

Assimilating the past, understanding the present: writing about contemporary Greece

Review Article

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Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: a Journey Through History*.
St Martin's Press: New York 1993.

James Pettifer, *The Greeks: the Land and People Since the War*.
Viking: London 1993.

Peter Murtagh, *The Rape of Greece: the King, the Colonels and the Resistance*.
Simon & Schuster: London 1994.

Richard Clogg, ed., *Greece, 1981-89: the Populist Decade*.
Macmillan: London 1993.

Harry J. Psomiades and Stavros B. Thomadakis, eds., *Greece, the New Europe,
and the Changing International Order*.
Pella: New York 1993.

It is perhaps not paradoxical that Greece's recent vilification in the European media over the alleged misappropriation of EU funds and Athens' uncompromising attitude on that well known Balkan apple of discord, Macedonia, should have struck a negative chord with the (elusive?) Greek psyche. Indeed, even a cursory look at the responses such comments have elicited and, alas, continue to elicit amongst Greek politicians and diplomats generates a sense of *déjà vu*. In the terrain of academia, the reception reserved by scholars for a (Greek) social anthropologist, then at Princeton, who took the bold step of 'examining Slavomacedonian claims to a distinct ethnic heritage and minority status'¹ indicates the extent of 'cultural introversion' that permeates influential circles of contemporary Greek society.² And it would be no exaggeration to maintain that, with the

millennium approaching, Greece's contemporary 'foes' have no reason to envy the notoriety that nineteenth-century 'mischief-makers' such as Philipp Jacob Fallmerayer and Edmond About are accorded in the collective mentality of the modern 'Hellenes'.³

It would be, of course, a sign of extreme complacency for anyone to account for this rigid stance solely in terms of what the nineteenth-century author of *Pope Joan* referred to as one of Greece's main scourges, patriotism.⁴ Explaining and evaluating this contemporary sort of siege mentality and its rather dispiriting ramifications is a complex exercise; it requires a thorough and solid knowledge of Greece's emergence and development as a sovereign nation-state, an ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, policies and flamboyant rhetoric, a near complete detachment from sentimental interpretations based on personal experience, and, last but not least, a desire to write history as it is and not as one would have liked it to be – through a modern looking glass, not an ancient and (by inference) glorious one.

The publications under review fall, broadly speaking, within two categories: the books by Kaplan, Murtagh, and Pettifer are, to varying degrees, the products of political reporting, investigative journalism and personal experience attained, *inter alia*, through the recollections of key participants (especially in the case of Murtagh) and discussions with 'the Greek people themselves, invariably prepared to talk about their private concerns with strangers' (Pettifer, xxi). Although they do embody a fair amount of history and politics, they are largely written for the general reader who wants to get an idea about contemporary Greece, and – in the case of *Balkan Ghosts* – about that eternal powder-keg of Europe, the Balkans, by journeying 'through history'. There are no footnotes to distract one's attention, but plenty of catchwords and images for a non-academic readership. Similarly, most of the illustrations convey an aura of familiarity as far as personalities and momentous instances of history caught on camera are concerned; Andreas Papandreou with his companion Dimitra Liani (before and after their marriage), the Junta leader Georgios Papadopoulos and his coterie (while in power and during the 1975 trials), the exhumed bodies of Athenians massacred in December 1944, the armoured tank seconds before it stormed the gates of the Athens Polytechnic in November 1973, and so on. The front covers are equally revealing: retouched photographs depicting scenes from what seem to be provincial towns of the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the century for *Balkan Ghosts*; an elderly, miserable-looking Greek Orthodox priest, arms

folded, sitting on the steps of a whitewashed staircase in one of Greece's myriad Aegean islands for *The Greeks*; and, naturally, a close-up of the Parthenon, taken against the scorching sun, for *The Rape of Greece*.

Although all three dust-jackets are rather predictable in as much as they remind us of the postcards that one can find in most tourist shops and kiosks in Greece and the Balkans, they underline the authors' view in regard to the pivotal significance of the past in our understanding of the present. Pettifer expresses this conviction in unequivocal terms when he writes that the 'events that have made Greece as it is today stretch back thousands of years, but in some aspects they have a more contemporary resonance than the remote past of other countries' (xxv).⁵ This may be the case, but it falls short of being a truism specifically linked to Greece and the Greeks alone. In his monumental *The Past is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal has shown that:

All around us lie features which, like ourselves and our thoughts, have more or less recognizable antecedents. Relics, histories, memories suffuse human experience... Whether it is celebrated or rejected, attended or ignored, the past is omnipresent... [and] remains integral to us all, individually and collectively... It is assimilated in ourselves, and resurrected into an ever-changing present.⁶

It is precisely the process of 'assimilating' and 'resurrecting' the past that one has critically to examine and assess (and, if possible, master) before embarking on the voyage of grasping its resonance for the present.

In *Balkan Ghosts* the history of the contemporary Greeks, as indeed that of the other former subject peoples of multi-ethnic empires, emerges through a largely empirical account of high power-politics. Admittedly, there are occasional glimpses of popular attitudes. When for example Rena Molho, one of Kaplan's interviewees, vents her justifiable anger over the deplorable absence of any evident official acknowledgement that not long ago Thessaloniki was rightly referred to as the 'Mother of Israel' for its large Jewish community, one is poignantly reminded of how selective and exigency-related the process of assimilating the past can be.⁷ But such penetrating insights are few and far between, as Kaplan spends most of his time trying to explain why 'the experience of greeting [Andreas] Papandreou..., in a bathing suit and wearing a towel around his neck..., was akin to shaking hands with an underworld celebrity at the ballpark'

(267). Rather than elaborate on how Andreas could be

Prime minister, party leader, head of a popular government, revolutionary agitator, scourge of the Americans, faithful NATO ally, anti-European, grand European, jingoistic and rabid anti-Turk, Balkan federalist, *megaloides* [supporter of the irredentist Great Idea], Marxist internationalist, defender of the working class, last best hope of the shipowning caste, man of the people, Spartacus, Pericles, Don Juan,⁸

Kaplan merely portrays him as a larger than life figure. Likened to Byzantine emperors with 'their complex... sagas of greed, lust, personal cruelty, and ambition' (260), he is even credited with 'Greece's only successful fascist regime' (275)!⁹ In the light of PASOK's eight-year rule and its democratic return to power in October 1993, Kaplan's line of argument would seem to revolve around the dictum that 'a people get the sort of leaders they deserve'. However, such general aphorisms, coupled with the author's optimistic view that this time round the West (Europe) 'might succeed' in attracting the East (Greece) 'with her wonders' (281), leave one wondering whether a more appropriate title to Kaplan's book might not have been 'Balkan Nightmares'.¹⁰

Unlike Kaplan, who has been described as 'openly aspir[ing] to become the Dame Rebecca West of the 1990s', in his 'voyage' Pettifer generally avoids falling prey to stereotypes and sensationalist prognostications.¹¹ Divided into three parts, *The Greeks* offers its readers a highly readable and largely accurate overview of post-civil war Greece. Taking as his starting point the turbulent events of the 1940s and their ideological, social and demographic consequences, Pettifer sketches the gradual transformation of Greek society from under-developed to modern, from agricultural to urban, amidst economic crises, political instability and social strife. The chapters on tourism, archaeology, religion, language, the family, and the environment, although occasionally rather general, are solid examples of the author's historical awareness. In Part III ('Neighbours and minorities', 177-237) Pettifer is at his best. He critically deconstructs Greece's tangled relations with her Balkan neighbours in the post-Cold War period and with her partners in post-Maastricht Europe, proffers well-disposed admonitions and constructive criticism, and concludes with a prediction which lies at the core of the ongoing debate between 'modernizers' (εὐρωλιγούρηδες) and 'neo-orthodox' (εὐρωφάγοι):¹²

To be a Balkan, not a European, country, in the sense of being part of a potential federal Europe, must be a likely destiny for Greece. In cultural terms, if this means the reaffirmation of many features of traditional Greek life at risk from an increasingly technocratic and conformist culture emanating from the United States and Brussels, it must be a welcome development (237).

Whether or not one disagrees with this view, it does not in the least minimize the importance of *The Greeks* as a welcome addition to the oeuvre of witty and penetrating analyses of modern and contemporary Greece; a tradition that goes back to the end of the nineteenth-century and includes such fine examples as Charles Tuckerman's *The Greeks of To-Day* (1878) and William Miller's *Greek Life in Town and Country* (1905).

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of *The Rape of Greece*. As a 'work of [investigative] journalism' which endeavours to tell the 'story of how [Greece] was turned into a pawn of the United States in its Cold War jousting with the Soviet Union' (vii), it will certainly engage the attention and interest of those who are inclined to overemphasize the significance of the 'foreign factor' and to look for spies and villains pulling the strings behind the scenes while the masses are reduced to mere spectators, if not victims. A detective *manqué*, fascinated by unearthing intrinsic evidence that would lead him to solve the 'crime' and deliver the culprits to justice, Murtagh unquestioningly subscribes to the 'Bad Guys/Good Guys' axiom, with the Americans and their autochthonous protégés 'betraying democracy in Greece'. But nowhere does he attempt critically and qualitatively to address the internal military, political, cultural and economic aspects of Greece's structural dependency on the United States which by and large account for the rise to power of the Colonels, the nature of their regime and, of course, its ultimate demise. On the contrary, Murtagh shows a marked inclination to explain events in terms of conspiracy, a predilection which somewhat ironically, though rightly, he attributes to Andreas Papandreou (104).

'In telling part of the history of resistance to the Colonels' (viii), *The Rape of Greece* offers some compensation to its readers for what is overall a selective account – occasionally marred by errors of fact – of Greek politics from the late 1940s to 1974. Focusing on Δημοκρατική Άμυνα (Democratic Defence), which in the autumn of 1974 was recognized as a co-founder of PASOK, Murtagh

narrates the activities of a resistance organization whose 'astonishing story' is not widely known (chiefly because its members did not cash in their resistance credentials in the post-1974 period, contrary to what was the norm at the time). Established on 22 April 1967 by the same centre-left intellectuals who, 'being sensitive to matters concerning democratic processes', had founded the 'Alexandros Papanastasiou Society' two years earlier, Democratic Defence grew into 'one of the very few resistance organizations which could claim a mass presence'.¹³ Through the production and distribution of anti-Junta propaganda and the planting of home-made bombs and incendiaries which occasionally failed to explode, Democratic Defence members sought 'to keep the junta under pressure, isolated at home and abroad', harbouring no 'realistic expectations of overthrowing by force the regime'; resembling in this 'the pattern of Danish wartime resistance to German occupation, rather than that of the French' (224-5). But even here, the narrative fails to rise to the occasion. The emphasis is on the spectacular: the bravery, trials and tribulations of 'foolhardy but always well intentioned' (viii) Greek activists and those of their European friends (mostly from Britain) who, either as 'mad dogs and amateurs' or as 'likeable, well meaning eccentrics', provided cover, money, printing facilities, false passports, bombs, weapons and the like.¹⁴ Considering that key participants 'freely gave [Murtagh] their time and their memories' (ix), one would have liked to read more about Democratic Defence's relations with other resistance organizations, its social make-up and, perhaps more importantly, the ideological, not just the personal, metamorphoses its members experienced in the process of actively resisting the Junta.

The case of Yiorgos Kouvelakis is particularly revealing. Assuming the organization's leadership following Professor Filias' arrest in June 1968, one summer night Kouvelakis planted a number of bombs in three buildings in Constitution Square and then returned to his office situated on an upper floor of the Parliament:

He flung open the windows for a panoramic view of the square and watched as the bombs went off one after another... Had the police looked up at that moment, they would have witnessed the extraordinary sight of an excited and cheering judge surveying the chaos and damage below him in the square. *Amazingly*, no one was killed but when the rush of excitement abated, Kouvelakis had uncomfortable thoughts about where resistance ended and terrorism began (187, my italics).

Similarly amazing is the fact that Murtagh fails to refer to the underlying, much deeper and certainly not only 'uncomfortable' effect such an incident had upon this 'senior member of Greece's legal establishment' (185). For example, how did Kouvelakis' action square with Democratic Defence's avowed aim of rationalizing Greek society 'along the vague and often legalistic lines of independent "democratic socialism"?'¹⁵

In effect, *The Rape of Greece* demonstrates, albeit somewhat crudely, the profound gulf that separates simplistic works of journalism from collections of scholarly essays (the latter comprising the second general category under which the publications reviewed here fall). The outcome of two academic conferences held in London in April 1990 (*Greece 1981-89: the Populist Decade*, edited by Richard Clogg) and in New York in May 1991 (*Greece, the New Europe, and the Changing International Order*, edited by Harry J. Psomiades and Stavros B. Thomadakis), they seek to examine the 'nature of the PASOK phenomenon, its populist appeal' and its legacies (Clogg: xiii), and to 'provoke inquiry into the major issues and policy choices confronting Greece... in the post-Cold War era' (Psomiades and Thomadakis, 11-12). Both volumes include a proportionally high number of essays on foreign policy and defence (five out of a total of eleven and four out of a total of sixteen, respectively), perhaps indicating that age-old traditions die hard particularly in the era of globalization we live in.¹⁶ But this does not in any way detract from the volumes' overall scholarly quality: none of the contributors have put forward jingoistic or polemical arguments, nor has anyone yielded to the temptation (a powerful one, given the media's scrutiny of public personages) of character assassination.¹⁷ On the contrary, and notwithstanding a few evident lacunae, the thematic and methodological diversity of the contributions attest to the breadth and scope of contemporary Greek studies, providing rich and thought-provoking insights and ushering specialists and general readers alike into an engaging and constructive debate.¹⁸

One of the essays to be singled out in *Greece 1981-89*, and indeed a point of reference for numerous papers in both volumes, is P. Nikiforos Diamandouros' comprehensive interpretation of politics and culture in post-authoritarian Greece, a follow-up to the author's 1981 paper just as PASOK was completing its spectacular 'march to power'.¹⁹ Within an interdisciplinary framework which emphasizes, *inter alia*, the shared assumptions of collectivities (rather than the values of individuals) from a macro-historical perspective, Diamandouros traces

the evolution of the two antithetical philosophies which have existed in Greek society from the 1830s to the present. Interchangeably acquiring the attributes of a panacea and a scourge, both the 'underdog' and the 'modernizing' culture continue to 'profoundly affect' politics as their respective adherents 'cut across the political spectrum' (20). Diamandouros concludes his erudite analysis on a note of qualified optimism when he writes that 'the modernising culture seems to be on its way of becoming the dominant logic of integration in political and cultural life', albeit with a delay significant enough to make 'the nature of democracy in Greece... hang in the balance' (21).

Indeed the successful realization of Diamandouros' 'optimistic way out' (an expression borrowed from Tsoucalas' contribution to the Psomiades and Thomadakis volume) underscores numerous essays in both volumes. In his 'Political and institutional facets of Greece's integration in the European Community', Arghyrios A. Fatouros opines that for Greece 'modernization is a one-way street' and goes on to argue that the Greeks' "'Eastern" tradition', which roughly corresponds to Diamandouros' 'underdog' culture', should not be perceived 'as inherently contradictory to modernization, but rather as an element that enriches (or can enrich) Greek society... giving its own individuality and character, without divorcing it from the rest of Europe and from the "West"' (Psomiades and Thomadakis, 35). Similarly in his interesting, albeit somewhat inchoate, discussion of the conflict between nativism and cosmopolitanism from a literary perspective, Yiorgos Chouliaras asserts that 'in response to globalizing trends, Greece is closer to [Europe and its modern, rational norms] than ever before' as the Greeks 'are forced to restructure their lives' (Psomiades and Thomadakis, 120).

Some, however, find no reason for such optimism. Read together with his empirical essay on the Greeks' 'free-rider' syndrome,²⁰ Constantine Tsoucalas' masterly account of 'how this intangible specificity one refers to as "Greek cultural identity"... might determine the forms of the country's integration within the wider European system' (Psomiades and Thomadakis, 62) concludes with two gloomy scenarios, bleak for Greece and the 'rational' West alike:

It cannot be ruled out that Greeks might forcibly adapt themselves to accepting a subsidiary role of dependent puppets, essentially playing their Zorba roles before their own glorious ruins to the tunes of the bouzouki or, if need be, of the bagpipe... [Alternatively], if Europeans tend to abandon

the traditional forms of normative collective rationalities and to increasingly adopt 'free-rider' behavior, Greeks would probably thrive (77-8).

On a more empirical level, Christos Lyrintzis' skilful overview of PASOK's performance in power and its long-term legacy hardly bears witness to Greece's capacity for rationalization and modernization. In what is probably the most chilling succinct account of what many regard as the 'lost decade' of the 1980s, Lyrintzis describes the average PASOK supporter (and, I would venture to add, the average Greek) as someone 'who feels oppressed and insecure, distrusts the state and evades taxation, yet demands state protection, a person who can be radicalised but is not radical and who can occasionally be progressive but in fact is deeply conservative, familiar with everything and expert at nothing' (Clogg, 43). George Th. Mavrogordatos takes up the theme of PASOK's populism, pitting the many ('the "People" as an essentially undifferentiated whole') against the few, and credibly demonstrates how PASOK's attack on organizations which represented the interests of sectional groups and parties in effect served 'the powerful and privileged few within "the People" itself, at the expense of the many', thus further contributing to Greece's 'increasing marginality within the European Community' (Clogg, 48, 63). Similar conclusions regarding the country's 'marginality' are implicit in Dimitri Sotiropoulos' paper on 'The state in post-authoritarian Greece' (Psomiades and Thomadakis, 43-56). Using the epigrammatic description of the Greek state as 'a colossus with feet of clay',²¹ he argues that the weakness of civil society, encapsulated in the state bureaucracy's endemic inefficiency, inflexibility and sluggishness, is the result of a 'bureaucratic clientelism'²² with deep historical and structural roots which can not be erased solely by laws and 'better management'.

These firmly entrenched historical and structural 'particularities' which make Greece appear once more as 'Europe's spoiled child' are convincingly borne out in the majority of the contributions on defence and foreign policy issues and the economy. The sense of urgency which underscores the informative and critical analyses of most essayists attests to a society which seems to be in a quasi-permanent state of transition, torn between modernization and tradition – a society which has to contend with the inevitability of depending on the European Union for economic and structural support, heed Brussels' 'rational' admonitions, and come to terms with the legacies' of the PASOK era, particularly *Avrianismos*.²³ The problems thus arising are too complicated to simply ignore. (The obdurate

stance on the 'Macedonian Question' is a case in point, irrespective of how – and when – the issue will be solved.) It is, of course, hopeless and to a large extent extraneous to offer sensationalist prognoses. Not least because what today seems the desirable way ahead (and desirable for whom, one might ask) may overnight become a nonsensical absurdity. The most we can hope to achieve is to understand the present by examining the past, evaluating its relevance and interpreting it within a broad context. Reading *The Greeks, Greece 1981-89* and *Greece, the New Europe, and the Changing International Order* makes our task less burdensome.

NOTES

- 1 A. Karakasidou, 'Politicizing culture: negating ethnic identity in Greek Macedonia', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 11 (1993) 1-28. For a less polemical critique of Karakasidou's findings see the communications of N. Zahariadis, B. Gounaris and C. Hatzidimitriou in *Balkan Studies* 34 (1993) 301-51.
- 2 Cf. A. Liakos, 'Επικίνδυνες αναθυμιάσεις: νεοελληνικές σπουδές σε ατμόσφαιρα εθνικάθαρσης', *To Vema* (21/11/1993).
- 3 Recording his observations from Greece in the 1870s, the first American Minister Resident at Athens described how 'at the name of Fallmerayer, a University man... [rose] from his seat with flashing eyes and excited gesture, [pouring] forth for a good ten minutes a volley of indignant rodomontade against the memory of the unfortunate Professor, which, if not conclusive in point of argument, had the effect of adjourning, *sine die*, any further discussion on the subject'; Charles Tuckerman, *The Greeks of To-Day* (New York 1878) 330.
- 4 E. Roidis, 'Όνολογία, όνος πατριώτης', *Asmodaios* (11/7/1876); now in "Απαντα, II (Athens 1978) 196.
- 5 In the same vein, Murtagh maintains that 'any student of contemporary Greek affairs will find himself dragged back into history. Nothing happens in Greece today that does not have a resonance in the past' (vii).
- 6 D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge 1985) xv, 412.
- 7 'You know the fairgrounds, where every year there is a trade fair and the Prime Minister gives a speech? It is built over the Jewish cemetery. There is not a plaque. Nothing.' (237). Characteristically, the Greek government refused to participate in the events marking the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz because of the official presence of representatives from FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia); see A. Liakos, 'Εθνική απρέπεια', *To Vema* (5/2/1995).
- 8 P. Pappas, 'The eighteenth October of Andreas Papandreou. Some thoughts on a democratic cult of personality' in T.C. Kariotis, ed., *The Greek Socialist Experience: Papandreou's Greece 1981-1989* (New York 1992) 40.
- 9 This, according to a Greek-American 'scholar' and publisher whose explanation Kaplan has no hesitation in accepting.
- 10 Cf. Margaret Reid's review of *Balkan Ghosts: 'Balkan Ghosts and nightmares'*, *Balkan Forum* 1 (1994) 251-2.
- 11 M. Todorova, 'The Balkans: from discovery to invention', *Slavic Review* 53 (1994) 477. Not surprisingly, there is a full-page photograph of West in Kaplan's book.

12 Cf. N. Mouzelis, Διαφωτισμός και νεορθοδοξία, *To Vema* (21-28/5/1995).

13 M. Spourdalakis, *The Rise of the Greek Socialist Party* (London 1988) 32-3, 56.

14 The two quotations are the titles of chapters 13 and 17 respectively. The most prominent member of this medley of men poised to 'do the right thing' was Martin Packard (with Hank as his *nom de guerre*). After seeing combat in Korea, Packard joined the British Navy's Fleet Air Arm. In 1957 he married Kiki Tsatsoulis whose 'family had connections with Athens' liberal intelligentsia' (138). Following a brief spell of peacekeeping in Cyprus, Packard resumed his job of assistant to the Royal Navy's Fleet Intelligence Officer, taking early retirement in 1968. Invariably accused of being a British spy and likened to Lawrence of Arabia, lately Packard 'has become involved in joint business ventures between Western companies and financiers and the emerging post-communist Russia' (264)!

15 Spourdalakis, *The Rise of the Greek Socialist Party*, 56-7.

16 Out of the remaining combined total of eighteen essays, ten examine issues and aspects related to 'culture, politics and society', while another eight deal with the economy.

17 To varying degrees, this was not the case with three earlier collections of essays dealing with post-1974 Greece. Cf. N. Stavrou, ed., *Greece Under Socialism: a NATO Ally Adrift* (New York 1988); S. Vryonis, Jr., ed., *Greece on the Road to Democracy: from the Junta to PASOK 1974-1986* (New York 1991); and Kariotis, *The Greek Socialist Experiment*.

18 With the exception of a few scattered references, gender issues, the military, education (particularly the politicization of the curricula) and state-church relations are not covered in any great detail. For the latter see V.N. Makrides, 'The Orthodox Church and the post-war religious situation in Greece' in W.C. Roof, J. W. Carroll and D.A. Roozen, eds., *The Post-War Generation and Establishment Religion* (Boulder 1995) 225-42.

19 P.N. Diamandouros, 'Greek political culture in transition: historical origins, evolution, current trends' in R. Clogg, ed., *Greece in the 1980s* (London 1983) 43-69.

20 C. Tsoucalas, Τζαμπατζήδες στη χώρα των θαυμάτων. Περί Ελλήνων στην Ελλάδα, *Ellenike Epitheorese Politikes Epistemes* 1 (1993) 9-52.

21 N. Mouzelis, Η Ελλάδα στο περιθώριο: ποιος φτάνει; *To Vema* (30/12/1990).

22 Defined as the 'systematic infiltration of the state machine by party devotees and the allocation of favours through it' in C. Lyrantzis, 'Political parties in post-junta Greece. A case of bureaucratic clientelism?', *West European Politics* 7 (1984) 103.

23 As Stephanos Pasmazoglou argues in his essay on PASOK and the media, 'Avrianismos..., the backbone of PASOK's populism..., has been, and is, a neo-fascist phenomenon drawing from all the elements of a society in crisis' (Clogg, *Greece, 1981-89*, 105, 107).