

## Historein

Vol 16, No 1-2 (2017)

Greek Historiography in the 20th Century: Opening a Research Agenda



### Review of Maria Zarimis', Darwin's Footprint: Cultural Perspectives on Evolution in Greece (1880-1930s)

Sevasti Trubeta

doi: [10.12681/historein.9082](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.9082)

Copyright © 2017, Sevasti Trubeta



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:

Trubeta, S. (2017). Review of Maria Zarimis', Darwin's Footprint: Cultural Perspectives on Evolution in Greece (1880-1930s). *Historein*, 16(1-2), 167–173. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.9082>

**Maria Zarimis**

***Darwin's Footprint: Cultural Perspectives on Evolution in Greece (1880–1930s)***

**Budapest & New York: CEU Press, 2015. 340 pp.**

**Sevasti Trubeta**

Free University of Berlin

In recent decades, publications on biopolitics, health policies and eugenics have proliferated. The increasing scholarly interest in these topics is further manifested in moving beyond predominant Anglo-American and German paradigms and considering neglected regions such as southern, eastern and southeastern Europe and Asia. But while ideas and technologies of human life have been, to a large extent, explored in association with discourses of health and disease, the cultural conditions of their dissemination and transfer into literature still remain underexplored, especially with respect to southeastern Europe (including Greece). Hence, Maria Zarimis' recently published book opens a new perspective on the reading of Greek literature by raising questions as to the influence of both Darwinian thought and biosciences on Greek material culture.

The novelty of this book comes down to the following points: While considering a wide spectrum of Greek writers, Zarimis suggests a remarkable pattern of Darwinian influence on Greek intellectuals, even though she states that "the application of sciences, in particular Darwinism, to literature [was not] a common trend among Greek writers" (68). (What is not addressed here is that Darwinism cannot actually be considered a science; rather it refers to different perceptions of Darwinian ideas.) A

further novel point is the author's attempt to identify eugenic ideas in Greek literature up to the 1930s. Moreover, she traces different scientific theories and ideas on evolution, heredity, degeneration, physiognomy, etc, in the works of Greek novelists and intellectuals and associates these ideas with the influence of various perceptions of Darwinian thought. The author specifies that the main objective of her book is "to unveil how Darwinism formed a part of the Greek intellectual and cultural life during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (1). Moreover, she intends to unfold "the informative, intriguing, and often controversial details drawn from the writings of prominent literary figures, historians of science, scientists, politicians, feminists, and other intellectuals from various academic disciplines" (1), focusing on the literary world, and on Grigorios Xenopoulos in particular. The author's concerns are well reflected in the structure of the book and its division into six chapters, which address Darwinian and post-Darwinian evolutionary theories and how they were perceived by Greek writers.

The first chapter aims to provide an overview of evolutionary theories and "investigates the main scientific ideas that may have influenced society and the literary world in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. These include aspects of Darwin's theory, its philosophical implications, and other evolutionary and associated theories popular at the time" (21). The second chapter addresses the influence of Darwinism and evolutionism on Greek prose fiction and refers especially to Emmanuel Roidis, Kostis Palamas and Nikos Kazantzakis. The third and fourth chapters are dedicated to Xenopoulos and the Darwinian influence on the magazine *Η Διάπλασις των Παίδων* (Children's guidance) and his novel *Πλούσιοι και φτωχοί* (Rich and poor). The latter is read under the aspect of "the biological ide-

as that were derived from Darwin's theories and absorbed in Xenopoulos' novel" (160). The two last chapters of the book address the gender issue in several of Xenopoulos' novels under the primary aspects of degeneration, Darwinism and eugenics. Zarimis argues in these chapters that in the representation of the degenerated woman, "the New Woman was simultaneously representative of the 'degeneration of society and ... and that society's moral regeneration'" (205-6).

### ***Is Darwin's footprint traceable in any bioscientific theory?***

This book is actually more an attempt to trace Darwin's footprint in Greek literature and less an account of the cultural perspectives on evolutionism in Greece. Going into theories of biosciences, national ideas and literary genre, it invites a reexamination of the possible relationship between diverse scientific "isms" that addressed human nature at the time and sought to manage human life. Indeed, the story this book tells goes beyond Darwinian thought and (social) Darwinism and includes biologism, hereditarianism, progress and degeneration, modernism, scientific rationalism versus metaphysics (the "disenchantment of the world"), eugenics, medicalisation, gender-related discourses and many other issues bearing on the perception of the human being, society and the technologies of human life. Certainly, this book tells a story of ideas in motion; ideas that move between countries, diverse scientific disciplines; science and art; scientific rationalism and social morality; body, gender and sexuality. For all the motion of these ideas, Zarimis allocates a common centre to all of them when her approach suggests that all these issues should be subsumed under the umbrella of Darwinism and/or fixing their original source in Darwinian

thought, which is implied as having been the cradle for what came after.

In methodological terms this strategy indicates that there were epistemological and cultural continuities in the embracing of Darwinian ideas up to the 1930s. But what about the breakpoints, disruptions and transformations that occurred, especially when one considers that the interaction between science and literature is primarily a matter of a *cultural* transfer of science and thus subject to the cultural codification of the contemporary sociopolitical concerns of the intellectual elites? In the case she explores, the flow of bioscientific concepts into Greek literature and intellectual discourses occurred in a period when a national ideology and language were in formation and while Greek intellectual and national elites were coping with the historical past, the Ottoman past in particular, and redirecting their eyes toward western civilization.

In the search for Darwin's footprints in the works of Greek writers, a strong point of Zarimis' book is the reconstruction of the interpersonal networks through which Darwinian ideas and Darwinism were transmitted to Greek intellectual circles (for example, in chapter three). Having had access to archives and personal libraries (for example, of Kostis Palamas), the author shows that several of the Greek novelists had read Darwin or were informed about bioscientific theories. However, contrary to what Zarimis suggests, the influx of such ideas and theories into literature did not occur through one-to-one transfers. For instance, in an oversimplifying way, she believes that she recognises in Palamas' "primeval soul of the Greeks ... a metaphor for [August] Weismann's germ plasm" (98).

A first and essential question that a critical reading of this book raises is whether Dar-

win and Darwinism(s) indeed formed the central axis around which every bioscientific theory and idea of human beings and human life turned (at least those considered in this book). Certainly, Darwin's theory of evolution caused a seismic shock to the thinking about the world and life and also gave impetus to a shift from perceiving the human as a creation of God to being a self-creator of even a perfect instance of him/herself. However, the dynamics of the ideas and technologies of human perfection cannot be considered outside the domain and dynamism of modernism, and this is a neglected issue in Zarimis' book.

An instrumental vehicle for the dissemination of bioscientific ideas was biological determinism (biologism). Along with its having been embedded in certain epistemological approaches, its societal dynamics rested on its moving between biosciences, humanities and popular discourses. Zarimis does not omit biological determinism as such, but disregards its fluidity and capability to merge with diverse ideologies. She regards, for example, the "idea of biological determinism" as being "widespread in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries", and as referring "to the belief that the individual is shaped by biological factors, more than likely by heredity" (31). However, biological determinism and heredity were not mutually exclusive; rather the former was inserted into ideas of heredity (not only in scientific but also in popular terms). Yet biological determinism coined the language of heredity and descent not only with respect to individuals, but also to large groups: it moulded the language of talking about communality in its diverse versions, including nation and class. Finally, both biologism and the late nineteenth-century idea of progress may be the keys for understanding discourses of heredity, descent and the perceptions of human beings, also with respect to discourses of degeneration.

Certainly, progress had emerged as a philosophical question prior to Darwin, but in the second half of the nineteenth century two developments gave form to its semantics: first progress was discussed in medical terms, and further it appeared interwoven with degeneration, thereby forming a terminological couple. Reversely, the terminological couple, degeneration–progress, came to influence medicine decisively (first of all psychiatry) and its allied disciplines, such as physical anthropology, physiognomy, phrenology and others. In the proceeding medicalisation of society in the same period, medical discourses became the main channel for disseminating idea(s) of degeneration to several sectors of society. Still, degeneration emerged as a malleable notion whose content was (trans)forming while moving among sciences, humanities, imagination and sociopolitical thoughts. Pointing to the kaleidoscope of theories and ideologies from which degeneration (and progress) drew its semantics, Daniel Pick argues:

Degeneration was never reduced to a fixed axiom or theory in the nineteenth century despite the expressed desire to resolve the conceptual questions once and for all in definitive texts. Rather it was a shifting term produced, inflected, refined, and re-constituted in the movement between human sciences, fictional narratives and socio-political commentaries. It is not possible to trace it to one ideological conclusion, or to locate its identification with a single political message. It is perhaps possible to suggest something of the political range of its connotations.<sup>1</sup>

If Pick is right, the Darwinian connection between ideas of degeneration in the literature is rather improper, especially with respect to Xenopoulos' novel *Η νύχτα του εκφυλισμού* (The night of degeneration, 1926) which was written in a period

in which discourses of degeneration had been widely popularised. (Cf., for example, Zarimis' argument in explaining the degeneration of Phoibos in this novel: "The relationship between mind and body is of course a timeless issue, which was further popularised with Darwin's theories that were considered materialist" (279).)

### ***On the attractiveness of eugenics to present scholars***

One novel question Zarimis wants to raise is related to tracing eugenic ideas in literature. However, her strategy to juxtapose literature with scholarly texts on eugenics (either contemporaneous or subsequent) weakens her approach and raises more questions than answers. An indicative example of this is the tracing of eugenics ideas in Xenopoulos' *Η νύχτα του εκφυλισμού*. Although the eugenic influence on this novel is indeed revealing, the reference to a later publication on eugenic sterilisation by "Moysidos" (sic, 282; she is referring here to Moisis Moiseidis) undermines the arguments. Moiseidis' book on eugenic sterilisation was written in 1934 and revealed the uneasy reaction of a eugenicist (Moiseidis) to the Nazi sterilisation laws. Moiseidis presented comparatively the diverse international attempts to establish measures and institutionalised policies on sterilisation in several countries and sided with the moderate current among eugenicists. Zarimis' attempt to find the link to medical publications on eugenics disadvantages the fact that, in the period when Xenopoulos' novel was being written, eugenic ideas were penetrating diverse sectors of Greek society and were about to become a controversial issue, especially with respect to sterilisation.

Zarimis elaborates on a similarly problematic link to eugenics with respect to Palamas'

verses of *Ο Δωδεκάλογος του Γύφτου* (*Twelve Words of the Gypsy*, 1907) and also to Papadiamantis' *Η Φόνισσα* (*The Murderess*, 1903). In the second chapter of her book, she analyses Palamas' poetry, pointing out his advocacy of scientific rationalism and his appreciation of Darwin's ideas of evolution. This appreciation is, however, far from justifying a "utopian eugenic subtext, in the context of literature, associated with the idea of the selection of a 'new unblemished' race, which will be ridden of the weak and imperfect" (95), as Zarimis believes that she recognises in the following verses of *Twelve Words of the Gypsy* (which might be "quite freely" translated from the Greek original): "And from us shall start the lineage / Of a new unblemished race; / Children who shall bring forth others / Like themselves; while every sore, / Canker, ugliness and evil, / Will have ebbed for evermore" (95).<sup>2</sup>

A link to eugenic control over reproduction and especially to eugenic sterilisation is expounded on as well in the case of Papadiamantis' *The Murderess*. While the connection between poverty and the abandoning of children, female children in particular, is well-founded and persuasively illustrated, the association with Michail Kairis' lecture on eugenics (1917), especially his reference to infanticide in ancient Hellas, is inappropriate. Leaving aside the heterochrony of the two texts and the fact that the association of infanticide in ancient Hellas with eugenics was a marginal view among both Greek and European eugenicists, control over reproduction (if this is the essence of the association between *The Murderess* and eugenics) is not an exclusively modern, much less an exclusively eugenic, concern. In the societal environment aptly described by Zarimis in this chapter, it would be intriguing, I suggest, to consider whether the figure of *The Murderess* eventually personifies the female healer who possessed the knowledge about repro-

duction (that is, contraception and abortion) and at that time period was not only obsolete but, moreover, negatively connoted. If Giorgos Aristinos' argument is right that Papadiamantis' *The Murderess* is an "irresolute work" and eventually "nothing but the painful gestation of modernity",<sup>3</sup> then this novel could symbolically be taken for the end of the era in the traditional control over reproduction and the emergent victory of modernity. But this is not necessarily a eugenic matter.

### ***Advocating purification and still, beyond eugenics***

The rhetoric of purification or/and degeneration was often embraced by Greek intellectuals in that period when debating the creation of a national language. It also occurred when they attempted to cope with the historical past while reconsidering or even discarding historical epochs according to the advocated national concepts. In doing so, intellectuals used to resort to their contemporary, prominent discourses on progress and degeneration and they also utilised a biologist vocabulary.

Once again, the association with eugenics in the several cases discussed in the book is often groundless and far fetched. Zarimis interprets Giorgos Skliros' thoughts as eugenics statements, such as those addressed against the "Turkish ethnic element" in Greece in order to "purify the race". She quotes Skliros: "It remains to us to make the social and mental revolution, *purifying our race* from all horrible Asian stigmata which till now have contaminated and withered it, condemning it to obscurity and barbarism."<sup>4</sup> And she interprets this statement as follows: "The racial rhetoric is evident. His underlying aim was to harness a biological approach and rid the Greek race

of degenerate elements by eugenic means, even though those means were not voiced. In accordance with the ideal of the *Megali Idea* (Great Idea), it is likely he was referring to removing the Turkish and any other 'foreign' ethnic element occupying Greece, as a means to purify the race" (51). Suggesting another interpretation, I would argue that obviously Skliros uses a biologistic language (in this text as in several others) when he suggests that modern Greece finds its place in the modern world by confronting the oriental remnants ("stigmata") of the Ottoman past. But there is neither eugenics nor exclusion of ethnic diverse elements here. In spite of that, in the quoted passages there is no indication of the "Turkish ethnic element"; none of the Greek eugenic currents was concerned with ethnic questions and minorities. Both the quoted passage as well as the reactions to it (51–52) by Nikolaos Giannios and Ion Dragoumis (the latter is elsewhere (54) characterised as "socialist"), only illustrate that the point at issue was whether Greece belonged to the Orient or the Occident. In this very light, one can consider Perikles Giannopoulos' quoted statement (from 1904): "Let the few take courage, the many will follow them fatefully, when we all help to *purify the horizons of ideas and physical things*, which blocked from us the good road towards the Greek Rebirth" (62).<sup>5</sup> The foreign influence Giannopoulos means is apparently nothing other than western European culture; and the discovery here of "evolutionary and eugenic undertones" in this discourse (63) is dubious.

Apparently, the translation of the Greek term "*fili*" into "race" misleadingly identifies the former with Anglo-American racial concepts. But, when Skliros and Palamas refer to *fili*, they mean the Greek national community. As I have detailed elsewhere, Skliros' understanding of *fili* is indicative "of the merging of diverse semantics at the intersection of cultural and



naturalistic elements that are intercommunicated by the idea of common descent ... The idea of descent encompasses a wide range of myths, including the supposed power of blood to explain the evolution of individuals and societies.”<sup>6</sup>

It is likely that the recent increase in interest in eugenics has led to the formation of a fashionable subject, with the effect that eugenics often becomes perceived as an omnipresent, uniform and diachronic phenomenon, something easily taken for granted in the aftermath of the Second World War, as Zarimis argues: “Compared to other countries of Eastern Europe, eugenics in Greece became even more developed after World War II” (45). But is the founding of an association of eugenics by the gynaecologist Nikolaos Louros<sup>7</sup> after the war enough evidence for the postwar development of eugenics? (Especially in view of the fact that the public debates of this very association reveal a remarkable opposition to eugenics among Greek intellectuals.) And, what about the passage from postwar reformist eugenics to human genetics? Finally, the question of continuity of eugenics as incorporated in postwar human genetics is a controversial issue. Eugenics is not a diachronic phenomenon of any attempt to control human reproduction, but rather a historical phenomenon of biopolitics. It should be noted that the soil on which eugenics flourished was less Galton’s proposal (whose influence in the nineteenth century was marginal and came to the fore along with the rise of the transnational eugenic movement) and more so the central position of hygiene, hygienic discourses and practices from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Hygienists and eugenics shared to a remarkable extent the same concerns about degeneration, the crucial role of women in the progress of society and the nation, and, not least of all, the declared necessity to exercise con-

trol over reproduction. Their fundamental difference, however, was down to the proposed measures, even if the borderline between hygienic and eugenic rhetoric was often blurred.

Still, ideas related to human life and human beings traversed the borderlines between the sciences, art, images of disorder, national ideologies and morality.

### *Moving ideas, transforming bodies*

The most demonstrative example of ideas in motion is included in chapter five of Zarimis’ book. Especially in the subchapter “The Spider and Praying Mantis” (which is one of the most impressive), she addresses the imagery of women as vampires, cannibals, spiders and lamias in Xenopoulos’ novel *Τερέζα Βάρμα-Δακόστα* (Tereza Varma-Dacosta, 1926). Being more than an account of Darwinian influence over this novel, this chapter demonstrates the interlinkage between aesthetics and biosciences, discourses of physiognomy, vampirism and transformative bodies, degeneration and ethical assessments of female emancipation and sexuality. The “glistening” point here is how the core idea of the physiognomic discourses appears interwoven with diverse ideologies,<sup>8</sup> epitomised in gothic and vampire figures, and becomes codified in literary symbols. The transformative body and the Gothic figures became a motif in prose fiction and literature that draws on different sources and indeed also from science. The modern gothic and vampire figures, even if they were supposed to have found stable soil in scientific reasoning (even if contested), correspond to fears of the transformations in the political and social order caused by developments in their current world. Tabish Khair and Johan Höglund describe gothic figures as travellers

“from the imperial metropolis into the colonial periphery, ... where stable cultural categories clash, collapse and transform, allowing both the human and the political body to take new and often disturbing forms”.<sup>9</sup> These transformations stand surely for the survival of gothic figures in the literary genre, even though discourses on teratology, physiognomy and phrenology were largely discredited by scientific means.

Maria Zarimis’ book raises a wide range of issues related to the influence of Darwinian thought and Darwinism, but also of biosciences, over Greek intellectuals and novelists. A critical reading of her book may contribute to the discussion on new perspectives for research on the cultural transmission of evolutionary and bioscientific thoughts into Greek material culture.

en: Brill, 2013), 162. On the conceptual transformations of *fili*, *ibid.*, “Concepts of the Greek *fili*: communality in racial and eugenic terms,” 145ff. On Skliros’ idea of *fili*, *ibid.*, 161–62.

- 7 Nikolaos Louros was the “founder and first president of the society”, according to society’s own publication. See Greek Society of Eugenics and Human Genetics, “Πρόλογος” (Forward), *Συζητήσεις ενώπιον του κοινού* (Debates before the public), 3rd vol. (Athens, 1978), 5.
- 8 Richard Twine, “Physiognomy, phrenology and the temporality of the body,” *Body & Society* 8/1 (2002): 67–88.
- 9 Tabish Khair and Johan Höglund, eds, *Transnational and postcolonial vampires: dark blood* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.

## NOTES

- 1 Daniel Pick, *Faces of degeneration: a European disorder, c. 1848–c. 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 7.
- 2 Cf. the original verses: “κι από μας θα γεννηθούνε / τ’ αφεγάδιαστα παιδιά, / που όμοια τους θα σπείρουν κι άλλα, / κι ό,τι γύρω τους αχνό, / άρρωστο, άσκημο, θα ρέψει / στον αφανισμό”.
- 3 In his introduction to his edition of Papadiamantis, *Η φόνισσα* (*The murderess*) (Athens: Ellinika Grammata, 2006), 48.
- 4 Giorgos Skliros, “Ο σκεπτικισμός και η φυλή μας” (Scepticism and our national community), 291 (*italics by Maria Zarimis*).
- 5 Perikles Giannopoulos, “Η σύγχρονος ζωγραφική” (Contemporary painting), 60 (*italics by Maria Zarimis*).
- 6 Sevasti Trubeta, *Physical anthropology, race and eugenics in Greece, 1880s–1970s* (Leid-