



## *Book Review by Dr. Andronikos Falangas*

Vangelis Calotychos, *The Balkan Prospect: Identity, Culture, and Politics in Greece after 1989*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, XI+272 pp.

As its title reveals, Vangelis Calotychos's book is an analysis that goes beyond the political and cultural reality of Greece, that is to say, an analysis integrated in a broader Balkan context. The choice of 1989 as point of reference is unambiguous. That year signaled the breaking of the Iron Curtain in southeastern Europe. As a consequence, thousands of emigrants, mostly Albanians, crossed the borders of Greece with the hope of a better future for themselves and their relatives left behind. This exodus had a serious impact on Greece's demographics, already affected by the repatriation of ethnic Greeks from the Soviet Union. What is more, it was followed by waves of economic or political refugees from the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southern Asia who imagined Greece as the gate for the West. All these migrants transformed Greece into a multicultural and multiracial society. Their labor boosted the country's economic growth, but their growing numbers, claims, and needs strained the country's public institutions, affected traditional community solidarities, and contested deep rooted beliefs of Greekness and otherness.

The collapse of communism in Bulgaria, Romania, and Albania, the Yugoslav Wars, and the breakdown of Yugoslavia impelled the Greeks to reflect on their Balkan affinities and loyalty to the Western world. Moreover, the birth of a country claiming the name of Macedonia and the legacy of Alexander the Great strongly hurt Greek sensibilities, sparking a still unsettled dispute. Regarding the Greek-Turkish relations, a period of appeasement followed a major crisis in 1996. Three years later, when both nations were hit by earthquakes, Greeks and Turks expressed a solidarity that overshadowed the Cyprus problem and other long conflicts.

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During the first decade of the twenty first century, Greece completed large infrastructure projects and organized over-expensive Olympic Games. Consumerism became a hallmark of the local lifestyle, widely due to government salaries and subsidies. This semblance of prosperity kept deep-rooted social and economic issues out of sight. In 2010, these issues were dramatically exposed by the Greek government-debt crisis. Austerity measures, recession, high unemployment, and poverty have since become Greece's grim reality. The crisis has had a serious impact on the immigrant communities. Besides the scarcity of jobs, they have had to cope with a xenophobia translated into violence by the far-right party of Golden Dawn.

Calotychos's book sheds light on what has just been summarily presented, but its readers will vainly look for statistics, archival sources, or recorded interviews. The works of filmmakers and novelists, and some selected newspaper articles are Calotychos's primary sources. Empowered by a solid intellectual background and analytical skills, he utilizes literary and cinematographic creation as a guide that goes beyond words, images, and styles, being able to unfold not only crucial aspects of Greece's recent history, but also secrets of the Greek and Balkan psyche. From another standpoint, Calotychos's book contributes to a wider knowledge of the Greek and broader Balkan cinema and literature. Furthermore, it illustrates the legends, events, conflicts, traumas, and situations that have inspired their creators so that these cultural artifacts might be better assessed by a Western audience that largely perceives them as exotic.

An additional merit of the book, especially of its first chapters, is the reflective assessment of a large number of theoretical studies. Calotychos updates or redefines established and often distorted views of the Balkans' ethno-cultural complexity and of the behavioral patterns of their peoples. Beyond formulating some fresh ideas, or paving the way for an innovative cross-cultural research, he offers a comprehensive tool, valuable to those willing to demystify the Balkans and form a solid idea on the Greek society in the last twenty five years. Further enriching the volume are an extensive bibliography of mostly English and Greek titles and a very useful index.

Calotychos's erudition and cultural vision become obvious in the book's "Preface and Acknowledgments." He is a scholar with broad academic experience and a teaching record that includes Harvard, New York University, and Columbia. Interestingly, he shares with his readers his personal Balkan experience that goes back to his childhood years. This confession reveals the importance of the imaginary in inter-Balkan perceptions and interpretations.

Imaginary is also present in the following "Introduction: The Balkan Prospect in the New Europe." It opens with an allegoric scene from *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995), a poetic

film by internationally acclaimed Greek director Theo(doros) Angelopoulos. Inspired by this scene, the author reflects on the ambiguous relationship between the Greeks and their Balkans neighbors, emphasizing the cultural dilemmas caused by the formers' early European orientation.

"This is the Balkans, This is no Fun and Games," his initial chapter, constitutes the book's most theoretical part. The author examines the definition of the Balkans and the ambiguities generated by this geographical term heavily charged with cultural assumptions and connotations in both Greece and the West. He investigates the specificity of Greece within the Balkan space, and finally reconsiders the notion of "Balkanism" developed, in conjunction to Edward Said's "Orientalism," by Bulgarian born historian Maria Todorova.

"Names, Differences," the second chapter, deals with the socio-political evolution of Greece after its adhesion to the European Economic Community and the rise to power of the Socialist Party (PASOK) leader Andreas Papandreou in the same year (1981). It gives a clear idea of the Greeks' attachment to customary associations between Hellenic past and Modern Greek identity, Greek identity and Greek citizenship, and Greek identity and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Many Greeks persistently defended, and still defend, these ideological constructs constantly challenged by the influx of immigrants and the liberal or global views of the post-Communist era. This reality facilitates the understanding of the passionate polemics against unflattering academic essays on Ancient Greece or Byzantium. It also makes transparent the motives behind the massive mobilizations against the removal of religion from the Greek identity card issued by the government and the international use of the name of Macedonia by the Greeks' northern neighbors.

"Repetition, Agency," his third chapter deals with the alleged tradition of recidivism and violent conflict among the ethnic groups in the western Balkans. The author explores the link between a collective pathology and the resurgence of blind violence during the Yugoslav Wars. He extends his analysis over three internationally awarded films: *Underground* (1995) by Bosnia-Serbian Emir Kusturica, the above mentioned *Ulysses' Gaze*, and *Before the Rain* (1994) by Milcho Manchevski, born in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. All the three deal with the alienation caused by the Yugoslav Wars in conjunction with the circularity of the tragic in the Balkan space.

The fourth chapter, "Bridges, Metaphors" investigates the Balkan metaphor of the bridge, as it is manifested in folklore, modern literature, and in films such as *The Suspended Step of the Stork* (1991) by Angelopoulos. Calotychos highlights the topos of human sacrifice during the building of a bridge in *The Bridge of Arta*, a Greek folk

ballade, and the novels of two famed Balkan writers, Yugoslav Ivo Andrić and Albanian Ismail Kadare. The Balkan view of bridge does not necessarily imply freedom and interaction. It may be associated with intrusion, alienation, and foreign domination, up to the point that Greek novelist Aris Fakinos imagines a bridge builder destroying his masterpiece at the sacrifice of his life. In Angelopoulos' vision, the bridge becomes a symbol of division and oppression. According to Calotychos, these negative perceptions of bridging reflect a collective fear of foreign intervention, perceptible in Greece of the 1990s after the Western/UN actions in the Balkans and Cyprus.

The fifth chapter, "Limits, Coexistence," outlines the Greek-Turkish relations since 1989 and examines the Greek-Turkish coexistence in a historical and imaginary perspective. Calotychos focuses on the literary and cinematographic rendition of the traumas caused by the failed Greek military campaign in Asia Minor, the fate of its participants, and the Catastrophe of Smyrna (1922), the population exchange between Greece and Turkey (1923), and at a later date the deportation from Turkey of its residents of Greek nationality (1964). He also discerns the variations in the Greek perception of the Turk, from an empathetic rescuer in Dido's Sotiriou's novel *Bloody Earth* (1962) to a cruel aggressor in *1922* a film directed by Nikos Koundouros in 1978. Over and above that, Calotychos shows the limits of the Greek-Turkish coexistence and rapprochement, imposed by taboos, like the mixing through sexual relations, or by the remembrance and reconstruction of a traumatic past.

The penultimate chapter, "Migrations, Prospects," covers the thorny subject of emigration to Greece. Feature films and literature are widely presented, and with good reason. As historical and cultural creations, they provide valuable insights into social tensions, stereotypical ideas, gender views, and cultural conflicts generated by a large and diverse emigrant population in a country known for its high degree of ethnic and religious homogeneity. They also reveal the hardships of the ethnic Greeks from the Soviet Union and southern Albania after moving to Greece, seen not as a host country but as their often idealized homeland. Moreover, novelist Sotiris Dimitriou juxtaposes the Greek migration experience in Germany to that of the Albanian in Greece, and film director Sotiris Goritsas reports new migration challenges for the Greeks in the Balkans after the elimination of the barriers imposed by Communism.

The concluding chapter, "Epilogue: Back to the Balkans," starts with an incident that targeted Third World refugees in Athens (2009), highlighting an alarming reality. Greece had become a main port of entry for unauthorized migrants in Europe's borderless Schengen Area, and the Greek authorities could hardly handle the situation. The Greek state and society had already faced integration challenges posed by the culturally closer Balkan immigrants. However, the assault on a female Bulgarian

immigrant and trade unionist in 2008 sparked a vehement public reaction, as part of a broader social unrest. But the mobilizations of that period failed to improve an ailing state apparatus. The rest of the chapter deals with debt-ridden Greece, its place in the European Union, and the challenges faced by its people and leadership. Its final sentence lacks optimism: “The prospects are grim.”

Calotychos’s book is more than a significant contribution to the field of Greek and Balkan studies. It is an homage to the cultural legacy left by a pleiad of modern creators, despite or due to their tribulations in the land of “no fun and games.” *The Balkan Prospect: Identity, Culture, and Politics in Greece after 1989* was deservedly honored by being awarded the prestigious Edmund Keeley Book Prize of 2013 by the Modern Greek Studies Association.

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