

Historein

Vol 19, No 2 (2021)

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



Dimitris Papanikolaou, Κάτι τρέχει με την οικογένεια: Έθνος, πόθος και συγγένεια την εποχή της κρίσης [There is something about the family: Nation, desire and kinship at a time of crisis]

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doi: [10.12681/historein.23353](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.23353)

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To cite this article:

Plantzos, D. (2021). Dimitris Papanikolaou, Κάτι τρέχει με την οικογένεια: Έθνος, πόθος και συγγένεια την εποχή της κρίσης [There is something about the family: Nation, desire and kinship at a time of crisis]. *Historein*, 19(2). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.23353>



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Plantzos, Dimitris. 2021. "Dimitris Papanikolaou, *Κάτι τρέχει με την οικογένεια: Έθνος, πόθος και συγγένεια την εποχή της κρίσης* [There is something about the family: Nation, desire and kinship at a time of crisis]". *Historein* 19 (2).
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Dimitris Papanikolaou

*Κάτι τρέχει με την οικογένεια: Έθνος, πόθος και συγγένεια
την εποχή της κρίσης*

[There is something about the family: Nation, desire and
kinship at a time of crisis]

Athens: Patakis, 2018. 448 pp.

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Growing up in the 1970s, in a postjunta Greece only then beginning to imagine itself as a slightly less modernised version of the United States, I remember how TV and cinema audiences were mostly treated either to copiously romanticised representations of courtship or highly dramatised tales of male heroism. Then came the family, but apparently it came to stay.

One generation later, the family is seemingly everywhere: in 2018, when the book under discussion here was published, international audiences were being exposed to, among other offerings, *Insatiable*, a black comedy produced for Netflix, where three samples of a supposed “American family” were living their day-to-day nightmarish realities against the stifling background of the American Southeast. Having run for two seasons, the show was just cancelled in early 2020, having treated its global audience to generous portions of an over-the-top portrayal of life on the edge of pop culture – from beauty pageants to wellness retreats, and from queer aesthetics to, well, even higher levels of queerness. *Insatiable* (and its many follow-ups/lookalikes such as *The Politician*) tread on a path well paved by earlier works such as the unforgettable *Desperate Housewives*, which first aired in 2004: it was then that we first enjoyed such pointy critique – parody even – of this new sense of American (or even Western) gothic: hysterical dialogues, grotesque characters, kitsch designs, unreal storylines posing as random everydayness, idiosyncratic (if not plainly sick) sense of humour.

Six Feet Under had come slightly earlier (2001); *Breaking Bad*, a bit later (2008). Then came the disturbingly sardonic *American Horror Story* (2011), the subtler *Transparent* (2014) and the retro science-fiction *Stranger Things* (2016), most of which ran until the end of the decade or remain in production to the present day. Despite their different outlooks on life, society, and coming to terms with both, all these series have at least one thing in

common: they portray the family, as well as the family home, as a dynamic social agent. Even when other social, natural (or even supernatural) factors are at play, and usually there are, these and many more productions like them place an obvious emphasis on the ways families have in recent years come to entrench sexual fluidity and frustration, the tortuous genealogies of personal and collective trauma, family as an index of group psychosis, derailment, frustration. A society besides itself.

Dimitris Papanikolaou's new study *There is Something about the Family* may be read within this panoptic, global as well as globalised framework; an aggressive dystopia enabled by social media and internet TV. Papanikolaou's *family* brings to the fore a number of Greek cultural products from the last couple of decades or so: films, such as "Greek Weird-Wave" classic *Dogtooth* (*Kynodontas*; Yorgos Lanthimos, 2009); novels, such as Auguste Corteau's *The Obliteration of Nikos* (*O afanismos tou Nikou*; 2008); novels turned into films, such as Anna Kokkinos' Greek-Australian drama *Head On* (1998) based on Christos Tsiolkas' *Loaded* (1995) – and many more. Through his grim harvest, the author thus converses indirectly with the no-man's land deployed by pop culture at large; his gallery of unlikely heroes echo the frustrations expressed, often ad nauseam, by similar products elsewhere: is, for example, is the "typical Greek family" in *Dogtooth* yet another version of the families lurking in the dark corners of *American Horror Story*? Or is *Insatiable* an unlikely parody, in retrospective anticipation, of Athina Rachel Tsangari's *Attenberg* (2010)? Is Corteau's Nikos or Tsiolkas/Kokkinos' Ari the alter ego of the gay son from *Desperate Housewives* or *The Politician*?

Written in Papanikolaou's lucid and innovative Greek style, *There is Something about the Family* offers an extensive revisiting of the author's crucial theoretical framing of what he has dubbed "archive trouble". According to Papanikolaou, archive trouble is a brand of "disturbed-archive poetics", at the same time undertaking a "critique of official archive logics"; in many ways, this condition was generated as a result of, as well as in response to, the so-called "Greek crisis" from 2008 to 2009.¹ Papanikolaou turns to the Greek family "precisely because it involves life, economy and politics, in ways that bind people's bodies with the idea of a population, individual lives, psychological pressure and violence, with the violence of the sequences, the models, and the narratives" (416; all translations my own). In other words, the family, with all its systemic futures and structural deficiencies, becomes the focus of a debate regarding the country's financial ruin and social collapse. And this, according to Papanikolaou, because we all succumb to the "net of Greek kinship" (427), and take part in the *networks* it generates. And this is where, according to the author, the Greek works he discusses differ from their American counterparts: when, for example, Vince Gilligan in *Breaking Bad* explores dysfunctional families and pathological conjugal ties he is in fact attempting to deconstruct the "American dream", consumerist society, and the systemic corruption of Western society; just like Lauren Gussis in

Insatiable used the “modern family” as a symptom of a nouveau-American pathology of imagery, shallow sentimentalism and political correctness.

On the contrary, Papanikolaou argues, when Greek cinematographers and writers such as Lanthimos, Tzoumerkas, Kitsopoulou, Dimitrakaki and Croteau dissect the Greek family, they do so because they recognise it as the nest of social malaise – and not merely its symbolic representation. It is because these creators find the “holy Greek family” to be the hub of all the biopolitical technologies, all the discursive practices, and all the sociopolitical performances that construct and shape us today: as social agents, as engendered subjects, as bodies – national as well as nationalised. This cultural nucleus, where all that defines society’s cultural/political structure is at once present and under constant reproduction, is what Papanikolaou defines as the “short-circuit family”. As he claims, “returning to the Greek-family-question was one of the many attempts in these latter years to locate a new critical discourse, a new collective expression; [for] as a ‘short-circuit family’, [the Greek family] has been historically functional, and often decisive as such” (422). Inevitably, Papanikolaou’s rigorous rethinking of the Greek family and its cultural horrors is at the same time self-referential and even autobiographical, though of course in a subtle, nonlinear way: while he makes no reference to his own childhood or his relationship with his own mother, the author seemingly revisits his own biography through the relationship he establishes with Croteau’s Nikos or Dimitrakaki’s Katina Mela (incidentally, in a way not quite unrelated to how Dimitrakaki chose to compile her own autobiography, through illusion and allusion, and entirely counter-factually, in the face of her own heroine).

Papanikolaou compiles his material in a meticulously systematic way. His associations are labyrinthine, and the book’s spiral progression, simply genius. His pages – splendidly restless and nonlinear – converse with a theoretical universe of inconceivable vastness and admirable depth. For Papanikolaou belongs to a small group of scholars of international recognition who insist on undertaking a deeply integrated discussion of modern Greece, and – crucially – writing in Greek, through the deployment of a wide-ranging series of methodological approaches (from cultural studies to queer theory) and their involvement with an international array of current debates (from the biopolitics of austerity and crisis to sexual citizenship). His texts, therefore, both disseminate and help enrich the theoretical frameworks he employs in his work.

Papanikolaou sets his ambitious agenda in the prologue to his book: drawing from carefully chosen examples from the Athenian theatre scene, he discusses his concept of the “short-circuit family” alongside his parallel notion of the “family-as-a-frame” (also exemplified on the book’s colourfully designed back cover). He also defines *oeco*-nomics as biopolitics, drawing mostly on Foucault. The book’s first chapter focuses for the most part on *Head On* and the ways the contemporary Greek family – diasporic or not – constructs (some of) its members as noncanonical bodies, reacting at the same time to their own ways of inventing themselves. Some of the topics Papanikolaou discusses in this section are: family and the national(ised) subject, the gendered body and the nation-historical archive,

assumption of one's personal responsibility, the moment of parrhesia (another cue from the latter Foucault) – in sum what Papanikolaou himself describes as an “embodied archival scrutiny” (101).

The book's second chapter discusses the idea of a family archive, one that came to know endless mutations through the dystopic landscape of the “Greek crisis”. Here the discussion sets off with Syllas Tzoumerkas' *Country of Origin (Hora Proelefsis)* from 2010. Gradually we are steered towards parrhesia again (a topic the author will revisit in the last chapter of the book). A brilliant analysis of *To You Who Are Now Listening to Me (S'esas mou me akoute, 2003)* by Loula Anagnostaki gives Papanikolaou the timely opportunity to explore some of his book's central themes: the family remains in a state of fragmentation, this time however its members insist on speaking up about themselves and the seemingly desperate hope for a revolution that has not yet been forthcoming. And they do so on stage, breaking up what would be the natural flow of a theatrical performance, as the emancipated spectators of their own dramatic collapse. Taking us through Anagnostaki's plays such as *To You Who Are...*, and her earlier trademark works *The Parade (I Parelasi, 1965)* and *Nike (Niki, 1978)*, as well as their timely revivals from the austerity years, Papanikolaou leads an impressively multifocal discussion of the body – canonical or not – its familial frame, its national coding.

In chapter 3, the book turns to Nikos Apostolou, Corteau's unlikely hero from *Obliteration*. This choice allows Papanikolaou to introduce queer aesthetics and its political vocabulary, one the Greek language is not quite accustomed to just yet. Gradually the reader realises that Papanikolaou's strategic choice has all along been to talk about not just the body, but the noncanonical, queer body, a body in constant state of archive trouble. In his previous book, *“Those people made like me”: Queer Cavafy and the Poetics of Sexuality*,² Papanikolaou defined the queer as “what is sexually antinormative, politically radical, socially off-centric” (87); this phrasing explains why the author, in his new book, chose to work on these heavily politicised texts as expressions of queerness and not merely by returning to analytical categories traditionally applied by critics (especially those of the left) to literature in Greece, namely class, social struggles and so on. *Obliteration* thus affords Papanikolaou a welcome opportunity to discuss the private sphere and its pitfalls, as well as Greek LGBTQ movements and their fight since the *metapolitefsi*, an issue to which he returns to in chapter 4.

The book's fourth chapter goes back to the notion of parrhesia, here combined with Judith Butler's concept of “giving an account of oneself”.³ Central to this chapter is Dimitrakaki's *Inside A Girl Like You*, a groundbreaking novel published in 2009. Following on the steps of Dimitrakaki herself – who in her novel composes a deeply affective quest through texts, histories and sentiments from and for the past – Papanikolaou resumes and further explores his own views on identity and genealogy. He returns, crucially, to the old

question regarding the so-called “death of the author”, a concept that has suffered a lot in Greek criticism and the persistent resistance of some of Greece’s leading “theorists” to comprehend the very theory they ostensibly discuss. And this underlines this book’s importance for Greek theoretical studies at large – and the significance of its author’s choice to publish it in Greek. Papanikolaou’s bold line of argument settles, I find, this long-brewing discussion once and for all, in relation to such a topical issue in Greek sociopolitics, that of the family as an agent of cultural identity-forging and -performing. Papanikolaou theorises the infamous “death” as a gesture, not an ideological finality; as such, the idea of author suppression leads us to a field where meanings are constantly and persistently renegotiated, and the readers turn into authors themselves – though vulnerable rather than authoritative, and in a permanent state of precarity. Giving an account of oneself, Papanikolaou argues, against the family and national archives takes place inevitably within the claustrophobic frame set by the Greek family. At the same time, it becomes meaningful precisely because this becomes its *sine qua non* condition: accounting of oneself thus becomes a performance of family-ness, something like a Sunday lunch.

The book’s ultimate chapter has been conceived as “a supplement as well as a response to what was said in those preceding it” (340). Papanikolaou returns here to the problematic of the gendered, queer body, and its politicisation in the Greek public sphere. His central point of reference in this chapter is *Strella*, a film by Panos Koutras from 2009. Papanikolaou sees *Strella* as a text of a newly found political possibility, transcending once again the traditional left–right divide or the polarities between individual and collective, private and public, and so on. According to the author, “morality of the self” (355), mostly projected and received as a poetics of sexuality, is an act that is political and collective in its own right. It is an act through which the personal is reintroduced into the public sphere, and according to Papanikolaou this enhances rather than undermines its private character. The politicisation of sexuality in the Greek 1970s and 1980s, as well as its depoliticisation in the following years, is, according to Papanikolaou, at the same time a political *and* a nation-forging gesture (even when it is packaged as mere “confession” on behalf of its protagonist).

In sum, this is a thoroughly enjoyable book, eloquently written and perceptively argued. It addresses crucial issues in literary theory and cultural studies through carefully selected case studies, topically and tellingly “Greek”. Since its publication, the book has had a significant impact in the Greek debate on the family as an agent of identity-forging, as can be shown by the number of public discussions, even artistic responses, it has generated.

¹ Dimitris Papanikolaou, “Archive Trouble,” in *Hot Spots, Fieldsights*, 26 October 2011, accessed 20 May 2020, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/archive-trouble>.

² Dimitris Papanikolaou, “Σαν κ’ εμένα καμωμένοι”: Ο ομοφυλόφιλος Καβάφης και η ποιητική της σεξουαλικότητας (Athens: Patakis, 2014).

³ Judith Butler, “Giving an Account of Oneself,” *Diacritics* 31, no. 4 (2001): 22–40.