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Antonis Liakos, Ο ελληνικός 20ος αιώνας [The Greek 20th century]

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Antonis Liakos,
Ο ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟΣ 20ΟΣ ΑΙΩΝΑΣ
[The Greek 20th century],
Athens: Polis, 2019. 754 pages.

Antonis Liakos' latest book offers Greek-language historiography a "total history" of Greek society in the twentieth century. Whereas Eric Hobsbawm wrote about the short twentieth century (1914–1991), Liakos resets the century's boundaries, starting with the decade-long war mobilisation of 1912–1922 and ending in the 2010s with the political earthquake caused by that crisis – given that there is currently a different, much more global one. The book situates Greece in its international context, making it abundantly clear that Greek history hardly makes sense without its world context, and synchs it with the major historiographical turning points of European and world history. War, demographic trends, the economy, disease, biopolitics, migration and cinema all interweave in an engaging prose that also poses new questions and interpretations. There are many political histories of Greece in the twentieth century; there are even a few economic histories of twentieth-century Greece. This is, however, a book of Greek *society* in the twentieth century, as its author notes.

There is a biological metaphor in the introduction that prepares the reader for the approach taken in the rest of the book: the image of Greece as a cell that goes through constant metabolism with its environment. The book moves the

historiographical discussion away from sensationalist accounts of triumphalism and despair, common in recent historical and not so historical accounts of modern Greece; away for the idea that Greek history oscillates between catastrophes and achievements, civil wars and bankruptcies that abound in recent treatments of Greek history (for the post-1821 period as a whole). Greece as a "nation" even received its "biography" recently (apparently, since 2004 the "nation" has been experiencing a "mid-life crisis"). Liakos, on the contrary, seeks to rescue history from (the teleology of) the nation, evoking Prasenjit Duara's phrase.

The book's first decade, 1912–1922, is the decade of violence, of the Balkan Wars, the Great War and the Asia Minor campaign; that first chapter shifts the focus on the war experience shaped by a violence that was often designed by state officials and armies and executed by regulars as well as irregulars; that violence also comprised the "solution" of population exchange. The decade-long start of the twentieth century is marked by a number that is stunning even given later-period population movements: 3.5 million people of various ethnic and religious groups were forced to leave their homes from 1912

to 1922. The *Mesopolemos*, the interwar period, is marked by state building for the first time since the nineteenth century. Greece attempted to assimilate populations of different religions and different languages, although Macedonia largely “became” Greek. Macedonia – understandably – gets a lot of attention, but other parts of “New Greece”, such as Epirus, Crete or Thrace that were integrated into the state still wait their integration into the historiography of the twentieth century. The settlement of refugees posed a formidable challenge, as many historians have argued, and the author singles out the most important areas of state intervention that had a lasting impact. Liakos often uses creative language to convey the process, as in the title of the chapter “Casting the state: regulating society”.

The period from 1940 to 1944, which includes the occupation, resistance and Holocaust, is considered as distinct from the 1946–1949 period. The main thread here is what happens to the country when state and market – two of society’s most important institutions – break down. The author states that this is when Greek history entered European history, with the extermination of the Greek Jewish population. The Civil War period is convincingly treated as a global conflict distinct from that of the Second World War; Greece became part of a Cold War buffer zone, together with Iran and Turkey, a very different geography from anything before or after the Cold War period. The 1950s were also a period of reconstruction, when a new kind of state emerged (the second of several state-building processes the Greek state went through). This is the turning point in the

Greek twentieth century, when the Cold War absorbed Greece, continuing from the involvement of Greece in the World War, the “first” – so to speak – of several of Greece’s “global” moments.

The second half of the book (the post-1949 period) is a cultural and social history of Greece. Events are told concisely and serve as a way of thinking about the political beyond the historical, not as a political history but a history of politics. The facets of life in postwar Greek society follow seamlessly one after the other, as the author zooms in and out of the daily life to major transformations; the postwar reconstruction and US aid, the development of industry and the spectacular rise in incomes and expectations, migration and remittances that sustained family and household, tourism as an economic force and a cause of environmental “creative destruction” à la Joseph Schumpeter. There is often a microhistorical approach to the history of Greek culture from various reference points to the “democracy festival” (*το πανηγύρι της Δημοκρατίας*): poems and cinema, fragments of evidence combine with the music concerts as part of the “*metapolitefsi* cultures”, all intertwined with political events and policies that heralded significant social change.

The last part of the book, which comprises almost a third of the volume, transcends the contemporary history of the last three decades (1990s–2010s) to become a history of the recent past that flows to the present. Migration, identities, demographic collapse (in 2010 the population declined in absolute numbers for the first time), globalisation and Europeanisation as part of European integration, and the new technologies

shaped the course of the country in the post-1989 world. The problems that accumulated are discussed succinctly with an emphasis on the increased dependence on external debt and the collapse of the productive capacity of the country, showing how one can write a history of the very recent past. The intersection of Greek with European history in this part of the book emerges through the “third way”/modernisation project under a guise of a social democracy devoid of the progressive meaning it held in the postwar decades. As the author argues, the Greek version of modernisation failed to adapt to globalisation because Prime Minister Costas Simitis’ PASOK ignored the “social question” brought forward by immigration, suburbanisation and the deregulation of labour markets; a sober approach, that puts emphasis on the failure to tackle corruption and fiscal derailment in the absence of a new vision of economic development, and what the author elsewhere calls “fragmented modernisation” (595). In the end, it is hard not to think while reading Liakos’ narrative of this very recent past, that in the case of Greece, just like in several others in Europe, centrist politics could not and did not work, either economically or socially, particularly in times of crisis. The recent cultural history of Greece would be incomplete without the impact of mobile phones, privately owned media, the Athens 2004 Olympic Games and the securitisation transformation between the early 2000s and the outbreak of the 2010 crisis, which put an end to such projects and plunged the country in an still-expanding spiral of a society in crises.

The last chapter is a surprising one, but appropriately placed at the end of the book. What could have been a conventional “literature review” of historiography of the twentieth century and an early chapter in the book, comes as the concluding chapter that traces how historians in Greece viewed their history in the twentieth century. Few people are more qualified to talk about this than Liakos, himself a part of the “new wave” of social history that has transformed historiography since the 1970s and 1980s. The chapter takes the reader to key historiographical debates of the twentieth century, such as the long-lasting one about the 1940s and the more recent rise of public history as a field where not only historians’ views but history itself is contested and challenged.

What is most refreshing is the setting out of the different scales of analysis depending on the events and the period; the two world wars and the Holocaust integrated Greece further into European history (a process that started of course with the emergence of Greece as an independent state); the Cold War and the 2004 Olympics signalled the country’s entry into world history; tourism and migration need a Mediterranean history focus, whereas the Balkan Wars, the Civil War and the conflict over a name for North Macedonia that would be acceptable to Greece make more sense within a Balkan history context. What could have made the book even richer is a reflection of how migration abroad and to Greek cities from the 1950s to 1970s changed Greek society, and how changes in the *Metapolitefsi* period, especially, and all the way to the present have reverberated outside Athens. As the

focus towards the end of the book shifts to Athens-based events (the Olympics, the “abandonment” of Athens city centre by its middle classes and the moving in of migrants, the 2008 uprising – on which there is some mention of the countrywide protests), so the book becomes slightly more Athenocentric; this is an understandable choice, given the gravitational pull of the capital in all walks of life. In a country still so unevenly fragmented though, Greek society’s recent and ongoing transformation may be visible in different ways from the

“periphery”, especially when it comes to the impact of tourism, migration and the rise of local/regional politics since the 1990s. Regardless, Liakos offers one of the most intriguing ways to approach the history of the second modern Greek century with new interpretations and surprising perspectives, that takes us all the way to a recent past that lives in the present. Hopefully it will be translated into English soon.

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