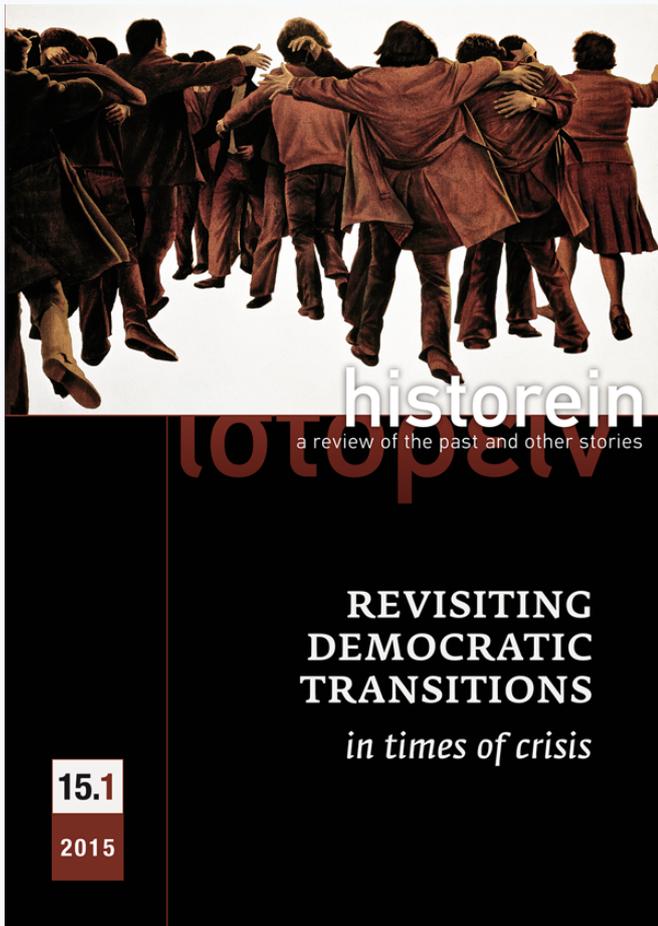


Historein

Vol 15, No 1 (2015)

Revisiting Democratic Transitions in Times of Crisis



Review of Kostis Kornetis' Children of the Dictatorship: Student Resistance, Cultural Politics and the "Long 1960s" in Greece

Polymeris Voglis

doi: [10.12681/historein.299](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.299)

Copyright © 2015, Polymeris Voglis



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:

Voglis, P. (2015). Review of Kostis Kornetis' Children of the Dictatorship: Student Resistance, Cultural Politics and the "Long 1960s" in Greece. *Historein*, 15(1), 170–172. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.299>

Finally, some attention should be drawn to the teleological subtitle of the book, which promises to link the (current) Cyprus conflict to events in the 1930s. While it is tempting to extend conclusions of historical research to the present or the future, historical determinism lurks, possibly underestimating, in this case, other, later factors that may have played a (decisive) role in the creation of the current Cyprus conflict. The connection that Rappas makes in the last two pages of his book between British colonial rule in Cyprus in the 1930s and the current Cyprus conflict falls rather short and could have been more convincing.

Despite these aspects that deserved more attention, *Cyprus in the 1930s* should be valued for its subtle, sensitive and well-researched account of the relations between colonisers and colonised, and for its regular thought-provoking excursions to broader perspectives.

Kostis Kornetis

Children of the Dictatorship: Student Resistance, Cultural Politics and the “Long 1960s” in Greece

New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013. 373 pp.

Polymeris Voglis

University of Thessaly

Every year on the anniversary of the Athens Polytechnic uprising (17 November 1973), a number of extreme rightist websites challenge what they call the “Polytechnic myth”. They maintain that no civilians were killed by the police and the army during the violent suppression of the uprising, despite the fact that researchers have established that the events left 24 people dead. Even more alarming are the findings of a survey conducted in the spring of 2013, according to which 30% of respondents believed that “things were better during the dictatorship than they are today”. The economic crisis and the breakdown of the political system have led many people in Greece to sympathise with authoritarian solutions: a well-organised and disciplined society without conflict, corruption and crisis, and governed by a strongman. The appeal of authoritarianism nowadays reflects the discrediting of political developments in the decades following the fall of the dictatorship, the era known as the *Metapolitefsi* that has been harshly criticised as responsible for the current crisis. Moreover, the appeal of the Colonel’s dictatorship (1967–1974) has flourished on the basis of ignorance, distortion and silence. The seven years of the dictatorship remain a largely unknown period for many Greeks. Even the majority of the people who experienced those years prefer to forget, pretending that nothing extraordinary occurred during them until the end, the Turkish

invasion in Cyprus in 1974. There are those, however, who do remember, the people who stood up against the dictatorship and experienced the terror and the brutality of the regime. Kostis Kornetis' *Children of the Dictatorship* is the first scholarly attempt to tell their story.

Drawing on a variety of sources, mainly oral and written testimonies but also archival holdings and the press, as well as the literature on social movements, Kornetis studies the trajectory of the student movement against the dictatorship, paying special attention to the subjective experience and memory of the young activists. Moreover, throughout the book he examines the student movement in Greece in relation to the global '68 in order to trace the flow of ideas, attitudes and cultural idioms between Greece and the West in terms of political radicalism and counterculture. Following Marwick's thesis of the "long Sixties", Kornetis' book is not confined to the seven years of the dictatorship but starts with the student movement in the early 1960s. The student protests in 1961–62 and the formation of the leftist Lambrakis' Youth in 1963 marked the emergence of a new social subject, that is, students, that played an important role not only on the university campus but also in society and politics in general. Students introduced new ideas and practices that challenged the post-civil war establishment, in other words the conservative and authoritarian policies of successive rightwing governments. After the Colonels' coup on 21 April 1967, these students would be at the forefront of the struggle against the dictatorship.

Kornetis doesn't examine the student movement and the antidictatorship resistance as a unified whole that covers the seven years of the junta. Instead he suggests that there were two distinct phases and, accordingly, two distinct "generations". While the definition of "generation" is rather loose in the book, his point

is clear. In the first phase, between 1967 and 1970, the students who were already politically active before the coup played a significant role. They formed small, clandestine groups, some of which used violent means against the dictatorship; most of these groups were crushed by the police and their members were arrested and received heavy sentences. In the second phase, between 1971 and 1973, "the children of the dictatorship" took the leading role in the resistance against the junta. As the author argues, "the politicisation of everyday practices and the emergence of collectivities with their own contestatory strategies created spaces of political agility that eventually transcended the dichotomy between hard-core resistance and passive acceptance" (48). Also, the two phases of the resistance corresponded to different political opportunities, according to the author: the harsh state repression of the first period was followed by the relaxation of policing and the junta's timid "liberalisation". The distinction between the two "generations" is convincing and it is crucial for the understanding of the differences between the practices of small groups and the outbreak of a mass student movement against the dictatorship. However, the author should have elaborated more on the relation between the two (that is, whether and to what extent the first generation influenced the second). He claims that the formation of the first generation was conditioned by the civil war past whereas the next generation was not, a conclusion that is not very well founded. Perhaps even more problematic are the generalisations that the first "generation's" entire cycle of clandestine and violent actions eventually proved fruitless" (86) and that the second generation sought "to 'kill' their predecessors and affirm their dynamic presence as a self-sustained entity" (100).

The largest part of the book is devoted to the 1971–73 period and the culmination of the

movement against the dictatorship. The exasperation of the students with the conservatism of the university in terms of administration, faculty and atmosphere, as well as the attempts of the dictators at a “controlled liberalisation” of the regime, drove many students into collective action. Kornetis insists on the role, on the one hand, of regional student societies rather than openly political clubs, like the Hellenic-European Youth Movement, and, on the other, of numerous leftist political groups, in creating opportunities and providing structures for student politicisation. Moreover, the author pays attention to a broader cultural change underway in Greece in the early 1970s and aptly demonstrates the cultural underpinnings of the growing politicisation. New publishing houses were created, a number of New Left books were translated, new magazines were published, American counterculture made its way to Greek audiences, new theatre groups with a political edge were formed, and a new music idiom flourished that drew inspiration from both rock and traditional folk music. Kornetis puts forward an impressive analysis of the cultural change that happened during that period, a change that not only concerned the avant-garde and the arts but eventually the everyday life of Greek students, from their clothing and hang-outs to their political engagement and sexual relations.

The last chapter of the book, on the student mobilisation and the Polytechnic uprising, offers a thorough and vivid account of the developments in the student movement. From the end of 1972, the students’ contestation of the regime became open, public and continuous and very often was violently suppressed by the police. The contentious issue was the students’ demand for free student elections and unions and the confrontation with the regime had two “critical events”. The first was

the occupation of the Law School in February 1973, which was reluctantly tolerated by the regime, although students who sought to occupy the school for a second time in March were arrested and severely beaten. Using oral testimony, the author highlights the activists’ experiences of torture and imprisonment. The second “critical event” was the Polytechnic uprising in November 1973 which was ruthlessly repressed. The author describes in detail the dramatic events and the growing radicalisation of the student movement. The students believed that they were acting on behalf of society and that the overthrow of the dictatorship was possible: “the waiting had come to an end, an immediate future seemed imminently close” (263). The ensuing bloodbath, however, left its mark on the individual memory of the participants, a memory that oscillates between exaltation and trauma, as Kornetis thoughtfully argues.

Kornetis’ book breaks new ground because it is the first systematic attempt to historicise the student movement under the dictatorship. By using a variety of sources, he carefully reconstructs the historical events and discusses in depth the students’ experience and memory of their political engagement in different instances (in clandestine groups, in prison, in university life, in their personal life, and so on) in order to highlight the multiplicity of their identity. Last but not least, Kornetis examines the Greek student movement as part of the broader 1960s movement and draws (especially in the epilogue) very significant conclusions regarding the commonalities and the peculiarities of the Greek case. In this way, in studying the Greek movement from a transnational perspective, it is indispensable for all scholars of the 1960s.