

## **Volos, Gendered Aspects of Migration in Southeastern Europe**

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### **The Future in Migrancy**

#### **Cultural Politics**

This paper addresses themes that are part of a broader engagement with the analysis of the impact of migration on cultural politics in contemporary Greece. I use the term “cultural politics” in the broadest way possible. I do not wish to constraint my reference only to official policies. On the contrary, I want to stress the need for a reflection on the impact of migration on wider processes of meaning production in our societies. I suggest that we focus specifically on how this experience tends to redefine our understandings of community, our gender positionings, and our notions of the future. The combined use of the terms “culture” and “politics” is intended as a constant reminder of the fact that these processes of meaning production are always negotiated and fought over in the sphere of politics, including both the level of official politics as well as the level of everyday practices and acts.

The grounding hypothesis that lies behind this paper is that contemporary migration in Greece is related to two analytically distinct and maybe also separate spheres of cultural politics. The first sphere concerns the ways in which the migrations of the last two decades have radically refined the national imaginary of native Greeks—meaning here the ways in which we understand ourselves as political/national subjects with a specific historical formation and a particular common future. The second sphere concerns the migrant communities and the ways in which the migrants understand their own “us” as foreigners—as well as natives—in Greece, in the countries of origins, in Europe.

Concerning the first sphere I will only present briefly some thoughts in order to provide a picture of the current cultural setting in Greece. Concerning the second sphere I will refer to some of the findings of our research project. The overall question that I wish—one day to be able—to address concerns the extent to which these two spheres of politics develop in isolation or in relation to one another. How is the

communication between the two worlds achieved, claimed, troubled, perturbed, or enabled? The initial hypothesis, which put me on this track of thought, is that communication between these two spheres is—for very specific historical as well as political and social reasons—very problematic and that to a great extent there are two cultural worlds developing today symbiotically but separately. This particular aspect of the experience of migration remains unexplored. Despite the need for more primary research, it is vital to acknowledge the significance of the problem and its centrality for the current political and academic debates over migration in contemporary Europe.

### **“We the Greeks” and migration: one word on the first sphere of cultural politics**

During the last few years we are experiencing in Greece—like in many other western countries—a sharp accentuation of radical forms of racism. The reasons for this accentuation are historical and political and we should not thus naturalize them as inevitable phenomena. In Greece, the formation for the core of racist dispositions can be traced around the end of the 1980s and in the context of the sudden and massive arrival of foreign workers mostly in the countryside, on the one hand, and of the uprising of Greek nationalism around the military and political developments in the Balkans at the same period, on the other. The Balkan wars of the 1990s, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the political mobilizations and debates around the creation and the naming of the Republic of Macedonia, the rapid processes of EU integrations and structural adjustment created the political conditions that enabled the emergence of very hard forms of nationalist politics in the public milieu. The consolidation of these hard elements of nationalist fantasies was realized first through a direct targeting against migrants and secondly through its diffusion in large social groups across the political spectrum. At the same time, recent research indicates that the social space within which the most intense forms of racism are detected is the educational system, the schools and youth culture.

Three are the points that I would like to make here in order to put the second part of this presentation in context. The formation of ‘we the Greeks’ vis-à-vis migration is marked by three main characteristics:

1. The nationalist targeting of migrants during the 1990s.
2. The naturalization of racism through the propagation of a distorted notion of “multi-culturalization” in the media and mass culture.
3. The central role of gender specific attributes both in the formation as well as in the naturalization and diffusion of racist discourses and practices.

### **Trans-cultural communication**

One of the first findings of the interviews is that trans-cultural communication is multidirectional and multi-lateral. Communication does not take place only between the two obvious poles: the migrant community and the recipient society. On the contrary communication includes exchanges between the migrant and the family, the migrant and the country of origin, the migrant and other countries where compatriots, or members of the extended family reside (i.e. cousins who migrated to Italy etc.), the migrant and migrants of different national backgrounds etc. These different axis of communication, which also offer an indication of the many diverse levels of sociality that the subjects pursue, are performed within personal and inter-subjective relationships on the level of everyday life. The mechanisms and strategies of communication are very complex and include many levels of meaning production. Communication is conditioned by coherent structural forces, but also by internal contradictions and ruptures.

Age and gender seem to be very important parameters as well as signifiers of cultural exchange and inter-subjective communication. As the interviews indicate age differentiation has a great impact on the formation of communicational communities and practices. Younger interviewees have more complex demographic and social profiles than the older ones. Migrant youth is different from their parents in terms of the spaces of socialization that accommodate them, and the ones they in their turn appropriate. They appear—or at least they present themselves in such a way—to have greater access to the Greek public sphere while at the same time they seem to maintain on the level of everyday life the separation between the public (Greek) and the private/family sphere of the migrant community. Young migrants operate within communicational fields that are more closely related to various practices of popular culture, while references to the importance of new technologies (satellite television, internet and mobile telephony) in establishing transnational networks of exchange

appear as a common sense on the part of the interviewees. Interestingly, younger interviewees seem to develop strong, functional and conscious bonds with their country of origin. These bonds are materialized through summer vacations in Albania and Bulgaria and they acquire meaning in everyday life through technological channels of communication that render distance—both geographic as well as cultural—not an obstacle, but on the contrary an advantage to contact by choice.

### **Horizon of Expectations**

The interviews offer very powerful insights into the formations of an articulate horizon of expectations that seems to be formative of the migrants' subjectivity in relation to the various levels of exchange that they occupy in their everyday lives. The interviews are very rich in indications on how migrant notions of self are organized around conceptualizations of the future. As it was expected, young interviewees express their expectations for social upward mobility which in some cases takes the form of critique against the previous generation—mostly their parents.<sup>1</sup> What is more important however is to explore further and analyze the morphology of this horizon of expectations and to contextualize it historically and culturally in relation to both people's present as well as to their past. In what follows, I will read through some of the interviews in order to explore how migrant subjectivity is expressed through an emergent politics of hope. Alongside this exploration of hope I will offer some suggestions on how gender emerges as a key concept around which the future is thematized. The great majority of the interviewees thematize gender roles as one of the main areas where political change, cultural transformation, social integration, generational differentiation, control, resistance, future expectation, and subjective potential are all materialized.

### **Horizon of Expectations**

I will try to describe this emergent horizon of expectations through reference to some of the main features that the interviewees attribute to their future. I will refer to seven nested features, which means that every one of them is an internal element of the previews one.

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<sup>1</sup> As for example in the case of a daughter of an Albanian domestic worker who emphatically insists that she does not plan on doing any housework when she will create her own family, because she thinks it is necessary to hire people for the accomplishment of all domestic tasks.

## 1. Ordinary people. Ordinary Future

Migrant interviewees across age and gender differences imagine their future through dreams about upward social mobility, improving their living conditions, becoming home owners, safeguarding a better future for their kids through education, getting a better job, having a family, making a career etc. These are ordinary people, having ordinary expectations about their future. Thus in order to understand what is migrant about the migrant horizon of expectations one has to analyze how this ordinary future is thematized vis-à-vis the experience of mobility.

2. **Returning to the country of origin** (Bulgaria or Albania) seems to be a common plan for the future, although it is more prominent in the case of older migrants.

Planning the return to the homeland is materialized through the **building of a house** back home financed through the earnings of work in migrancy. As Elli put it:

“Me in five years...In five years I think I will have my own house in Bulgaria, they are already preparing it for me, half of it is already finished, I will have my house and then I am thinking of getting married and making a family and I want to have a son... a healthy child...which means that I do everything for him. To have something for him...for the child and the husband. [I do it] only for those who will be with me for ever, until I die. That is, I think, what I want.” [Elli, MET155,156]

She also stresses that she wants her new house to be in Bulgaria but in the city and not in the parents' village. Creating the conditions for not being alone, for having her own people—not her existing relatives, but the imaginary family of her own choice—at her homeland—but not at the place where she comes from but at the city of her choice, a place where she has never lived before...these are Elli's plans for the future. The future is here imagined as a direct opposite of the present. Or rather the present represents a void, an absence in relation to the future. The future is invoked as a symbolic remedy of the maladies of the present. Projecting security, sentimentality, togetherness and agency to the future is for Elli a way to justify the lack of material and emotional resources that mark her present life in Greece.

3. **“Social acknowledgement: dignity and respect”** One of the reasons that they give when asked why they want to return to their homeland in the future is for **“dignity and respect”**. As in the case of Sokrates who wants to return in the future to Albania because he feels that the contribution of Albanians’ labor to the development of Greece is completely underestimated by Greeks. To the question “what are your plans for the future” he responds directly with a reference to racism in Greece.

“I do not want to stay here in Greece, I want to return to Albania, to find a job...I do not have a problem with the people here, it just that...the Greeks are...you know, there are good people who welcome you in the homes and offer food...but for me...I do not get any respect. This is what I like, to show respect to the other person, not to look at him like that...they should not look at you like “the Albanians”, because you can find bad people everywhere, but here they always blame the Albanians, all the worst jobs are for the Albanians, now the Greeks should respect that...because Greeks wouldn’t do those jobs...Greeks use machines, while Albanians dig with their hands. I don’t see any Greek working...they work for themselves. They should respect that....[the Albanians] work for Greece and they offer something, right? To the economy, take the Olympic Games for example....[Greeks] should show more respect” [MET160. Sokrates]

Demanding respect is a dominant feature in this interview, while it is present in many other interviews as well. Asking for respect as a response to the question about future plans indicates that social justification is a constitutive element of the migrants’ horizon of expectations and it has to be taken into consideration when we are attempting to explain the insistence on returning to the homeland as the ultimate goal of the migration process. This issue should also be explored comparatively, as to its prominence or not in other countries of migrancy. For example the same interviewee insists that the best period of his life was when he lived briefly in Britain—a place where he would also like to return if he had a choice—because, according to his testimony, foreigners enjoy greater respect there. As he put it, one “does not need to hide that he is Albanian in Britain.”

**4. Pride.** Studying in higher education is another expectation expressed both by parents as well as by younger interviewees. Higher education as a means of social

mobility is a common place for lower and middle social classes in general. What is particular in the case of migrants, especially the case of Bulgarians, is that they dream of returning to their country of origin in order to enroll to the university. This is the case of Dafne [MET 155] who wishes to study to become a veterinarian, but she wants to do so in Bulgaria and not in Greece. Dafne has lived all her life in Greece, her parents migrated when she was very very young. Returning to Bulgaria seems to her like an interesting adventure. Like living abroad. She studies music, she attends the music High School and she has visited Bulgaria as part of school trips. Dafne presents herself as an exemplary case of successful integration in the host country. Even though she does not like to differentiate herself from her classmates and she presents her school life as very rewarding and ideal, she nevertheless explains how during her school trip to Bulgaria she enjoyed gaining the teacher's and the students' respect since she was able to speak Bulgarian and thus helping classmates to communicate etc.. A great part of Dafne's account of her future plans is dedicated to the expression of her pride for her country of origin, a choice that we need to interpret in relation to the previous reference to the quest for dignity and respect.

**5. Insecurity** Interviewees often express their insecurity towards their future in Greece. Recurrent references to the possibility of the implementation of anti-immigration policies as a result and in the context of the war against terrorism indicate the impact that the post- 9/11 public discourses on security in Europe have had on the subjectivity of migrant. [MET 134\_Manolis] As Anieza put it

“I do not make many plans. But I am optimist. I do not make plans because I am afraid with all the terrorism now, I fear a lot that maybe they will make a law...the European Union, a law against immigrants. I am very afraid of that. I believe that they will not do such a thing, but that there are going to make some very strict rules. Rules that will make things very difficult for us here in Greece, us the migrants I mean....”

[MET99-100\_Anieza}

Insecurity about the migrants' well being in Greece is expressed in many cases and in various ways. In some cases we encounter a generalized feeling of insecurity as in the case of Marko from Bulgaria:

“-How do you imagine yourself in five years from now  
-I imagine myself up at my home in Bulgaria...with my family...the family that I will create...to have a job...I hope that there will be jobs that we are becoming part of Europe...to have jobs and be OK. That is how I imagine my future...for the present I am not sure...I want to go back to my city, to know that this is home. Here I am afraid, I am afraid to go out for a coffee...I am afraid here, I am afraid I will meet the wrong people. Because I have heard many stories about meeting the wrong people...and drugs and I am very afraid to get involved. My father is also worried about me...if I am OK, if I have problems...not to get involved with the wrong people...I would feel safer at home...here I am afraid because there are many foreigners in Greece...from Albania, Romania, black people from Nigeria...there are many different people...you do not know what's in the other person's mind...what the other person wants to do to you...[MET 197\_Marko Bulgaria]

In some cases we encounter a resistance to plan the future. This happens in situations when the levels of anxiety and insecurity about day-to-day affairs are heightened as in the case of Stefka from Bulgaria refuses to plan the future. She says:

“No I can't. Because sometimes I think that this and the other will happen in such a way. And then what comes is different. So now first I see what is coming and then I say I will do that that or the other and whatever doesn't happen I just let it be!” MET112\_Stefka] Bulgaria

**6. Insistence on established gender roles.** As creating a family seems to be a constant element of future plans gender roles become a signifier of the “things to come”. Interviewees often stress that gender roles have changed because of the conditions of migration. Arranged marriages are not the rule anymore. Both men as well women seem to believe that migration and life in Greece is changing gender roles, mostly those of the women. What is interesting in terms of future plans is that most migrants seem to prefer to marry women and men from their own community. Personal relationships with Greeks are considered dangerous since there is a general understanding that such a marriage would not be easily accepted by the Greek side to the family and thus the union could be a source of problems, anxiety and feelings of rejection and discrimination. Although there are many references to relationships—mostly with Greek women—future planning of families does not include Greeks.

1. **Racism “The hate will be for ever”**. Many interviewees, especially Albanians, recognize that racial hate is a main characteristic of the relationship between Greeks and migrants. As Natassa puts it:

“There shouldn’t be so much hate. We also have lots of racism. We hate you and you are racist towards us. We are not perfect either, I admit it. We also have lots of hate, but you have lots of racism. This should be like that. We all eat and talk together, we have friendships and relationships...but even for minor reasons we turn our backs to each other...It is a pity...And the state is to blame. More than anything else...that is what I think...this has influence me a lot”

As far as the future is concerned there is a general understanding that racism will not disappear within their lifetime.

“-Don’t you think that things are bit better now?”

-No matter the improvement to a great extent hate will remain...maybe for the children of my children it will go away, but for as long as we are here, hate will exist” [MET101,102\_natassa\_Albania]

The persistence of racism is part of the migrant horizon of expectations conditioning many other aspects of future plans, visions, desires and projections.

A further analysis of the emergent horizon of expectations may indicate that the migrant field of cultural politics is marked by complexity and intense internal differentiation. This understanding is a necessary condition for the undermining of non-productive concept of integration that has defined for many decades both the research as well as the policies that concern the history of migrations in the western world. As this preliminary approach has shown, the supposed integration of foreign migrants in Greek society goes hand by hand, co-exists, with a general sense of insecurity, a new structure of feeling to refer momentarily to Raymond Williams, that

does not allow migrants to comfortably visualize a future in Greece as a recipient country of migration.

We need more knowledge, critical analysis and comparative cross-European exploration of the ways in which migrants conceptualize their future, the future of their countries of origins and new destinations, the future of Europe. The exploration of this theme is vital both on the level of academic research as well as on that of policy making. Seen from this perspective gender does not operate only as an analytical concept or a research parameter, but as a powerful nexus around which social relations, the understanding of heritage and the politics of the hope are organized in the particular historical context of contemporary Europe. [cultural turbulence, political transformations that mark the various states of emergency that we all inhabit daily].