europe and the United States and their reverberations in discussions on the nature of the Greek nation and the character of its people. Finally, there were accounts of the transformations of anti-Americanism intersected with readings of the transfigurations of Greek nationalism in a state that enjoyed an ambivalent relationship with “Europe” and its institutions.

Secondly, a large number of interventions focused on issues related to aspects of the study of collective action, political protest and social movements throughout the *metapolitefsi* period. Here we find accounts of the scope and form of labour mobilisation in the late 1970s and early 1980s, of the state of labour institutions such as the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE). What is more, a number of studies argued for the need to further explore the cultural aspects of youth po-

liticisation with respect to seemingly apolitical youth groupings in the 1980s and 1990s. Reaching post-2008 Greece, surveys on the recent forms of political participation and collective action pointed to the need for new understandings of the nature and the transnational character of the social movements that sprung from the crisis.

Thirdly, a great number of papers focused on cultural aspects of postauthoritarian Greece. Some interventions centred on the question of the relation between “higher” and “lower” culture, “avant-garde” and “underground” in artistic and literary practices from the 1960s onwards. In other instances, close readings of literary texts such as Tsirkas’ *Lost Spring* pointed to the ambivalences of the reception of socialist ideas. With respect to the latter, comparative accounts of the influential journals *Anti* and *Politis*, readings of the self-image of “the Polytechnic generation” (the generation of students that toppled the military regime) and aspects of the literary production in the initial post-authoritarian period guided us through the muddled world of progressive and socialist thought.

The emphasis on “culture” served to uncover the latent political nature of cultural practices. For instance, the process by which winter travel destinations are being refashioned not only relates to specific socio-economically bound ideas of touristic development, but it also exposes the mechanics of the production of social prestige and “luxury”. By the same token, the social vocabulary of the use of whiskey as the arch-beverage of evening leisure points to a thick web of political and economic workings in line with the cultural logic of late capitalism.

Fourthly, another series of papers tackled the more traditional question of state institutions and the making of public policies. Historically informed accounts of the history of enfranchisement and constitutional reforms met with institutional criticisms on the shortcomings of the function of state-independent authorities, the constitution as a guarantee of stability in times of crisis and the inadequacies of existing interpretations of the fiscal roots of the recent crisis.

To conclude, the conference purported to offer an initial contribution to the understanding of aspects of a recent past that is gradually delving deeper into the depths of history. It ventured to battle against what Antonis Liakos called “*metapoliteftiki melancholia*”: the condition of never-ending grief that cannot be fulfilled as long as the object of loss remains essentially unknown. Hence, the historian’s duty to uncover the past bears a resemblance to Odysseus’ pledge to bury Elpenor upon his return from the underworld, to use Miltos Pechlivanos’ analogy.

How can we make the *metapolitefsi* history? The commencement of the long process of historiography is contingent on eschewing the linear and teleological narratives fuelled by the popular “cri-seology” of our time in order to make space for proper historical reflection.