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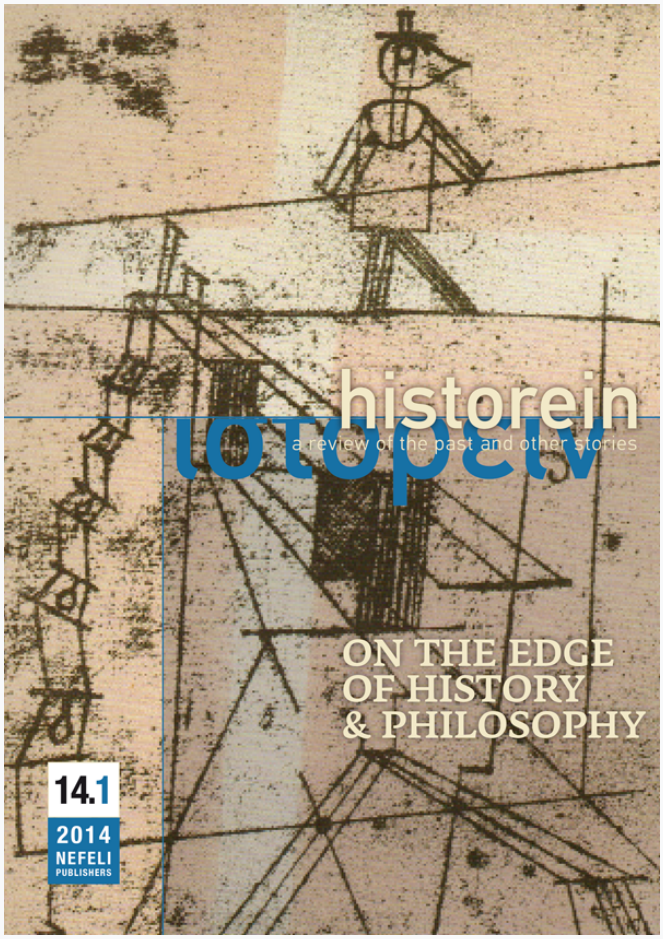

Review of N. Theotokas's Ο βίος του στρατηγού Μακρυγιάννη: Απομνημόνευμα και Ιστορία [The life of General Makriyannis: memoir and history]

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Nikos Theotokas

Ο Βίος του στρατηγού Μακρυγιάννη: Απομνημόνευμα και Ιστορία

[The life of General Makriyannis: memoir and history]

Athens: Vivliorama, 2012. 549 pp.

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The publication of Nikos Theotokas' study comes at a critical juncture in contemporary Greece. Neither the book's modest title, nor the pastness of its object, seem to have much relevance for the fierce urgencies of the present or even for the challenges – methodological, theoretical or institutional problems – now facing Greek scholars within the humanities and the social sciences. How then can we explain the appeal of the book to a wide readership within and beyond academia? And why the numerous and enthusiastic reviews it has received? One explanation lies in the long-lasting and enduring significance of Makriyannis' writings for modern constructions of Greek identity. Makriyannis' name evokes a past still present and still contested: the foundational event for modern Greece – the 1821 revolution. But the specific contribution of Theotokas' book is also significant, since it powerfully challenges a range of current orthodoxies.

We will come to the significance of Theotokas' account soon, but first, who was Yannis Makriyannis? Born in 1797 to a peasant family, he fought in the war of independence, rising to the rank of general by 1824 and marrying the daughter of a prominent Athenian. In 1828, upon the arrival to Greece of Ioannis Kapodistrias as governor, Makriyannis was appointed general leader of the executive authority of the Peloponnese. However, he soon came to oppose the governor's policies. He initially welcomed the enthronement in 1833 of King Otto, a Bavarian prince, but became disillusioned by the policies of the Bavarian-dominated regency. Makriyannis played a leading role in the conspiracy against the regime and in the 3 September 1843 movement that led to the granting of the first constitution (1844). He was convicted of conspiracy and sentenced to death, though he was later pardoned. During the defence of the Acropolis during the war of independence, he sustained serious head injuries. An illiterate soldier, he learned to read and write and, in 1829, embarked on the writing of his *Memoirs*, an extraordinary document that covers the period during and after the war of independence. In 1851 he began writing a second secret manuscript, known as *Visions and Miracles*. This was published in 1983, more than 120 years after his death.

Given the mass production of memoirs written by the Greek fighters of the 1821 revolution, Makriyannis' text was just one among many. However, thanks to its complexities, his *Memoirs* had the ability to respond to the anxieties and the pursuits, the various interests and multiple needs of the modern Greek intelligentsia, who gave it a privileged place in the national literary canon. Yannis Vlachoyannis, who discovered Makryiannis' manuscript in 1907, interpreted it along the lines of a populist view of 1821. It became a precious repository of a Greek folk culture and popular wisdom that was despised by the political elite and the dominant culture.

In the interwar period, Makriyannis was established at the core of Greek identity and has remained a powerful national myth ever since. For a generation of liberal bourgeois intellectuals with cosmopolitan orientations and hegemonic aspirations, such as the poet Giorgos

Seferis – a key figure in Greek modernism – Makriyannis' writings appealed to their own aesthetic and political concerns. They appropriated Makriyannis' *Memoirs* for a definition of Greekness that reconciled tensions between tradition and modernism, west and east, cosmopolitan elite identities and national indigenous localism.[1]

For many leftist intellectuals in subsequent decades, Makriyannis became the symbol of a socialist and democratic revolution yet to come. Arguing that the 1821 revolution had been betrayed, unfulfilled or incomplete since its radical ideals were frustrated, they turned to Makriyannis as a radical figure who could infuse new life into the project of a democratic and socialist transformation of Greece during the German occupation, the civil war and, later, the dictatorship. Makriyannis' *Memoirs* was incorporated into the grand narrative of struggle between the democratic patriotism of the people and the rightwing political and intellectual representatives of the Greek state.[2]

The rediscovery of *Visions and Miracles*, the second manuscript of Makriyannis' memoirs, produced another interpretation. This text had previously been characterised as the work of a sick old man suffering from severe epileptic seizures, the consequence of old war wounds. But now, Makriyannis' manuscripts were praised as the arc of Hellenism, the lived intellectual tradition of the Orthodox east. So they have been used to support a polemic against western rationalism, individualism and modernity.[3]

Last but not least, a more recent interpretation of Makriyannis comes from the perspective of a modernising messianism. What appears at first sight to be a sympathetic and scholarly understanding of Makriyannis' world can, on closer scrutiny, be seen as a kind of orientalism. Merging insights from functional anthropology and the concerns of the policy advisor, Makriyannis' life and ideas have been placed within the grand narrative of Greece's failed modernity. For some key Greek modernisers and reformers, such as Thanos Veremis, Makriyannis demythologised is nothing but a Rumeliot warrior; that is, a traditional figure, a bearer of the kind of Ottoman premodern mentality that has hampered Greek modernisation since the nineteenth century.[4] This Makriyannis offers a cautionary tale of how Greek modernisation went wrong and is a metonym for Greek backwardness, clientism and statism. In other words, this kind of perspective is a fierce polemic against images of Makriyannis fabricated during the twentieth century. It refutes the claims to truth made by previous readings and puts the history of the 1821 revolution in the service of current conflicts, articulated in terms of an opposition between modernisers and populists. Iconoclastic in its intentions, this approach seeks to revise and demythologise Greek national history, to disclose the truth about 1821, to discover the "real" Makriyannis. Inspired by essentialising understandings of tradition and modernity, this kind of revisionist approach explains modern Greek history as the struggle between darkness and light, between the bearers of tradition and the rational agents of modernity.[5] The narrative of Greece's failed modernity maintains a series of dualisms (such as high/low culture, active/passive, subject/object, state/society) that dramatises the relationship between the intellectuals and *the rest*.[6] From this standpoint, the 1821 armed uprising was converted into a national war and transfigured into a revolution thanks to the efforts and the accomplishments of a small, foreign-educated, westernised elite of Greeks. If for some Marxists the driving force of Greek history was the struggle between the people and the state elites, according to the new grand narrative the

driving force is a struggle between elites: between a western-educated elite and its adversaries. Seen from this elitist, rationalistic and unhistorical perspective, the whole of Greek history is perverted, full of logical paradoxes, pathologies and aberrances.

How does Theotokas contribute something new to our historical understanding? Makriyannis was born into a peasant family, a fact that national narratives highlight and dramatise. However they understate or completely write off Makriyannis' unprecedented upward social mobility before, during and after the struggle for independence. In Theotokas' study, this is placed at the centre of Makriyannis' life trajectory and connected to the great cultural and social transformations of the era. By 1821 Makriyannis had become a prosperous merchant. In an era of economic downturn, he succeeded in taking advantage of available opportunities to enrich himself, trading with all, Orthodox Christians and Muslims, acquiring a significant real estate portfolio and making money from usury, by charging interest on loans. At the outbreak of the revolution, Makriyannis could afford to recruit a small group of warriors, and was soon promoted to the rank of general. But what national accounts take as a given – Makriyannis' readiness to serve the cause of Greece's freedom struggle – is turned by Theotokas into a problem. Makriyannis' involvement in the war is not interpreted along the lines of romantic nationalism, as the awakening of an ever-present, essentialised national consciousness of the Greek people.

Theotokas' approach is also different from revisionist and modernising approaches to Makriyannis' life that perceive him as a traditional warrior, unable to follow the spirit of the modern era and to accommodate himself to larger abstractions and concepts, the ideals of nationalism and modernity. Makriyannis did fight alongside traditional warriors, klepht captains and armatols. But Theotokas traces how Makriyannis, in the course of the war of independence and after the first civil war, abandoned his old loyalties and aligned himself with the very different strategies of the central administration.

The author tries to understand the process of Makriyannis' self-transformation. Avoiding the reductionism or cultural determinism of revisionist approaches which consider the indigenous elites and the peasants as wholly determined by premodern structures and mentalities, Theotokas not only examines the social but also the intellectual and cultural mobility that marked Makriyannis' life. He emphasises his active, self-conscious and often conflicting responses to the modernisation process.

The emphasis on human agency, on Makriyannis' own self-transformation, is connected to wider social, political and cultural changes: including his encounter with westernised intellectuals and politicians; his exposure to national ideology and his familiarisation with ideas about the capacity of the individual to change himself and his world. Theotokas is careful not to present Makriyannis' receptivity to these new ideas and his shifting faith and loyalties as a matter of passive adaptation or as an instrumental adjustment to the imperatives of the new westernised power elites who toiled hard to build a centralised bureaucratic power structure.

Thus we are given an account of Makriyannis' adventures that historicises the concepts of tradition and modernity. In revisionist accounts of the 1821 revolution, tradition is generally represented in abstract terms as doctrine rather than as everyday social practices that are adapted from past generations and actively transformed. Theotokas enables us to

see, through the life of Makriyannis, how the moderniser's arguments are based on a static and essentialised understandings of tradition. Theotokas discusses how various popular traditions were reframed, reimagined, translated, modified and politicised in order to deal with the constantly changing challenges of modernity. For instance, affinities between the doctrine of divine providence and secular philosophies of history promoted by nationalist teleology facilitated cross-cultural interactions, established lines of communication between the indigenous Greeks and the westernised educated elites and fuelled much of the revolutionary energy of the time.

Viewing his own personal life and the collective history through faith with one eye and practical reason with the other, Makriyannis became a political opponent of the Bavarian regency. In his *Memoirs* he voices his disillusionment with the new regime and identifies himself with the injured, frustrated and unappreciated freedom fighters and the poor peasants. He points the finger at the newcomers, "heterochthons", intellectuals and politicians born outside the Greek state, who showed little respect for local customs and explains to his readers the reasons he become the leader of the conspiracy that led to the 1843 revolt and the granting of the first constitution. By historicising Makriyannis' life and ideas, Theotokas' study also questions leftwing approaches that portray him as the incarnation of democratic and republican ideals. Here Theotokas argues that in Makriyannis' writings, the term "constitution" draws its meaning from religion rather than from the political philosophy of the Enlightenment; the author claims that Makriyannis' ideas attest to a kind of "archaic constitutionalism" since he does not understand the source of power as the solemn expression of the will of the people, but rather of the will of God with whom sovereignty resides.

Soon after the National Assembly of 1844, Makriyannis gradually withdrew from public life, immersed himself in religious mysticism and abandoned himself to delirium and despair. In his second manuscript, *Visions and Miracles*, written in 1851–52, he recounts his prayers, his discussions with God, the Virgin Mary and the saints.

"For I am illiterate and cannot keep order in my writings." These are the opening words of Makriyannis' *Memoirs*. However, he sensed that attempts to put his memories into any kind of conventional logical order would be inadequate as a means of understanding, describing and explaining his own experience. Makriyannis *became a problem for himself*. The more he tried to feel "at home" by giving a stable, coherent, overall meaning to his world and his life, the more he was caught in a double bind and became confused and perplexed. In the end, he gave up. Yearning for some kind of wholeness or ontological security, he resorted to mysticism. Without giving up conspiracy plans against the rotten new world, in his *Visions and Miracles* Makriyannis attempted to recover a unified cosmos out of a traditional order that had now been shattered and replaced by institutional complexity, differentiation and a plurality of meanings.

However, Makriyannis had thrown himself into the eradication of tradition and his familiar world. He had actively participated in the building of a new society and a new nation-state. His life can be understood when placed in the wider context of detraditionalisation[7] – an open-ended process characterised by ambivalence, by sharp tensions between opposing forces and, sometimes, culminating in a break

with the past that is so radical that its intensity pushes it to the point of reversal.

The quest for the "real" Makriyannis generates questions that have haunted public history in Greece throughout the twentieth century. Was he a traditional warrior or the general who led the Greek struggle for independence? Was he a traditional chieftain devoid of national vision or a great man with a mature national consciousness who fought for Greece's rebirth? Was he a cunning and calculating liar, an ambitious self-promoter or an authentic martyr of the 1821 revolution? These questions spring from a one-dimensional frame of analysis and are constructed according to an instrumental logic that deviates from the logic of historical inquiry.

Theotokas' life of General Makriyannis is not another positivist quest for a positivist truth. The purpose of the study is not to bring to light hidden pieces of information about the general's life, to reveal things that have been obscured in other narratives, or to tell the truth about 1821. The author does draw attention to historical evidence that has sometimes gone unnoticed. However the study is marked by an unwillingness to embrace a positivist critique of ideology. This is precisely what revisionist and antinationalist approaches tend to do. In their polemic against nationalist, and right- or leftwing populist accounts of Makriyannis, these approaches turn to undermine his national image, exaggerating his role as a money lender and usurer, denigrating his patriotism and his heroism.

This style of questioning is a useful device in struggles over collective memory, launching polemics for or against. However, its logic conforms to the demands of identity politics. It catches the public's attention by narrowing its options in advance, fostering an oversimplified picture of the 1821 revolution and reducing the complexity and variety of history and Makriyannis' life to a set of abstract principles.[8]

Theotokas' book, by contrast, works to highlight the mentalities and systems of thought, their continuities as well as their multiple ruptures, through which Markiyannis' actions can be understood – including the myths that Makriyannis invented in an effort to understand himself. The focus, therefore, is on the complexities of his lived experience – not a single, homogenous totality but a complex full of tensions and dilemmas. Here lies the specific contribution of this study and its distinctiveness from other approaches that, despite their important differences, have one thing in common; they fall within the domain of identity history.

For Theotokas, by contrast, the life of General Makriyannis is the place where his conflicts, dilemmas, puzzles, decisions, choices, contradictions, uncertainties, doubts and ambivalences – that often evade metanarratives – interconnect and become meaningful. This study offers us not the "real" Markiyannis, the person who actually lived in history, but the "concrete in thought", the historical Makriyannis. It offers us something more: the contradictions, ambivalences and ambiguities of the Greek transition to modernity – a transition that although it has its own historical peculiarities, it is not so specifically and exotically Greek.[9]

The life of General Makriyannis is not an exercise in public history. It is primarily an achievement in historical scholarship. By fostering the unity of historical theory and practice, the study revives a particular humanitarian sensibility: a defence of explanatory pluralism, a plea for the importance of "negative capability" and an ap-

peal to moderation in "consistency"[10] – that is, a refusal to read the 1821 revolution so as to make it conform to a principle, scheme, pattern or value. For this reason, the book is a critical intervention of historical reason in public history.

NOTES

1 For a critical approach of these readings of Makriyannis, see Giorgos Giannoulopoulos, *Διαβάζοντας τον Μακρυγιάννη: Η κατασκευή ενός μύθου από τον Βλαχογιάννη, τον Θεοτοκά, τον Σεφέρη και τον Λορεντζάτο* [Reading Makiryannis: the construction of a myth by Vlachoyannis, Theotokas, Seferis and Lorentzatos], Athens: Polis, 2003.

2 Dimitris Fotiadis, *Ο Μακρυγιάννης* [Makriyannis], Athens: n.p., 1953.

3 Christos Giannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West: Hellenic Self-Identity in the Modern Age*, Athens: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007.

4 Thanos Veremis, "Ioannis Makriyannis: from history to anthropology", *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique* 8 (2011): 85–94.

5 For a critical survey of modern Greek historiography after the 1970s, see Antonis Liakos, "Modern Greek historiography (1974–2000): the era of transition from dictatorship to democracy", in Ulf Brunnbauer (ed.), *(Re)Writing History: Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism*, Munster: LIT, 2004, 351–378.

6 For the grand narrative of Greece's modernisation, see indicatively: Nikiforos Diamadouros, *Political Modernization, Social Conflict and Cultural Cleavage in the Formation of the Modern Greek State: 1821–1828*, PhD thesis, Columbia University: 1972 [which was published in Greek as *Οι απαρχές της συγκρότησης σύγχρονου κράτους στην Ελλάδα 1821–1828*, Athens: MIET, 2002]; John Petropoulos, *Politics and Statecraft in the Kingdom of Greece, 1833–1843*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1968 [Greek translation: *Πολιτική και συγκρότηση στο Ελληνικό Βασίλειο (1833–1843)*, Athens: MIET, 1985]; William McGrew, "Introduction", in Lilly Macrakis and Nikiforos Diamadouros (eds), *New Trends in Modern Greek Historiography*, Hanover: Modern Greek Studies Association/Anatolia College, 1982, xi–xiv.

7 On modernisation qua detraditionalisation, see especially Pantelis Lekkas, *Αφαίρεση και Εμπειρία: Μια φορμαλιστική προσέγγιση του ιδεολογικού φαινομένου* [Abstraction and experience: towards a formalist theory of ideology], Athens: Topos, 2013. For an interpretive approach of the 1821 revolution that puts emphasis on human agency by exploring how traditional habitus changed in response to new experiences and gave rise to national morale embedded in concrete social practices, see Dionysis Tzakis, "From locality to nation state loyalty: Georgios Karaiskakis during the Greek revolution", in Petros Pizanias (ed.), *The Greek Revolution of 1821: A European Event*, Istanbul: Isis, 2011, 129–149; Nikos Rotzokos, "The nation as a political subject: comments on the Greek national movement", in Pizanias, *The Greek Revolution*, 151–170.

8 On this point, the work of E.P. Thompson on historical logic remains a classic: Dorothy Thompson (ed.), *The Essential EP Thompson*, New York: New Press, 1993, 445–459. See also Michael Oakeshott, "The activity of being an historian", in idem, *Rationalism and Politics and Other Essays*, London: Methuen, 1984, 151–183.

9 For a critique of the Sonderweg thesis, see indicatively David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History*, New York: Oxford UP, 1984. For the debate about peculiarities in Britain, see Simon Gunn and James Vernon (eds), *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. For the tension between theoretical generalisation and historical particularity from the perspective of postcolonial criticism, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000.

10 On "negative capability", see Robert Kaufman, "Negatively capable dialectics: Keats, Vendler, Adorno, and the theory of the avant-garde", *Critical Inquiry* 27/2 (2001): 354–384. For a positive evaluation of the internal contradictions of Marxism, see Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and Anomalies in the Development of Theory*, London, Macmillan, 1980 [especially Appendix 3 on social "contradictions", 168–173].

Manolis Koumas

Μικρά κράτη, συλλογική ασφάλεια, Κοινωνία των Εθνών: Η Ελλάδα και το ζήτημα του αφοπλισμού 1919–1934

[Small states, collective security, League of Nations: Greece and the disarmament question, 1919–1934]

Nicosia: University of Cyprus Publications, 2012, 336 pp.

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Disarmament within the framework of the League of Nations originated from the perception of the first world war as a byproduct of the massive armaments undertaken by the Great Powers prior to its outbreak in the summer of 1914. The negotiation on disarmament was also linked to another aspect of the league's mission, the construction of a collective security framework which would supplant the traditional balance of power politics and calculations.

Manolis Koumas' book on Greece's policy towards the League of Nations' negotiations on disarmament in the interwar years is an original and interesting work covering a topic that has escaped the attention of Greek historiography. It is a well-researched book, with the author having consulted a wide array of unpublished and published archival sources – Greek, British, French and American – and, simultaneously, having acquainted himself with the international literature on the subject.

It is true, and Koumas does not pretend otherwise, that this issue was not necessarily central to the formulation of Greek foreign policy after the Lausanne treaty. Very early on, after the brief occupation of Corfu by the Ital-