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A Maximalist: Tassos, Linguistics and Cambridge

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In Memoriam: A Tribute to A.-F. Christidis



With this small tribute The Historical Review records the appreciation of the INR for the contribution to a historical understanding of linguistics connected with the work of A.-F. Christidis, who died prematurely in December 2004.

We present one of Christidis' last unpublished texts, "Nation and Language: The Balkan Solutions". It was delivered at a conference organised in May 2004 by Bogazici University on the State of the Art in the Social Sciences and the Humanities in Greece. The paper is published without any editorial intervention "correcting" its oral delivery. Apart from the short introductory note from his old friend and colleague Stephanos Pasmazoglou (from their undergraduate years at Cambridge), we also include a reflection on Christidis' achievement in Greek linguistics by Maria Theodoropoulou, one of his closest associates at the last stage of his academic activities at the Centre for the Greek Language. Finally, we have included a testimonial about Tassos by Terence Moore, Professor of Linguistics and Fellow of Clare College, University of Cambridge.

A TRIBUTE

Tassos Christidis, who passed away suddenly on December 26, 2004 at the age of 58, was one of Greece's most eminent linguists. He used the tools of his discipline to penetrate deeply into the labyrinths of what he insisted upon calling *Greek languages*. His research revolutionised conventional understanding of the Greek language and its histories. It runs counter to ethnocentric dogmatisms, prejudices and preconceptions. The central tenet of these mainstream concepts and *idées reçues* is the absolute continuity and superiority of the "sacred" Greek language (of an elected people), closely followed by the idea that the whole world is indebted to modern Greece for ancient Greek civilisation. Christidis distanced himself decisively from such ideas. He was just as interested in discontinuities as in Greek debts to other languages and civilisations of the eastern Mediterranean. A testimony of his approach is provided by his extensive introduction to the more than 1200 pages long *History of the Ancient Greek Language* which he directed (translated and now being published by Cambridge University Press).

Christidis' historical and linguistic methodology, re-enforced by his long-standing passion for archaeology (inspired during his undergraduate years as a student and apprentice in Manolis Andronikos' excavations at Vergina), led him to his other life-long work on the Dodona oracular tablets. Collecting, classifying and decodifying the tablets for him was a puzzle to be solved from fragmentary sentences and layers of words engraved on clay. This activity was not an end in itself but a necessary step leading to the reconstruction of aspects of the everyday life, preoccupations and aspirations of the ancients. He completed this work shortly before he died and it will be published within 2006 by the Greek Archaeological Association (*Ελληνική Αρχαιολογική Εταιρεία*).

Tassos Christidis' theory of language was far-distant from metaphysical, nonhistorical approaches. His main concern was to place linguistic phenomena within specific historical circumstances, concrete sociopolitical conjunctures and the entailing power balances. Hence, his approach was inter-disciplinary, including political history, socio-economic theory, philosophy of language, social anthropology and psychoanalysis. His concern for other cultures is evident in the particular interest he took in minority languages within national boundaries. With these guiding principles he inspired institutions, in

which he played a leading role, such as the Centre for the Greek Language, the Institute of Neo-Hellenic Studies and the Department of Linguistics at the University of Thessaloniki.

Christidis was dedicated, a full-time academic teacher, researcher and writer with a strong sense of duty – often anxiety which made him complete papers and articles long before the various “deadlines”. He held close relationships with undergraduates and colleagues. Unlike many technocratic research coordinators who oversee projects from a distance, when he was involved with field-work on minority languages, he opted to spend time among the indigenous speakers. He adopted no academic pose or mannerisms and was without vanity usually within a meditatively sensitive, often melancholic mood. His main ambition was to use the discipline of linguistics to systematically combat linguistic mythologies, whatever their origins. Tassos Christidis is an example *par excellence* of academic honesty and consistency to his principles and ideas.

For his close friends – he was fully aware that friendship is in the very essence of language – he has left behind not what in the usual obituary rhetoric schema is easily described as an “irreplaceable loss” for the “discipline of linguistics”, “the university”, “the nation”, but, for the truly irreplaceable void, the loss of a daily presence and insistent, brief, welcome, often enigmatic interventions (the mobile phone providing the most effective means); communications that combined radiating wit, quick perceptive character commentary, sharp political and social criticism but mostly humour in the highly elliptic form we all cherished. Tassos’ *forte* was sudden etymological discoveries (*pax-imatium* & *pax*)¹, alliterations, assonances, puns (the stock-in-trade of a linguist with letters, words, syllables, homonyms – *μεταξύ αιθρίας και πανολ-εθρίας*)²; last but not least, sarcasm, especially for those in academia projecting an air of self-importance. All the above, a treasury of generously scattered oral multi-layered words, all now gone, irretrievable.

Panteion University

Stephanos Pesmazoglou

¹ Meaning “Dry bread in time of peace”. Or when we were staring at the circular fish resembling a shield known as *kalkan* in the Constantinople/Istanbul *balik pazari*, Tassos rightly thought that we were wrong in believing that the name *kalkan* was Turkish in origin. Looking more deeply he found that the name derived from its Ancient Greek derivation: *κάλυξ* (the ancient Greek word for shield).

² Meaning “in between *calmness* and *devastation*”.

A.-F. CHRISTIDIS: THE CITIZEN-LINGUIST

Tassos Christidis was a rare type of linguist: opposed to any kind of segmentation, he rejected the increasing fragmentation of the discipline, which obscures the broader picture of language and its workings. In that sense, he was not just a linguist, but a citizen-linguist open to the world: the profoundly political dimension of his thought was grounded in a vision of universal humanity. He carried this vision with the humility bestowed on one who has acquired a deep awareness of the relativity of scientific truth “as an expression of the interface between the social and the historical” – this interface being understood as an “umbilical cord” that must be kept intact if science is to have any social relevance.

Such a stance towards science and ideas exorcises any form of absolutism. This is what also explains his attitude towards rationalist views of language that have, in his own words, resulted in an “abstract, ahistorical, sterile form of universality” – in other words, views that have portrayed language as autonomous and self-sufficient, surgically detached from the subject and his or her emotions and desires. Scientific programmes that stress the dominance of the digital mind (a fundamental tenet of linguistics) were quite prevalent when Christidis, resisting these views, insisted that language entails a mixture of the digital and the analogical, lexicalised as *light and warmth*, in Humboldt’s terms. *Light* because it shapes, decomposes and classifies human experience; *warmth* because beneath the digital surface of language, woven together with it in a state of tension, seethe emotions and feelings, the passion that colours and marks one’s encounter with the object – the *index* and the *icon*, in Pierce’s terms, a constant source of reference for Christidis. By focusing on linguistic elements that had been marginalised by formalist linguistics, such as metaphor, he brought to light the pre-linguistic and proto-linguistic “emotive” imprints of experience on the digital “impassive” surface of language, claiming that the experiential root of the symbol serves to clarify the boundaries of linguistic signification. Furthermore, in approaching types of discourse which have largely escaped systematic linguistic study, such as magical and prophetic discourse, he highlighted the tacit dialectic that links the peripheral with the central elements of language, opposing the devaluation of the peripheral: “limits delimit,” he would typically say.

In this view, language stretches out like a body bound by an intrinsic internal dialectic of contrasts: language, for example, is the only secondary signification system (according to Pavlov's distinction) that both distances itself from and at the same time incorporates spaces which connect it with the primary systems. This is what permits the development of an argument in favour of the continuity of language. Linguistic signification is not independent from pre-linguistic stages and language is not detached from its bodily root. In this sense, language is perceived as a continuum in which the different stages of language acquisition are co-articulated and invested with meaning according to a common logic, while at the same time they remain dialectically related to more general changes in human development promoting a holistic view of the relationship between language and the human subject.

Christidis developed such a position through a sustained dialogue with important thinkers and intellectual traditions from a variety of disciplines, mainly outside the dominant linguistic paradigm and often outside the field of linguistics itself. In particular, his encounter with psychoanalytic thought (mainly Freud and Lacan) proved to be extremely fruitful, producing a multitude of original insights. At the same time, while psychoanalysis provided him with concepts enabling him to approach sensitive aspects of metaphor and poetic discourse, his Peircian tools helped him interpret the unconscious as the realm of an analogical language, which, by using the index and the icon, is organised on the basis of primary elements of signification. From this standpoint, he was to counter Lacan's statement that "the unconscious is structured like a language" – a view inspired by Lacan's exploration of Saussurian linguistics – with his own proposition that "the unconscious is structured like a protolanguage", like a mother "tongue" that seeks unity and resists the division – the analyticity – imposed by the symbol. As a result, psychoanalysis is a talking cure insofar as it transforms the unconscious index into a conscious symbol separating, classifying and thus reshaping a dense holistic experience, depriving it of its anxiety-arousing power.

The synthesis that Christidis attempted does not extend merely to what we would call a Theory of Language. On the contrary, he used his profound knowledge of the nature of language to approach the history of Greek and to oppose – very often vehemently – certain views that proclaimed Greek as a "privileged language", the creation and proof of a similarly "privileged" or even "chosen" people. Language is at the same time one and many, he repeatedly wrote. It is "one" insofar as its homeland is the "single human intellect that

possesses no country of its own”; but it is also “many” insofar as socio-economic and historical factors fashion it into unique cultural products. It is this understanding of language that assisted him in countering the nationalistic discourses on language and culture that seemed to prevail within the public sphere in Greece. He believed it was essential – not only a scientific but also a moral duty – to deconstruct such views and help one discern the socio-historical context of language.

With the same kind of commitment to his political ideas, and relying on critical analyses of multilingualism and multiculturalism, he discussed the process of their mythologisation and the myths attached today to these notions. He spoke and wrote about the myth of multilingualism insofar as the latter is promoted through instrumental views of language. He was also concerned more broadly with the myth of tolerating difference and diversity insofar as such tolerance is promoted through a discourse that naturalises a culturally-stripped view of diversity, and presupposes a sterilised, asocial and ahistorical view of difference. Such views create the conditions for – and the danger of – a hegemonic form of patronage that “subjects or subjugates and homogenises”.

Multiculturalism, as an extension of the aforementioned myths, is revealed as “the ideological reflection of the splintering of the universal subject”. Deeply understanding the need to develop a socially and historically informed cultural or multicultural view of language and difference, Christidis considered it absolutely essential to articulate a new universalisation of the subject – a view that may be shaped by opposing both the “false homogeneity” and the “shallow cosmopolitanism” that present-day conditions foster: “...these monsters – both drawing on the same reserves of violence – either by sacrificing the particular on the altar of a counterfeit form of the general or the uniform, or by sacrificing the general for the sake of a particularity which is every bit as false”.

*Aristotle University of Thessaloniki /
Centre for the Greek Language*

Maria Theodoropoulou

A MAXIMALIST: TASSOS, LINGUISTICS AND CAMBRIDGE

One morning in Cambridge in the Michaelmas term 1976, Tassos dropped in on a lecture I was giving in Room 6 on the Sidgwick site. I was glad he did because the outcome was that I learned something of his views on what the study of language should be about. The topic of my lecture was Ferdinand de Saussure – the alleged “Father of modern linguistics”. During the lecture I was at pains to draw attention to Chapter V in the *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, a chapter normally little-noticed in which Saussure lucidly, but I believe with a faint air of regret, lists the topics he is not going to discuss. These include:

- the links between the history of a language and the history of a race or civilisation,
- the links between language and political history, e.g. colonisation,
- the links between language and institutions, the Church, the salons, the courts, the national academies,
- the links between geographical spreading and dialectal splitting.

None of these were to figure in Saussure’s account of language as a system. His credo, expressed in the final sentence of the *Cours* runs: “the true and unique object of linguistics is language studied in and for itself”. Saussure was the first minimalist.

Talking over the lecture later with Tassos he made a comment that shed light on the breadth of his own outlook. “Everything Saussure excludes,” he said, “I want to include.” And in his subsequent work as a linguist, he did: Tassos, where language was concerned, was a maximalist.

He was, however, a maximalist who remained intrigued by minimalists, in particular the arch-minimalist Noam Chomsky and his theories of grammar. In those early years he was sufficiently intrigued to write his innovative doctoral dissertation – examined by Professor John Lyons and myself – on the role of Adverbials in a transformational generative grammar. Tassos was challenged rather than deterred by Chomsky’s cautious observation in *Aspects of the Theory of Grammar* that “Adverbials were a rich and as yet relatively unexplored field.”

Yet Chomsky's theories of grammar, Tassos would remind me in later years, were not theories of language. In the professional life following the award of the Ph. D. Tassos showed evidence of a wide-ranging and far-reaching interest in many of those aspects of language excluded by Saussure, and later Chomsky: the links between the history of a language and the history of a race, for instance, evidenced in his work on the history of the Greek language, the links between geographical spreading and dialectal splitting, and the links between language and institutions. One of the most ancient of these last was the oracle of Dodona, the study of whose oracular tablets was one of Tassos's major projects.

Through all these years Cambridge remained a special place for him. Free of academic responsibilities we would meet over a meal – wine for me, coke for Tassos – and talk over whatever we were currently reading – including often the latest Chomsky. For a maximalist, Tassos kept up with minimalism and read I believe almost everything that Chomsky wrote. But for the maximalist in Tassos it's unlikely I would ever have read Deacon's *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain*. And I know because he told me how stimulating he found my counter-offer, Mithen's *Prehistory of the Mind*.

I shall miss those happy, relaxed, wide-ranging conversations. Adapting Terence on being human, we could truly say of Tassos: he was a linguist, therefore everything about language mattered to him.

Clare College, Cambridge

Terence Moore

NATION AND LANGUAGE: THE BALKAN SOLUTIONS

A.-F. Christidis

Around 1990 the linguistic map of the Balkans changed shape. And, as it usually happens, it changed shape in a bloody way. The unitary *Serbocroat* language, the national language of Yugoslavia, split up in, at least, three languages to cater for three different nations and their respective nationalisms: *Serbs*, *Croats*, *Bosnians*. The West, European and transatlantic, played, as we all know, a very decisive role in this break up. *Orthodox Serbs*, *Catholic Croats*, *Muslim Bosnians*. *Cyrillic* alphabet, *Latin* alphabet, the *common linguistic stock* –lexical stock– which the Ottoman rule left as a clear trace in the languages of the area. All these features, some primary, some secondary, were conjured to serve as symbolic tools for identities, as they were, bloodily, constructed or re-constructed in an arena closely monitored and manipulated by the Western guardians of the “wild” East of Europe –the Balkans. The Herderian vision of Vuk Karadžić (1787-1864) –“one people, one language”, irrespective of religion and culture– collapsed. Religion –Orthodoxy vs Islam–, Slavic vs non-Slavic cultural affiliations– script form and other cultural “baggage” were now called upon to support and fortify the new frontiers. To give just one example, for the Muslim Bosnians, a part of the Serbocroat language –the stock of Turkish loan words and expressions– became, under the new circumstances, a precious symbolic capital to be developed and cherished as an indicator of the Muslim connection. Linguistic elements of this origin were now upgraded from the colloquial or “low” register, with attempts even to revive their Turkish pronunciation (e.g. *kahve*).

Further south, the creation of an independent “Republic of Macedonia”, revived or rather intensified linguistic wars which were until then contained, in view of the fact that the specific region was just a federal state within the Yugoslavian Federation. The front which was opened in 1944 by the designation of the language of the Republic of Macedonia as “Macedonian” was now fully and extensively reactivated in two directions –Bulgaria and Greece. For the Bulgarians the designation “Macedonian” for the language of FYROM intentionally concealed the fact that, linguistically, the language spoken in FYROM is of Bulgarian affiliation. What linguists in Skopje designate as “Eastern Macedonian” dialects, linguists in Sofia would designate as “Western

Bulgarian”: the war of names at its height. And this war reached a climax in Greece, where the designation “Macedonian” both for the state entity and the language was seen as proof of the irredentist dreams of the small republic. Reactions reached the point of hysteria and the war of names produced terms such as the “idiom of Skopje” against the more balanced “Slavomacedonian”, which was deemed “unpatriotic”, as it included the taboo term “Macedonian”. The “idiom of Skopje”, as some “enlightened” proponents of the superiority of the Greek language and “race” argued, was and is a “semi-language” which owes a substantial part of its, otherwise puerile, linguistic physiognomy, to borrowings from Greek. For Greece itself, changes in the Balkans, as an aftermath to the fall of the Soviet bloc, had a further, interesting effect in the area of *language diversity* within Greece itself. In Western Thrace, where the Muslim minority is concentrated, one can distinguish three ethnic elements bound by Muslim religion: Turks, Pomaks and Roma. Pomaks speak dialects of Bulgarian affiliation. This made them a suspect element during the period of the Cold War. And this led to discrimination, constant surveillance and an official policy to integrate them with the Turkish element which presented no such problems in view of the position to Turkey in the Western Alliance. A result of this was a massive *language shift* in favour of Turkish on the part of the Pomak minority. Changed conditions of the outgoing twentieth century –the end of the Cold War with the fall of the Soviet bloc and tensions between Greece and Turkey– led to a complete reversal of the official policy towards the Pomaks and their language. They are seen now as a counter-balance to the Turkish component of the minority and their –up to now– stigmatised language became the object of language planning –dictionaries, grammars– however unsystematic and of dubious quality. The Pomak language resurfaced as a result of new conditions and new political priorities.

Let me add a few further bits of commentary on language and language ideologies in Greece at the end of the twentieth century. As is well-known –and I will return to this later on– Greek linguistic history is characterised by a bicentennial rift: the rift between the spoken language and the (mainly written) “purist” language. The social, political and ideological semantics of this rift did not, of course, remain the same, throughout this long span. Within the context of Modern Greek ethnogenesis –as it was prepared in the eighteenth century and fulfilled in the early nineteenth century with the successful revolution of 1821– the rift between *demotiki* and *katharevousa* has to be understood in terms of two interlocking but not, necessarily, harmonious parameters: a) the need, for the emergent Modern Greek nation-state, to reconnect with the

ancient Greek classical past in order to acquire legitimation –as to its European cultural identity– by the guardians of this symbolic capital –the Europeans. And in this direction, the purist language –as a second best in view of the impossibility of reviving (à la Israel) the classical language– could promote this Modern Greek quest for a European identity. At the same time the purist language, as a cultivated form of language, could provide –or it seemed so– more easily than the spoken demotiki, the basis for the creation –with massive internal and external borrowing (loan translations, mainly from French)– of a “high” form of language appropriate for the administration of the new state. And b) on the other hand, the “purist” language, as an artificial, mainly written, “restricted code” could not –equally well– serve the need for modernisation, which presupposed universal education. At the same time it could not serve the expansionist aspirations of the small Modern Greek state: reclaiming populations in the North and in the East who were either of Greek origin or with a Greek conscience but not Greek speakers. This quandary characterised the linguistic history of Modern Greece until the third decade of the twentieth century, leading to a gradual erosion of the grip of the “purist” language. The period between 1930-1975 witnessed a new semantic shift in the polarity demotiki/katharevousa: the former was seen as politically suspect in view of its defense by the left wing movement, while the latter became the symbol of the conservative status quo. The linguistic wars became part of these wider social conflicts. The dictatorship of 1967-1974 was the final episode in this long process. The association of this purist language with the offensive dictatorial rhetoric and the new alliances that were forged against the dictatorship beyond the left/right dichotomy prepared the ground for its final downfall. In 1976 *demotiki* was recognised by law as the official form of the maternal language. And this decision was followed by a modest spelling reform.

During the period that followed the language wars in Greece the issue took a different turn. Radicalisation of the younger generation in the decade after the fall of the dictatorship, accession of Greece to the EEC, victory of PASOK (the populist-socialist movement) in the elections of 1981 and the adoption of educational policies which downgraded the teaching of ancient Greek in higher education led to a redefinition of the conservative, or rather neo-conservative, ideology. A basic banner of this movement was the “protection” of the language, this basic pillar of the Greek nation. The nation was under threat as a result of the demise of the *katharevousa* and of the reduced role of ancient Greek in secondary education. The nation and its “purity”, linguistic, religious and other, was under threat by an internationalism signalled by the

supranational entity of the EEC. The nation was under threat by external enemies in the North and in the East, especially those in the North (the Macedonians of FYROM) who were “stealing” our history and the names that go with it. The nation was “under threat” by the increasing presence of economic immigrants. The popularity of this crusade –especially in its linguistic version– across the political/ideological spectrum has to be understood in the context of a general ideological demoralisation as a result of the collapse of old certainties (after the demise of the Soviet world) and also as a result of the onslaught of wild neoliberal capitalism which carried the day, unopposed and managed by socialists and social democrats.

In this state of ideological confusion and demoralisation, punctuated by scandals, political cynicism and an ever-widening income divide, archaic, age-old “certainties” in the form of mythologies and prejudices resurfaced and dominated. As Hobsbawm puts it “When society fails, the nation assumes the role of the ultimate guarantor.” And the reflex, in the area of language ideologies, of the failure of society was the establishment, as a sort of a self-evident truth, of views –which acquired great popularity– glorifying the Greek language as a unique, ahistorical miracle, as the mother of all tongues, etc.

Let me add a few remarks about language in Albania. There again socio-historical realities are reflected in the domain of language. First, there are two names for Albanian: *shqip* (“gjuha shqipe”), the Albanian language, and *arbëreshe*, which refers to the Tosk dialects of Christians in the south. Second, the dialectal basis on which the norm for the written language was based went through some interesting oscillations. Up to 1944 GÖk was the dialectal basis for the written norm. After 1944, the partisan government opted for Tosk (southern dialects) as a basis. After 1992 the supremacy of Tosk (which is a minority language form compared to GÖk) begins to be seriously questioned. The very dates mentioned –1944, 1992– give away the historical connotations of these changes in the language front.

I would like to conclude this presentation by opening it to the history of the issues and phenomena discussed. The question of language for all Balkan peoples was related to issues of modernisation and nationhood, separately or jointly. And modernisation meant approximation to the model of advanced European capitalist societies. And that model called for homogeneity –necessary for the functioning of its economic structures– which presupposed generalised education. And in that direction language had a strategic role, as the

basic tool for education. The basic obstacle was the “sacred languages”: Greeks, Turks, Serbs, Bulgarians, but also Armenians and Christian Syrians had to confront the obstacle for generalised education posed by their “sacred languages”. Serbs and Bulgarians had to confront –and they did so– the obstacle that Church Slavonic posed. Both peoples did relatively easily away with the candicacy of this “sacred language” for the role of national language. The Tanzimat provided a helpful framework for this fermentation.

The Turks, of course, took the most radical step in shaking off the “sacred” Ottoman linguistic heritage through the Kemalist language reforms. The Albanians, interestingly, were a model for the Kemalist reform of 1926-1928; early in the twentieth century (1908) they took steps in creating the alphabet of Monastir based on the Latin alphabet.

The Serbian and the Greek cases lend themselves to an interesting comparison. For the Serbs there was the pressing need –as a prelude to nationhood– for a linguistic unification which was hindered by the existing religious divides. And this is what Karadžić aimed at by proposing the popular speech –as against the “sacred” church varieties with their divisive religious connotations– as the basis for linguistic unification. For the Greeks no such problem existed. There were no religious divides to be bridged and there was an impressive and at the same time idiosyncratic linguistic homogeneity achieved –at the higher and leading levels of the Greek world within the Ottoman context– through the cultivation of the “purist” language. This “purist” language was a secular and not a “sacred” language, despite its affiliations with the Church and its institutions. The Church had its own “sacred” language, but it was restricted to the liturgical context. It is this secular character of the “purist language” and its symbolic role as a bridge with classical antiquity and with its guardians –the Europeans– that accounts for the tenacity of this linguistic form, despite the problems that it posed for modernisation, in the context of the emergent Modern Greek nation-state. It is worth noting that language and education as cultivated by the Greeks or (more accurately) by Rums within the Ottoman context were not necessarily connected with the issue of nation. In the Danubian principalities, run by Phanariot Rum princes under the Sublime Porte, an impressive translation project took place under the influence of the Enlightenment, but without any reference to issues of nationhood. The Patriarchate had passionate views as to the question of language without, however, any national implications. Language and nation were kept apart.

There is therefore a whole gamut of “solutions”, in the Balkan scene, on the issue that this presentation addressed: nation and language. And some of the recent developments can be perhaps better understood if placed in their historical context.

A final comment before I leave the floor. Let me remind you of the quotation from Hobsbawm which I cited earlier on: “When society fails, the nation assumes the role of the ultimate guarantor”. This is a point which postmodern or rather postmodernist theorists of the “nation” should do well to ponder, although it undermines the very basis of their theorising: an approach that segregates historical phenomena and formations from their social content. This amounts to de-historicisation. And this de-historicisation is not to be taken lightly as a purely academic issue. It reflects ideologies and politics; it generates policies and politics that affect our everyday lives, painfully, often lethally.

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