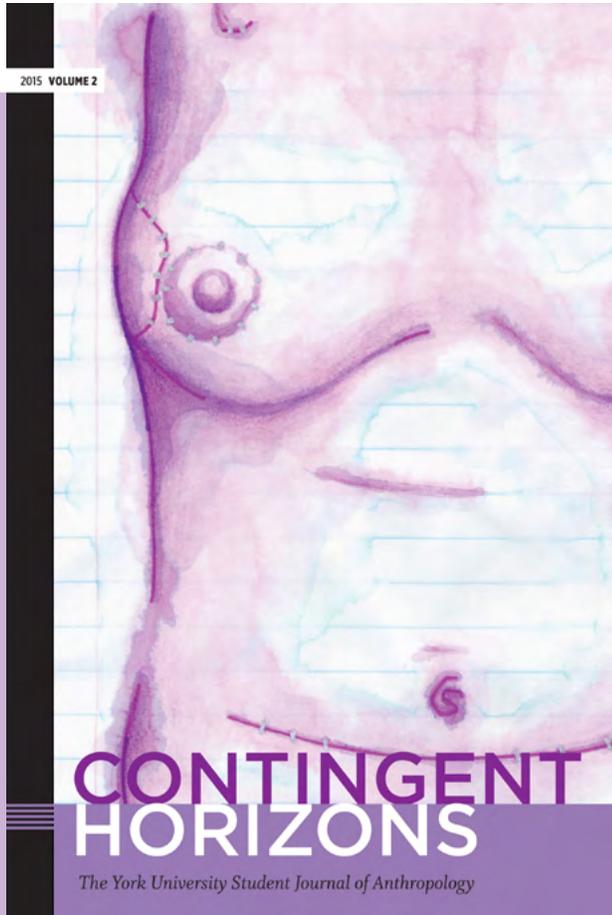


A Nation in Transition: Examining relationships and precarity in Athens, Greece

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A Nation in Transition

Examining relationships and precarity in Athens, Greece

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This paper aims to explore how the political and economic crisis in Greece has affected the social lives of young adults in Athens, paying particular attention to their position regarding relationships, marriage, and starting families. My aim in the outcome of this ethnography is to provide a greater understanding of the intersections of state and social life in periods of political and economic uncertainty as witnessed through the daily lives of my research participants.

KEY WORDS biopower, crisis, Greece, precarity

When I arrived in Athens, Greece in July of 2014, the state had already been experiencing four years of economic and political crisis, along with decades of varying degrees of uncertainty and instability. Neni Panourgiá paints a bleak picture, describing it as “this crisis which is not ‘becoming’ is not ‘progressive’, a crisis that came from ... the crudest capitalism that we have seen since the days of Manchester at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution” (2014). While the economy and politics were at the forefront of conversation among the public and the media during my time in Greece, I was instead interested in how the crisis was affecting the daily lives of the people who were living it. I decided to explore the social implications of such a crisis, specifically surrounding young adults like myself, focusing on their feelings towards relationships, marriage, and family. Research into these areas has exposed various instances of intersectionality between young adults in Greece, and their relationships with tradition, the state, and their place within a global economy.

Greece’s entrance into the European Union in the 1980s came about in the midst of an already unsteady economy. In Paxson’s *Making Modern Mothers*, she discusses the beginning of the end of the ‘traditional’ Greek family lifestyle during this time: “few women could afford to stay home with their children. It became clear to me that by the middle 1990s Athenian women were commonly questioning and second-guessing what they could expect of their lives in the workforce, in motherhood, in romance” (2004:06). Family numbers began to dwindle despite measures put in place by the Greek government to try and boost the population. Research done by Georgiadis shows that Greece continues to promote multi-child families with the constitution granting special privileges to families with four or more children since 1979, including pensions for mothers, reduced

transportation fees, lower electricity and water bills, and priority entry into state nurseries (2010:03). The government ministers “justify this type of support as crucial in light of Greece’s ‘demographic crisis’ or ‘underfertility’” (2010:03). These benefits are failing to persuade couples into reproducing; however, the Supreme Confederation of Multi-Child Parents of Greece (ASPE¹) citing “high levels of unemployment, women’s increased education and labour force participation, a large number of abortions, and growing levels of infertility” as the cause (2010:04). This information sets the scene of an already rapidly transforming landscape that will further shape and define the young adults who are left to grapple with its effects.

I chose persons between the ages of 18 and 30 as the primary participants for my research, generally using cafés and bars as my field site due to the higher number of young adults in these areas. The bulk of the data I collected came from one primary participant. I also gathered insight from a number secondary participants in Athens. The theoretical framework considered for this paper includes Foucault’s concept of biopower, which links the will of the state to the actions of its citizens. I broaden this definition beyond the conventional boundaries of the nation state and instead place it in a global context. I connect this idea with notions of transition, looking at which powers are influencing it and in what ways. I will introduce these ideas of change using metaphor as a way to highlight the shifting values and expectations among young adults in Athens. This paper concludes with a focus on the current precarity of Greece, how the young people are living without a sense of security or predictability, and the and reflects on the futures facing the state and its citizens.

Going for drinks — a methodology

I first met my key informant, Cassia, at a punk show near Exarcheia Square in Athens, Greece. Made famous as the anarchist district in Athens, you are as likely to see families out for dinner on a patio at midnight as you are to notice a quiet circle of pot smokers in an alley. As the show ended and the high energy crowd began to spill into the street I found Cassia and Amara, sitting on the curb in front of the club. The pair was the first set of young Greek adults I spoke with who seemed interested in a discussion about relationships as opposed to the typical conversations about unemployment rates, wage cuts, and poor political leaders. We chatted about the show and Canada and why I was in Athens, and they instantly became interested in the topic of my research. I discovered that both Amara and Cassia had university degrees in the social sciences — Amara from the United Kingdom and Cassia from Athens — which allowed them to easily relate to the material and understand the type of information I was looking for. After a brief outline of my project, they invited me to ask them anything I wanted. Unprepared for an interview, I asked a few broad questions and scribbled down notes on some scrap paper. At the end of the night they agreed to meet again for another set of interviews, and another night out. While this first meeting seemed at first to produce some predictable responses, it also introduced a range of contradictions I would later come across in interviews, such as the varying amount of significance placed on tradition and nationalism, which I will discuss further in this article.

Other informants I spoke with included a young man, Basil, who was going through a break-up during my time in Athens that he spoke about extensively. While his story was informative, the immediacy of his situation made him reluctant to answer any questions directly linked to my research. I was fortunate to have a lengthy conversation with an older Greek actress, Effie, who was unmarried and taught theatre to teenagers. Her experience made her a useful source of information both for current issues among youth as well as a historical narrative of how Athens has changed since the 1970s and 1980s until present day. Lastly I was able to have a brief but valuable conversation with Mary who was the only participant that was both married and with a child. These conversations took place in various locations around Athens, namely bars and restaurants in Exarcheia, Monastiraki, and Gazi.

Blood, water, and wine — Greek narratives of history and tradition

Many aspects of eating, drinking, and socializing in Greece were accompanied by narratives of custom and tradition. One evening while discussing the importance of these practices and their connection to relationships with Cassia and Amara, I asked whether they or their families would mind if they married a man who was not Greek. I was surprised when the both responded with a unanimous and definite ‘no’. This attitude seems to be a recent phenomenon, as previous ethnographies about Greece have emphasized metaphors of blood and nationalism (Herzfeld 2005; Paxson 2004). Herzfeld (2005) explores the history and significance of ‘Greek blood’ in his book *Cultural Intimacy*, stressing its ability to unite people, even where no direct family relation exists. He explains that the idea of ‘pure Greek blood’ has existed in its modern form for around 200 years with Greece’s separation from the Ottoman Empire as the cause. During this time it was helpful to emphasize a Greek national identity, strengthened by the metaphor of blood, to help unite the country (2005:111). It is a telling progression then that during my time in Athens, the metaphors used by my participants were not dominated by blood, as was the case in these early ethnographies, but water.

The images of water in Athens work like waves: a continuous cycle of pushing the young people away from Greece, and then inevitably pulling them back in again. Cassia stated one night in an offhanded way that, “Greece, the ship, has been sinking for forty years now, we haven’t hit rock bottom yet, but we’re very close.” This idea, likening a nation to a ship, was similarly used by Foucault, who mused

What does it mean to govern a ship? It means clearly to take charge of the sailors, but also of the boat and its cargo...to reckon with winds, rocks, and storms; and it consists in that activity of establishing a relation between the sailors who are being taken care of and the ship which is to be taken care of... [Foucault in Kazanjian 2003:114]

This vision combined with the image of Cassia’s sinking ship, points to an uneasiness with the leadership of Greece and its future. Later, a graduate student I met who had recently returned home to Athens described the youth as “abandoning ship” with the aid of their parents. This idea was reinforced by nearly all of the young people I spoke with mentioning their intentions to move, work, or attend school overseas.

While these images give the impression of escape, I found that water was also used to draw the youth back, in the form of baptism. I first realized the importance of baptism when Cassia commented that should she ever decide to get married she would have a religious wedding, regardless of her beliefs, so that any future children could be baptized. When I pressed her on the importance of baptism she provided some vague instance where an ex-boyfriend had some trouble in the army and then waved her comment aside insisting it was actually not such a big deal anymore. Effie was able to shed some light on how baptisms have persisted, explaining that although the feminist movement of the 1970s saw religious marriages being replaced by civil unions, baptisms were still required by law. Paxson explains that the name of a child could only be registered with the state through records of baptism which were legally required, with children being unable to enter the public school system without a certificate of baptism until 1983 (2004:123,166). Other major social obligations, such as the ceremonial naming of the godparents, reinforce the tradition's importance. Now, even as the laws have changed, the practice continues with wedding ceremonies sometimes only taking place so the child may be baptized. This persisting sense of social obligation appears to be one of the few anchors which continues to tie young adults and their future children to Greece.

And finally there is wine, or not just wine, but food and coffee and cigarettes; all accompanied by elaborate Greek narratives. The cultural significance of these items to my participants became vividly apparent when a friend James and I went for dinner and drinks with four Athenians at a restaurant that consisted of a few tables set up in an alley where we were assured the food would be delicious and 'authentically' Greek. After several plates containing various meats and vegetables arrived at the table, our companions began explaining how the meal was authentically Greek, as well as demonstrating the appropriate way to go about eating it; beginning with a single slice of tomato as a way to "cleanse the pallet." Meanwhile, James, laughing along believing they were detailed descriptions as opposed to instructions, innocently served himself some lamb and began to eat. He was quickly and not so-subtly chastised with the insistence that he stop what he was doing and follow instructions. Realizing this wasn't a joke, James awkwardly put his fork down, lamb still skewered on the end, and reached for a slice of tomato. It was during these times of intense illustrations of tradition, juxtaposed against a backdrop of young people expressing their discontent with Greece and their desire to seek opportunities elsewhere that you realize the extent of their multiplicitous identities.

Chaos to Capitalism — a question of bio-power in Greece

As mentioned earlier in this article, Greece has long been encouraging large, multi-child families which is proving nearly impossible in the state's current economic condition. Mary, my tour guide at the new Acropolis Museum, was the only woman I spoke with in Athens who had recently had a baby. She was married and had only given birth a few weeks before the tour. However financial troubles, including a lack of job opportunities for her husband, made it necessary for her to return to work as early as possible, highlighting a struggle to financially accommodate even a single child family. Later, when I asked Cassia and Amara at what age they might consider having children, they both agreed on thirty. After a moment of thought Cassia added to that, stating, "I think that's just a stereotype

though, everyone responds with thirty” reflecting on the fact that neither had a clear idea of when an appropriate time to start a family might be.

When Panourgía spoke of the crisis in Greece, she described it as a type of stalemate, a crisis which is not “progressive” or “becoming” (2014) of anything, and after spending some time there, speaking with my participants and hearing their stories, it was certainly easy to get that impression. There is, however, a clear transition taking place; not amongst the citizens and the state of Greece; but rather the citizens, the European Union, and the global community. Indeed, when speaking with Cassia and her friends, it was only their future in regards to Greece which was hazy and uncertain, any discussion of moving outside of Greece was filled with talks of the future and plans for careers or continuing education. On one of my earlier nights in Athens, I asked Cassia where she planned to eventually move. Cassia replied, “I think Germany, that’s where the love of my life is.” As I was a little surprised by her response, she continued, “Yes, he’s in Frankfurt, or maybe Munich, or Berlin, I’ve been there five times and I’m still looking...” These types of comments became common for Cassia as her ideas of love and relationships were thought of as a dream to be realized somewhere away from home.

The ubiquitous desire to leave Athens points to a paradigm shift rather than a coincidental preference. Biopower, which is traditionally defined as “the numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of population” (Kazanjian 2003:113), could be the cause for such a change. In this case however, I believe any favourable outcomes for Greece, such as having its citizens contribute to the economy from abroad or successfully achieving its ideal family structure through young adults gaining the financial stability elsewhere, as being more incidental rather than its influence over the actions of its citizens. I would argue that this is a larger exercise of biopower by the European Union or the greater global economy, encouraging young Greek adults to explore possibilities outside of Greece. In short, the inability to foresee a future in Athens, and so a refusal to stay within the unstable and inadequate family units of the past, have left these young adults the freedom and even the necessity to seek and adapt to other economies around the world.

Conclusion — and what about Greece?

Relationships among young adults have been greatly affected by the crisis in Greece. Important symbols have changed with metaphors shifting and conflicting with each other, prevalent ideals of ‘Greek blood’ and large families have given way to parents urging their children to hold off on marriage, pursue further education, and find a job in Greece or elsewhere. The precarity experienced by these young adults prevents them from being able to even imagine a future in Athens, let alone a prosperous one for them and their families. The old state of Greece has been broken down and it lies waiting in this liminal state to be re-imagined, while the young adults create new narratives of what it means to be Greek since the crisis, and in the years to come.

Notes

1 Ανώτατη Συνομοσπονδία Πολυτέκνων Ελλάδος

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