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Kostis Gkotsinas, Επί της ουσίας: Ιστορία των ναρκωτικών στην Ελλάδα, 1875–1950 [In substance: A history of drugs in Greece, 1875–1950]

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Kostis Gkotsinas,
ΕΠΙ ΤΗΣ ΟΥΣΙΑΣ: ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑ ΤΩΝ ΝΑΡΚΩΤΙΚΩΝ ΣΤΗΝ ΕΛΛΑΔΑ, 1875–1950,
[In substance: A history of drugs in Greece, 1875–1950],
Athens: Crete University Press, 2021, 528 pages
POISONS SOCIAUX: HISTOIRE DES STUPÉFIANTS EN GRÈCE (1875–1950),
Athens: École française d’Athènes, 2022, 383 pages.

In this book, Kostis Gkotsinas presents the outcomes of a long-term and original research project on a subject that had not attracted much historical interest. His book provides a unique opportunity to approach “drugs”, “substances” and “addictions” in their historical context, to understand how “words and things” are connected and also to historicise the subject. This allows for a deeper understanding of the social realities, scientific knowledge, perceptions, views, social and cultural values and practices, as well as interests embedded in the world of narcotic substances.

The author systematically and methodically maps the social landscape in which drugs emerged. Starting from the late nineteenth century, around 1870, Gkotsinas takes us back to the subject’s origins, discussing how certain substances were long known, but also how morphine was used in conflicts like the Franco-Prussian War, while technologies such as the hypodermic syringe appeared and were gradually used more widely. The Great War, and conflicts more broadly, contributed to the spread of morphine and other substances used on wounded soldiers. In this period, the

concept of “addiction” (mainly of “addiction to morphine” or “morphinomania”) was coined. It is known that in Greece, for example, the cultivation of cannabis spread. The book shows how the term “narcotics” has functioned as an umbrella term since the early twentieth century and had come to include various substances that are not exclusively associated with “narcosis”: in addition to morphine, it gradually encompassed cocaine, opium, ether and barbiturates. To be sure, drug substances and related medical or chemical products also had therapeutic uses (for example, the aforementioned morphine), which were not necessarily prohibited. Nevertheless, the book demonstrates how, during the interwar period, the concept of “drug addiction” was consolidated, as well as how the processes of control, policing and prohibition were expanded. In this field, medical opinions intersected with legal dimensions and discourses.

Gkotsinas’ book frames the Greek case with international developments and the actions of organisations such as the League of Nations. In the wake of substance diffusion, mainly during World War I, state bureaucracies gradu-

ally developed mechanisms for the control and suppression of practices involving substances like cocaine, opiates or cannabis. In the Greek case in particular, exports to Egypt played an important role in the shaping of the relevant legislation, for example, in state controls.

But who participated in the drugs world in Greece at the time? Who were the drug users, how did one gain access to a given substance, how did drugs circulate? The book unfolds a whole geography of places, communities, people and substances, ranging from cocaine imported for medicinal purposes to hashish dens. These sections of the book are of a particular interest. Gkotsinas very vividly shows how drug use follows complex and diverse pathways, where people of different social and class characteristics, as well as qualities, identities and professions, meet. He points out that what makes differences or underscores existing ones (for example, a bourgeois residence is not the same thing as a hashish den) is not drug use itself, as much as the setting and the mode of consumption. And if the stereotype presenting the Asia Minor refugees as hashish consumers still lingers, the author maintains a cautious stance on the issue, arguing that the evidence does not show either that refugees introduced the substance or that they were overrepresented in controls, arrests, etc. In this field, the book also demonstrates the thin dividing lines within different communities, such as the *rebetiko* musicians, between cannabis smokers and heroin users – see the story of Anestis Delias and the songs of Yovan Tsaous, demarcating hashish-drinkers (*χασισοπότες*) and heroin

junkies (*πρεζάκηδες*) (236–37 in the Greek edition, 145–46 in the French). This part of Gkotsinas' book constitutes an alternative geography and history of urban space in twentieth-century Greece, which not only enriches our knowledge of this period's social history, but also takes us to unfamiliar places and spots (for example, hashish dens, workshops, ports, neighbourhoods) as well as to practices within hitherto little-studied familiar spaces, such as the bourgeois residence. This social dimension constitutes an important contribution of the book.

The public debate, the images of drugs and drug users are of similar interest. The author argues that the public interest in drugs and drug use was far greater than their diffusion. The logic of treating users as patients was rather declarative. But there were other aspects in the press, within academia, in the medical and legal world, etc., that the book studies and creatively unravels, seeking “buried archives” in literary representations, in media and scientific discourse. In the interwar period, drugs become a “public issue” with many facets. First, the book dissects what the author defines as “anti-drug nationalism” (292 Greek ed., 184 French ed.). It shows how the ideas of degeneration and decline, already widespread since the late nineteenth century, and the related rhetoric are intertwined with fears that national stamina and health are being undermined, but also how the “ailing nation” has its dangerous underminers. An interesting new dimension in this issue is the piecing together and updating of stereotypes, such as the Jewish drug dealer in Thessaloniki newspapers in 1934, who undermines

the country's prestige and image (260 Greek ed., 163 French ed.).

However, the book does not confine itself to a univocal and homogeneous image of "national decline" produced during this period. On the contrary, and very importantly, the concept of "social decline", which is multifaceted and linked to "moral panics", is studied in parallel. First, it is associated with shifts in the roles of social actors, for example, the "unsupervised" or "abandoned youth" (449 Greek ed., 282 French ed.), the modernisation of women, the modernisation of technologies and time (for example, intravenous injection), raising fears concerning modern society and technological civilisation. This is a most valid aspect of the analysis. Gkotsinas shows how political divides and discourses intersect in the field of drugs. For the Left, the "artificial paradises" of the bourgeoisie coexist with the rhetoric of the "contamination" of the popular by the upper classes, mainly with hitherto unknown chemical substances, which formed decadent attitudes and a tendency towards crime and marginalisation.

One of the book's merits is the thorough analysis of a wide spectrum of dis-

courses, counter-discourses and policies on the issue. Thus, the book examines a wide variety of people, attributes, subjects and ideas: social agents with different characteristics; the advent of drugs as a public issue with various facets; aspects of the social, for example, the urban space, the technologies of time, etc., that are approached through a completely different perspective; social and political divisions that produce different discourses and representations.

As a result, the history of drugs intersects with many other "big" and "little" histories. The wide range of evidence and the rich analysis allows us to see the book not just as a history of drugs, but more broadly as a history of modern Greece in the light of how narcotic substances were used, dealt with and perceived.

Kostis Gkotsinas has produced a well-documented, rich, multifaceted and well-written work on a very difficult subject. And he has succeeded, in essence, in detecting the pulse of stories that are otherwise very difficult to tell.

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