BALKANS OF COLOUR

THE 'OTHER' PLAIN OF XANTHI

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Speaking of Race and African Legacies in Northern Greece

Natasa Chanta-Martin

Greece of today is known for being the EU country with one of the largest refugee influx of the past decade, if not longer. Although People of Colour have existed in the country long before that, either as students or economic migrants, only recently the existence of people of African descent has been mentioned in Greece. The Hellenic Republic, as it is formally known, is considered predominantly White and Christian Orthodox. The Muslim and/or turkophone community on the north-eastern part of the country, as well as the overall Roma community living in other various regions, are acknowledged as minority populations. The former are legally named the Muslim Minority of Greece and many children of those areas attend so-called minority schools, where they are taught the Turkish language and Islamic studies. However, a small population in this geographical area, the Plain of Xanthi, is said to be and seems to be of african descent. The alternative history that we will shed light on in this case study is an attempt to present some sort of European blackness of the unknown. What kind of neocolonial attitudes towards the Balkan region can be discussed in this section? Are concepts such as racialisation, whitewashing, and religious descrimination relevant? For more information on these keywords, **take a look at The Racial State by influential scholar David Theo Goldberg (2002).**

The AfroGreek community that will be presented as a case study in this handbook is important to be mentioned as a very specific and unknown part of the minority population in Greece. Through this section we will show how:

- no country was ever homogeneous throughout history;
- that population exchange, oppression and migration practices have always been happening;
- and to potentially offer a state-run narrative of different belonging for the incoming African populations of Greece.

In no means does the above narrative imply that recent refugees from Africa must be associated with the population of this case study, since the latter, as we will see, have been living in Greece for almost 400 years. However, the afrogreek presence suggests that exploring hidden histories of a nation-state can change one's view on receiving a foreign population and support the argument that part of Greece has always been Black or of Colour. This perspective does not portray the current status of the afrogreek population as an oppressed or vicitimised group. Yet, the community in question does feel forgotten by the government, while declaring to be treated unequally and in constant need to prove its greekness. In this particular case, the manifestation of "othering" is happening through ignoring racial diversity amongst Greece's oldest inhabitants and at the same time colonially "discovering" it through the mainstream media .

Greece's simultaneous connection to the Balkan region and colonial practices

Greece is not always considered as part of the Balkan region but a large part of its mainland (Northern, Central and the Peloponnese) is considered as the southernmost part of the Balkan Peninsula which is bordered by a large number of seas (Mediterranean, Adriatic, and Black).

Historically, Greece did not participate in the colonial acts of Western and Central European countries towards Africa, nor in the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans. Yet, the practice of implementing colonial-type methods of dismissing certain segments of societies, epistemologies and their spaces of existence can be seen domestically through this almost unknown microsociety. It is a top-down practice of correcting the past and a bottom-up struggle for equal representation in one's homeland. By ignoring and hiding these histories, the project of Europeanisation finds its racist logic within Whiteness- even though Greece is geo-politically and culturally part of Mediterranean, Balkan, Middle-Eastern, and North African ways of being and ways of looking.

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How can we use history to understand the concept of 'belonging'?

To answer that question, you can seek some advice from sociologist Gurminder K. Bhambra. She claims that countries without a direct colonial past or with moments of oppressed histories act in the idea that the rest of the world was external to these world-historical processes and that colonial connections and processes were insignificant to their development. She adds that we cannot understand who we are until the imperial history that has shaped each nation is understood. For more information in an audiovisual format, listen to G.K. Bhambra's 2018 lecture



> ***If you want to be part of European enlightenment, you have to be part of European enslavement.***
>
> ***G.K.B.***

https://encc.eu/resources/database/cohere-final-conference-who-europe

Greece and the issue of Race

Greece is no stranger to the term 'race' as the word φυλή [pron. phee-lee] is very much used until today. A great explanation of its meaning has been put in writing by sociologist Sevasti Trubeta in (2007): Anthropological discourse and eugenics in interwar Greece. Blood and Homeland:" Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe, 1900–1940, 123-142. :

The meaning of the term 'phili' (Φυλή) has been transformed over time, from the time of its origin in Hellenic Antiquity, through to the time of the Ottoman Empire, when it was adapted to the 20th century. It was useful because it could be employed to describe large communities, potentially including aspects central to the definition of an "imagined community".
In church texts of the 18th century 'phili' was used in reference to all Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire. Later, the term was used to describe distinct religious and linguistic communities within the Empire and was enriched by national connotations.
Indicative of this transformation is the usage of the term 'philetismos' (Φυλετισμός) by the patriarch of Constantinople in reference to the Bulgarian Schism. [...] By the end of the 18th century, the term had acquired additional racial connotations. This was due to a number of reasons, including the increased collaboration between Greek and European scholars in the rising significance of race in European scientific discourse.



Traditional table cloth from the region of the Plain of Xanthi.
Photo by N.C.-M. 2022

Access the above quote via:

https://books.openedition.org/ceup/2262?lang=en

TASKS AND FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. Try to identify where the word race is mentioned in the text below.
2. What does each sentence mentioning the word race cannotate in the text?

TO KNOW MORE

This text is from 1886 written by a significant historian about the Greek nation, C. Paparrigopoulos.

'[...] If the kingdom of Greece, from the moment it was first founded, had behaved with due foresight and dexterity towards the races which it is currently opposing, things would have been much less difficult than they are today. At that time, the Bulgarians and Albanians were not yet dreaming of autonomy, and felt an affinity towards the Hellenic nation, which, having benefited from this, could have easily appropriated those living in Epirus, Macedonia and Thrace. Besides this, Europe's main concern at the time was either to salvage the Ottoman state or to render autonomous the countries which comprised it, while now different plans are being plotted. Unfortunately, the kingdom, for fifty whole years, forgot the traditional command to use time well; and, what was worse, the first national assembly in Athens withheld any affection towards its fellow nationals and speakers of the Hellenic language, perceiving them as foreigners, and not as brothers who had suffered all manner of ills in the common struggles.

[...] Modern Hellenism is very different from ancient Hellenism. In the first place, its distinguishing features are not identical to those of its past form. The Hellenic nation today is separated from the other countries neither by its religion, nor by its institutions, nor by its way of life. Its religion is common to that of most of the Eastern peoples, while its institutions are common to most of those of the West. [...] It is understood that modern Hellenism does not demand to appropriate other races and other countries. It restricts itself to saving its fellow nationals from the threat of incursions by those of other races in countries which have belonged to Hellenism for a century. But if it is stated thus, that the Hellenic state does not covet the lands of other races, why use the term Hellenism, since, as we have often said, it is not necessary except as regards to its propagation to those of other races? Because the Greeks are still divided into those who are free and those who are not free. Hence, in its political sense, the term Hellenic nation could be limited only to the inhabitants of the free state. Because of this it was deemed necessary to express by the same term, unambiguously, the moral and spiritual unity of a politically split nation. '

Post-colonial countries are not only the ones that were colonised but also the colonisers themselves because they used colonisation to create the notion of nation-state. Their expansion and global dimension, as well as the cosmopolitan dimension today, is what legitimised the becoming of a nation-state. In order to become a European nation you have to colonise, and the non-White have always been part of your project. Therefore, Europe as we know it had never been White. Similarly with the Ottoman Empire- in order to prove that it was an empire, it had to bring enslaved people in its territory.

Like one of my Afrogreek interlocutors from Xanthi has testified, his ancestors were Greek before Greece was even conceived as a nation state. Now the story twists when Greece needs to show its cosmopolitanism as a European state by hiding its minority groups of Colour, therefore trying to convince that it is created out of Whiteness in order to seek belonging. Every population needs to feel part of their country's fabric and their diverse characteristics should be celebrated instead of hidden. The process of Othering in this case touches on exotisization, the unknown history, the "Christopher Colombus syndrome", and governmental ignoring. How many current Black students, second generation migrants of Greece, African kids of Athens and other cities would feel empowered and less foreign if their schools taught them the history of the AfroGreeks from centuries ago? How could such a historical fact, but also a present reality, raise awareness on discrimination and othering practices?

The example of the Afrogreeks of Thrace diversifies the discourse around colonization of the Black individual, as it deviates from the American context and notions of race, White gaze, appropriation, privilege, etc, while it offers a new dimension of racialized identities in relation to Eurocentric perceptions of Othering, i.e. migration flows, refugee influx, Orthodox Christianity, and more.



FUTHER READING

For more information on Greece and race, check out S. Trubeta's book:

Physical Anthropology, Race and Eugenics in Greece (1880s–1970s) a glimpse of which you can get if you visit Google Books at:

https://books.google.gr/books?id=wfqZAAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false