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Review of Vangelis Karamanolakis, *Ανεπιθύμητο παρελθόν: Οι φάκελοι κοινωνικών φρονημάτων στον 20ό αιώνα και η καταστροφή τους* [Unwanted past: The files on social beliefs in the 20th century and their destruction]

*Kostis Karpozilos*

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### Ruptures and Trajectories in Postwar Europe



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Vangelis Karamanolakis

*Ανεπιθύμητο παρελθόν: Οι φάκελοι κοινωνικών φρονημάτων στον 20ό αιώνα και η καταστροφή τους*

[Unwanted past: The files on social beliefs in the 20th century and their destruction]

Athens: Themelio, 2019. 319 pp.

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It is a powerful scene that still haunts concerned historians. On 29 August 1989, dozens of trucks unloaded tonnes of paper within the perimeter of a major steel company on the outskirts of Athens. These were the *fakeloi*, “personal files”, that the Greek state had kept for decades on millions of its own citizens. The files formed piles and then they were transferred, amid a chaotic atmosphere, in the operating furnaces. It was a highly symbolic event: on the 40th anniversary of the final battle of the Greek Civil War, the Greek state was orchestrating the destruction of files that were synonymous with its traumatic legacy. This legacy related to the post-civil war social and political segregation between nationally-minded and subversive citizens. The cornerstone of the division was the personal file. An extended and interconnected surveillance network informed an expanding archival ecology; there was a file for each citizen and its contents defined the classification of the individual according to a predefined scale that allowed certain privileges or implied certain restrictions. In this context, the destruction of the files was perceived as the final and cathartic step in the long process of terminating the repercussions and legacies of the civil war.

*Unwanted Past*, by Vangelis Karamanolakis, starts with this episode in order to address two interrelated questions: the construction of the Greek surveillance project, with a particular emphasis on personal files, and the circumstances that led to their choreographed destruction in 1989. Therefore, this book belongs to the extensive family of works that explore the handling of archives in the post-Cold War setting, the promises (and limits) of transparency, and the complex questions arising from the dialogue between the quest for historical “truth” and the dynamics of reconciliation and transition. Often in such works historians use their own research experience as an entry point to the dazzling world of surveillance, archives and personal files.

Karamanolakis, a professor of history in the University of Athens, fits into this

tradition. His academic itinerary began at the Contemporary Social History Archives (Aski), an Athens archival institution that was founded in 1992, with a focus on preserving the turbulent historical memory of the Left. In the historical context of the early post-Cold War years, the foundation of Aski – and the institutional commitment to open and unrestricted access to its archival collections – was a response to what had taken place in 1989. Even though Karamanolakis does not belong to the generation of concerned historians who had raised their voice against the burning of the files, he has closely followed the ensuing debates and shares a political and historiographical sensitivity that leads him to discern the importance of this event in modern Greek history. What is more, his distance from the 1989 controversy allows him to address an intriguing question: why did Greek society – and the parties of the Left – support the burning of the files?

In order to respond, the author first tries to frame the 1989 event within a broader paradigm and follows briefly three cases – Spain, Paraguay and the German Democratic Republic. In each case, the downfall of autocratic regimes dictated diverse responses to the handling of state archives, ranging from concealment and partial destruction to restricted and open access. Within this range of options, the Greek case stands out as an exceptional one as the surveillance and filing practices were carried out both by authoritarian and liberal governments throughout the twentieth century. This was a practice of the Greek state in which transitions and moments of rupture did not seem to affect its resilience and operating capacity. On the contrary, it constituted an expanding bureaucratic world that affected large segments of Greek society and was pivotal to the persistence of an internal division that shaped political and social realities.

The second chapter provides a historical overview of the implementation and evolution of the surveillance practices of the Greek state and, more importantly, the surveillance system on individual citizens. The key here is interwar anticommunism; reminding us that anticommunism was a major concern of liberal governments in the late 1920s, the author follows the development of legislation that targeted the “red threat”. In this framework, the Metaxas dictatorship proved to be instrumental in establishing the criminalisation of communist activity as it introduced a “certificate of social beliefs” that defined the relationship between the citizen and the State. In the postwar setting this practice was not abandoned. On the contrary, the violent postwar transition led to the intensification of anticommunist legislation and to the systematisation of surveillance practices, the centrality of the “certificate of social beliefs” in everyday life, and the expansion of the surveillance system; not just for those who were potential troublemakers, but practically for every Greek citizen. This very helpful historical introduction allows us to comprehend how the *fakeloi* produced fear and anxiety, how they became tools of intimidation and submission and how they evolved into a bureaucratic maze that reflected the relation between the state and the citizen.

The third chapter is a case study. Leonidas Kyrkos was an influential communist politician who in the postwar years was a member of parliament for the legal political party of the Greek Left. His file was not destroyed in 1989 as the relevant legislation had allowed space for the “preservation” of files of prominent individuals. At that point Kyrkos was a leading figure of the biggest party of the Left. Discussing the Kyrkos file, Karamanolakis is not primarily interested in reconstructing the politician’s life. On the contrary, and this is extremely productive, he discusses the prospects and limitations of historical research that arise from having access to such a file. The 1,200 documents that make up the “Kyrkos file” allow the reader to understand how the surveillance system worked on a daily basis and the bureaucratic nature of amassing and then classifying information. There are two important points here. First, as the author convincingly argues, the files do not contain “treasures” for the historian. They are important to the extent they describe a system of surveillance and the priorities of the Greek state. There is a popular belief, shared often by historians, that the files will reveal a secret that will alter our knowledge about modern Greek history. It seems that this was not the case. The repetitive reports, the bureaucratic language, the petty details are indeed revealing; but not in the way that is often anticipated when revealing a hidden secret. Second, the resilience of the surveillance system is indeed revealing of the continuities of the Greek state. Kyrkos was under surveillance in the early years of the Third Greek Republic after the downfall of the military dictatorship. This allows us to reconsider the limits of transitions, the continuities of the state, and the inherent inertias when it comes to practices that have a lengthy history.

The transition is the subject of the fourth chapter. The Greek transition to the Third Greek Republic carries a paradox: it is described by a notion (*Metapolitefsi*) that, at the same time, refers to the moment of the downfall of the junta in 1974 and to the following years with historians and political scientists debating whether its end came in 1981, in 1989 or even with the recent financial and political crisis. Karamanolakis here provides an excellent overview of the 1974–1989 period, emphasising the decline of institutional anticommunism and the overall revision of lengthy and resilient pillars of the Greek state. In essence, the author emphasises the gradual disintegration of the anticommunist state and the dynamics of democratisation. In this equilibrium the files remained a point of reference; even though the “certificate of social beliefs” was abolished in 1974, this did not signal any decision regarding the surveillance system itself. In this context, the “files” represented a mystified and distant world that was not subject to the transitional politics of democratisation. When Pasok came to power in 1981, it initiated legal reforms that signalled the terminal end of state anticommunism and the retrospective inclusion of the communist resistance in the national narrative. Despite these steps, the files remained in a state of limbo.

The next chapter takes us to the inferno; that is the burning of the files in 1989. This episode does not come as a surprise. Karamanolakis has demonstrated how the rise of Pasok to power went together with a promise of terminating the surveillance system that

had haunted Greek history for decades. In a telling poster for the 1985 elections, a file appeared ablaze with the caption “For Democracy without *fakelomata* [“filings”]; for Freedom without persecutions”. This promise was fulfilled in 1989. Karamanolakis here follows closely the parliamentary proceedings and public debate that finally led to the opening scene of this review. The year 1989 is exemplary for transitions and the author takes advantage of this in order to highlight the links between domestic politics and the overall rhetoric of the end of the Cold War. In the Greek setting a coalition government between the Right and the Communist Left in 1989 seemed to fulfil the notion of a historical compromise that allowed the Greek nation to leave behind its traumatic divisions. There are many details to this story, but the big picture leaves no room for ambiguity: the destruction of the files in 1989 was presented as a step towards national reconciliation and dissenting voices were few and not powerful enough to reverse the tide.

Why did this happen? This is the most intriguing question and in the last chapter one can truly enjoy a perceptive analysis that goes deep into the heart of the matter. Karamanolakis has already challenged the conventional wisdom that the destruction of the files was a decision of the Greek Right in its conscious effort to airbrush recent Greek history. Having done that, he turns to the broader issue of how Greek society (and especially the Left) addressed the legacy of the civil war. Despite the demand for reconciliation, the Left did not address the disturbing aspects of the civil strife and its own responsibility for the escalation of the conflict. In the post-1974 setting, the civil war was described, by all sides, as a “traumatic event” and this rhetorical abstraction ultimately did not leave any room for politics and practices of reconciliation. The “files” were seen as proofs of a past that no one wanted to address and discuss. Their destruction symbolised the transition from a traumatic to an unwanted past.

*Unwanted Past* is one of those books that serves multiple purposes: it provides an overview of the Greek surveillance state, the centrality of the files in the construction of the citizens’ classification system, the gradual – and not at all predefined – process from authoritarianism to democracy. This book can be read as a history of postwar Greece on the basis of a number of issues ranging from the relation between the state and citizen to the continuities of anticommunism which challenge clear-cut dichotomies between authoritarian and democratic politics. Above all, Karamanolakis provides a demystifying narrative. The files have haunted Greek political and social imagination for decades. Their existence (and the lack of any transparency on their existence) was instrumental to the implementation of an atmosphere of fear; their destruction has fuelled anxiety that any chance of actual reconciliation has been lost forever. The book demystifies the world of the files: it emphasises their importance and, at the same time, describes them in their actual dimensions. What is more, it explains how fear was instrumental in the decision for their destruction. Not only the fear of the knowledge that, despite all promises, the files were still

fed with information, but the fear of what their preservation would potentially release: moments of treason, moments of suffering, moments of submission to the Greek state.

The success of the book – evident in its public reception and a 2019 prize from the Academy of Athens – demonstrates interest for a practice that all Greeks know about (το *έχω φακελωμένο* [“I have a file on him”] and other similar phrases are still part of everyday life). This is a pioneering work and the author has succeeded in producing a narrative that is compelling and analytical at the same time. There are a number of questions that require additional research (for instance, the political economy of the surveillance system) and the author’s effort to challenge the clear-cut dichotomy between authoritarian and democratic regimes could possibly benefit from active engagement in the contemporary debate on big data and surveillance. In a similar vein, there is room to discuss the parallels between the practices of the anticommunist Greek state and the communist archival practice of retaining personal files on party functionaries and members. Ultimately, the decision of the Left to actively support the destruction of the files was a handling of its own traumas and responsibilities.

*Unwanted Past* questions our reflex reaction of astonishment when confronted with the scene of the burning files. This work opens the floor to the necessity of addressing what is taken for granted and the complex questions relating to the undiscussed aspects of modern Greek history.