

University Seminar 703: Modern Greek

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The Nation's Vow: Haunting Fantasies of the Colonels' Greece

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Summary of Presentation:

In his presentation, Antoniou presents part of his research on the so-called Nation's Vow, a planned but unrealized project for the construction of a large Church of the Savior on a hill overlooking the city of Athens. Examining the historical and historiographical complexities surrounding the project – a monumental national edifice now widely associated with the architectural politics, the urban design, and the aesthetics of the military dictatorship that ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974 – Antoniou asks: “What can the story of a phantasmatic building tell us about the making of public history and the place of silence, resistance, and complicity in Greece today?”

In the first part of his talk, Antoniou discusses the origins of the Nation's Vow, pointing out that its history long predates the 20th century: Following Count Kapodistrias's suggestion, it was the Fourth National Assembly of 1829 that first pledged to construct an Orthodox cathedral in return for liberation from the Ottomans. The project, in addition, initially was inextricably linked to the planned construction of another monument, dedicated to those who contributed to, and died in, the Greek fight for independence. Though the Nation's Vow, as Antoniou argues, subsequently faded “as a salient site of fantasy” and became “subsumed by its complementary edifice,” its long history and the involvement in and endorsement of the project by a range of prominent politicians, architects and urban planners over a long period of time undermines more current claims that the Nation's Vow was only (re-)discovered – indeed “born,” as the left-wing magazine *Andi* claimed – by the military dictatorship. “I want to problematize,” Antoniou says, “the axiomatic correlation between aesthetics and dictatorial politics at work in the discourse of particular narrators and claim that the unthinkable in this case assumes the form of a certainty: the Vow cannot possibly have a long non-dictatorial history that moreover involves prominent figures in the canon of modern Greece.”

Antoniou then recalls his meetings with “those excommunicated by official history”: one of the former leaders of the dictatorship, Stylianos Pattakos, and Despoina Papadopoulou, the wife of the late dictator Papadopoulos. The accounts of both, for Antoniou, render

problematic a reductive and de-historicizing reception of the history of the Nation's Vow as a limited and isolated phenomenon of Greece under the dictatorship. Pattakos, for instance – though he confirms that the building, as Antoniou describes, “would have signified the country's new glories, the dictatorship's capacity to rebrand the urban space, and the successful merger of nationalism, the classical past, and Orthodox religion” – also emphasizes the financial contributions made to the project by a range of prominent businessmen and shipping magnates. And both Pattakos and Papadopoulou herself reject the widely-held view that it was Papadopoulou's personal initiative, her style and religious sentiment, that played an important role in the rediscovery of the Nation's Vow.

It is, in fact, the figure of Constantinos Doxiadis, an important and highly influential modernist architect and urban planner, that Antoniou turns to in the last part of his paper. Doxiadis – who has been described as at once “super-modern” and “super-traditional” – had developed a veritable obsession with the Nation's Vow since the mid 1960s and had taken a keen interest in realizing the project, not least during the time of the dictatorship. For him, the Nation's Vow had the potential of becoming both the country's modernist architectural symbol and a key element in bringing about a large-scale “landscape restoration.” The fact that Doxiadis's engagement with this issue is unknown today and that attempts to analyze Doxiadis's activities during the junta are often identified with an effort at “diminishing his legacy through accusations of collaboration with the military regime,” as an informant argues, leads Antoniou to ask: “How do we consider the activities of professionals in a time of non-democratic rule? Should we expect architects and urban planners to stop working as a gesture of resistance? Why is it still difficult to accept that the junta established important infrastructure and at the same time acknowledge the reality of the torture in which the regime engaged?” Doxiadis – though disappointed that he was not directly commissioned to carry out the project – closely followed the dictatorship's architectural competitions for the Nation's Vow and continued to engage with the issue even after the dictatorship had fallen and the Nation's Vow, as Antoniou notes, in the minds of many Greeks had become “only associated with the military regime.”

For Antoniou, thus, the Nation's Vow “in many ways embodies the ambiguities of history.” Given the long-lasting and wide-spread involvement with this project of figures far beyond the horizon of the military dictatorship, the complex history and, especially, historiography of the Nation's Vow, Antoniou argues, “helps us understand how problematic certain discussions of Greece's dictatorial past have been, especially when perpetuating the claim that the Vow could have only been the kitsch project of a military regime.” “How is it possible,” he asks, for the kind of material he presented in his talk, “to find no place in the public history of the dictatorship of April 21?” Ultimately, Antoniou says, what is at stake here is the question of “how much can we reduce what happened to what is said to have happened?” The post-dictatorship accounts of the history of the Nation's Vow “reflected new political realities as created by the restoration of democracy,” not least “the wish of the Greek left to articulate a critical narrative concerning the country's dictatorial past that nevertheless would not destabilize the national micro-narrative of a heroic nation fighting for freedom and democracy throughout the centuries.” In this sense, Antoniou concludes, the history and

historiography of the Nation's Vow is paradigmatic for the "structural production of silence that operates at various levels and results from various configurations of power."

Summary of Discussion:

Q.

Did you ever find out who the other architects were who contributed?

A.

You can find them easily in the books. Some pictures of the models, for instance, are published in the edited volume *Kitsch Made in Greece* that I referred to in my presentation, and in Raftopoulos's article. The only pictures we have of those models are what *Andi* had. So the story was that someone took pictures and sent them to Papoutsakis. And Papoutsakis published those pictures in two articles and also gave them to Raftopoulos for his contribution to the volume on kitsch and the military regime.

Q.

I've been wondering whether the person who actually designed the model that looks like a hat – whether that is a conscious reference to Despoina's ridiculous hats?

Q.

And who made that?

A.

Several pictures of those models were published in newspaper articles. To be honest, when I went through these – and since I'm not an architect and I don't have a lot of knowledge about Greek church architecture – I was very much amazed by these particular contributions to the competitions. Because to my mind it looked too modernist. For those of us who are familiar with church architecture in Greece, it's something that you very rarely see. And at that time I wondered – and I was thinking of Freud – whether for some reason modernist Greek architecture was related to a traumatic period, and after the restoration of democracy we have no modernist architecture as far as churches are concerned. But I've discussed this with many architects and professors of architecture who told me that this won't be a valid argument because Greek architects have for many decades submitted modernist architecture to competitions. But since the church is responsible for deciding when it comes to the building of particular churches, all these plans are usually rejected. There are some but very few modern churches in Athens. For the Greek church, a theologian told me, this particular architecture brings to mind Protestantism, and there's a reflex reaction by association.

Q.

It's interesting, the way the junta embraced modernist suggestions and plans for the Vow. For all their retrograde ideology, they really embraced Bauhaus and they destroyed Athens by destroying those beautifully neoclassical buildings and building those buildings we see now around Syntagma or Omonoia.

A.

It's very important what you say because people who study the dictatorship often make only the connection with Metaxas's regime without being aware of how central the

notion of the builder is in the Bauhaus movement. And if we study Doxiadis's archive, we see how very much influenced by that movement he was, and how much he believed in the dictum that the architect should also be a craftsman.

Q.

So you're asking about aesthetics, and you're saying that there's modernism getting picked up, but some of the writers of *Andi* called it kitsch. But what you're saying is that there is a certain kind of continuity of interest in reviving the Vow, and it doesn't really have to do with what political regime is controlling at that particular moment. Therefore the politics and the aesthetics don't match up.

A.

What I want to problematize is this connection that is very obvious in the literature that studies the Vow in the post-dictatorial period, which connects kitsch and the dictatorship. And I think that if we also take into account another feature of that literature – which is a very particular periodization – there is there the implicit claim that kitsch in Greece commences on April 21 and concludes when democracy is restored, because by definition kitsch is a feature of totalitarianism.

Q.

But there is an association with regimes and kitsch, if you look at Russian neorealism for example, or socialist kitsch. How about Agios Nektarios in Aegina? That's kitsch too, and that's not during the dictatorship. There's just many dimensions to it.

A.

And when it comes to discussing public spectacles, it happens every year in Messolonghi. This is a massive re-enactment, and it's absolutely amazing to see hundreds and thousands of people dressed up in kilts and riding horses. But for some sort of reason, we don't make that connection: If that is kitsch, then how does this connect to the present political situation? So if we look for kitsch, we'll find kitsch. If this is the analytics we want to impose...

Q.

The reason I ask you about this interview with Pattakos, where he said the Vow would be "almost identical" – What came to mind was Tschumi, who had the similar audacity to say the new Acropolis Museum would be in dialogue with the Parthenon. Isn't that the same discourse, the same political position, the same sort of ideology of aesthetics? I'm just thinking about the possibility that there might be an internal discourse in architecture that actually thinks about this dialogue of buildings outside the context of political frameworks.

A.

Certainly, the architect and the urban planner in particular assigns particular usages to space, and of course this is an obvious manifestation of power. I'm not, unfortunately, familiar with ethnographies of architecture, how certain architects and urban planners arrive at decisions concerning the use of public space. But we do have very big projects: Doxiadis is a wonderful example. He is responsible for massive housing projects in Islamabad etc., where there was a big plot of land, and Doxiadis was like, "Okay, there's going to be 3,000 houses here, and two squares, and this is part of my new concept of

human settlement that I impose. It would be interesting to know these processes of how they arrive at their decisions, and their concepts of subjectivity. Doxiadis, as far as I remember, participated twice in the Delos conferences Doxiadis's associates were organizing.

Q.

It was also that moment in time. Doxiadis was not the only planner who thought big. Other people did too, they were megalomaniacal. But that was the time. Others did too.

Q.

So maybe that could also be an answer to your question about non-democratic... Professional builders who don't imagine themselves only as national subjects. They are building everywhere.

A.

I had a very interesting discussion with a professor at the National University of Athens who is now in charge of the archives of Neohellenic architecture at the Benaki Museum, and this was exactly what I asked her, and I thought that it was very interesting that she said, actually no. Of course it's a given that architects will continue working under a dictatorial regime, but there's something particular to the Nation's Vow. This was not just one more project, it was a project that was imbued with very particular symbolic values. It wasn't building a new stadium or a school. There was something, she claimed, particular to that project. And even though she herself describes herself as a person who continued to work and teach during the military regime, she thought she could never participate in that project because there's something particular to it.

Q.

So she's not connected to Adamis?

A.

I don't know about Adamis, the architect, who won twice the second prize. But this is the interesting ethnographic part, those prominent father-son relations. For instance, Moutsopoulos the son talks about the competitions launched by the military regime, and his father, *ex officio*, because he was professor of Byzantine architecture at the Aristotle University, was a member of one of the search committees. I know that father-son relations are very complicated, and it's not about telling the truth or not, but I think that this is a very interesting pattern that emerges. Since this is a very complicated story, I conducted many interviews, and people who I later discovered had a very active involvement because their colleagues recognized their faces when we were going through the press together, they said, "No, I had nothing to do with the project." So, on many occasions, people said, No I had no involvement, and later I found out that they did and they were very knowledgeable of what had happened during the military regime. But this is an ethnographic challenge when it comes to negotiating this particular knowledge with someone who is an elderly person, has constructed a new narrative after the restoration of democracy, and all of a sudden there is another person who was not there during the time – I was born in '79 – asking all these questions the answers to which could be used in so many different ways.

Q.

I studied Doxiadis during the war, what was going on during the war, not after the war, during the time when he was Minister of Reconstruction. In my experience so far, as an architectural historian reading primarily architectural material, it's fascinating: His name is more or less erased from Greek architectural history. There are people here, at the School of Architecture, who have written about him extensively, who find him very important, so internationally he's very recognized, but in Greece, up to very recently, up to that exhibit at the Benaki Museum, he wasn't there. He was a footnote, and very negative, in Philippides' book on Athens. The two of them had a terrible relationship. But you don't write somebody out of history. I think a lot of Greek intellectuals, who suffered during the junta, take a very negative view of him. His archive only became available a few years ago. My experience has actually been the opposite. I've been seeing things and thinking, Wow, he was doing this and doing that, during the war. He was also in the resistance, he organized architects against the Germans, all of these things, and nobody ever talks about them. If he appears in an architectural book, it's only in a footnote or a sentence, but in fact, he had an enormous contribution. In his last years, he clearly did have relations with the junta. I don't know much now anymore about that period, but I think that could also be an interesting part of your story, in terms of how we do history, and buildings and monuments and so on.

Q.

I mentioned him in my book, and that he was Minister of Reconstruction, and the copy editor of the translation crossed it out and said that she's looked everywhere and was not able to corroborate this. Because it's not there in Greek architectural history. It just doesn't exist.

Q.

What's the logic behind the name, The Nation's Vow? It seems to me that there were different political periods in which this notion of the nation would be imagined differently, after the Ottoman liberation, during the military regime and afterwards.

A.

We were talking about the Church of the Savior, and this eventually became known as the Nation's Vow. The name of the church was the Church of the Savior, but later, around the later 1840s I think, we have evidence that most people referred to it as the Nation's Vow. And Vow, on the one hand, refers to the actual building, but at the same time also refers to this pledge undertaken by the Greek nation to build a church in return for Greek liberation, which was made possible through divine intervention. Now if you study the history of the Nation's Vow, you see that it becomes some sort of silent echo of history. People are familiar with the term and know that it refers to a church but don't really know the history of it. We know that it's part of the church's institutional culture, it's not a coincidence that even nowadays young priests have heard about the Nation's Vow, and we know that it's something important, and that it's a church that hasn't been built yet. But at the same time there was all this confusion because, as I tried to explain, the Nation's Vow became also connected to the erection of the War Heroes' Memorial. I think it will be easier to answer the part of your question concerning the involvement of the evolution of concepts of the state by studying the proposed architecture. When, for instance, Ernest Ziller proposes a particular architecture for the construction of the War

Heroes' Memorial on top of Lycabettus Hill, if you study that architecture you see how central neoclassicism is. And perhaps this has to do with the national narrative. And then architects and others propose different architectures for the Memorial that sometimes includes the Nation's Vow. But at the same time there are continuities there, and just very superficial descriptions concerning the national need to fulfill the Vow.

Q.

It's interesting listening to you talking about the evolution of the conception of the national state, and how a kind of politics of fulfillment takes place with the Vow, especially in light of your previous interest in the building or not-building of a mosque. I was conscious about the comment someone made about Doxiadis being traditional and modern, and thinking a little bit about what the politics of your project is, or how it might be perceived as being both traditional and modern, in the sense that you raise a very interesting question at the beginning, which is, Can the dictatorship have a non-dictatorial past, which means that you try to argue against the circumscription that, let's say, the Left after 1974 participates in by circumscribing the dictatorship as a thing apart. You seem to be saying that that dictatorial politics and aesthetics in fact is part of a much longer *durée*, acceptable to the nationalistic discourse up to that point. So in one way you're opening that up, but you're opening it up at a very dangerous moment, right. Dertilis died yesterday or the day before yesterday, and when you look at the blogs, the blogs are saying, There is an omission here in speaking about this man, his contribution to the nation beforehand, and how a kind of fascist politics can become reconceived as something nationalist. It's at that moment that you find yourself dealing with these lines, which works both ways: It works as a critique of the Left, and – we were talking a little earlier about the Civil War, and of course I considered it a little bit in the early 90s, when Valtinos wrote from the perspective of the Security Battalions people jumped on him, it was a complex discussion. But you're doing that kind of critique, on the one hand, but on the other hand someone might see it as falling into the hands of a particular moment.

A.

This work is by definition a project of its time. I can't avoid what is happening, and also that I'm part of larger discussions in Greek academia. I felt that the time for the scholarly discussion of the dictatorial past has come. I feel that this is what will follow after the discussion that Neni and many others have engaged in concerning the Civil War. This is what follows, and I want to place myself right in the middle of that discussion. And I know that I'm not aware of all the historical information concerning the Vow, and also that I am very new to these particular investigations. Because, yes, the larger framework has to do with unfulfilled state initiatives and imaginary buildings, but I'm not using this particular research as a way to think of the state mechanisms that block particular initiatives, as I am trying to do with my doctoral dissertation. I use this ethnographic experience in order to think of the making of public history in Greece. When it comes to what you described about a particular period, I just wanted to repeat that this was also what the junta itself tried to imply, this direct continuity, that the junta did something new that can be linked directly to the revolutionary past. If one studies the discourse of Papadopoulos or Pattakos concerning this particular endeavor – the Nation's Vow – there is absolutely no reference to what had happened in the 20th century, it's all about the promise that our forefathers had made in the early 19th century. So yes, on the one hand

this work is a critique of the way segments of the Left have tried to re-think the experience of the junta, but at the same time these narratives can also be found in the discourse – which is historically uninformed – of the exact opposite. So it has to do with the making of public history and assuming particular certainties.

Q.

I have a question from the literary perspective. I'm trying to understand what you said about absence and silence. Because in my work on censorship and literature of the period, it's very clear that space and sound or vision and sound are being worked against each other, so that there is a sense that silence and the question of censorship then becomes projected onto the literary space of the page, and a kind of heterotopia; that you can visually create things in these texts that kind of take a part, even if on some level you're not saying certain things, you're saying other things. So I'm wondering about how absence and silence work here? Can you read building plans the way you read literary texts, for instance in terms of parody or kitsch? Can it at some level also be undermining at the very moment of participating as a building? I'm trying to understand how literary censorship works with the building thing you're doing, because you're making me think that the absence is more important than the silence.

A.

I talked about unthinkable history and the structural reproduction of silence. In that way, I'm not implying that the people whose statements I presented were necessarily aware of the project's history and they tried to hide that history. It is that element of the unthinkable that makes them create particular narratives that depend on certain silences. So I think that what differentiates this work from your work is that I'm not saying that these narrators are conscious of the silences on which their narratives depend. It's not about a regime that's trying to censor particular literary or other texts and trying to impose silence. It has to do with the idea that things could not have happened otherwise, at the expense of historical research, that there is no need to search the archives for what happened. There can be no question that this is the way that things should have happened, because things should have happened that way. Now, when it comes to study buildings from, I guess, a semiological perspective: it depends on the theory one brings to the research. I have talked in the past about phallic architectures and the phallic aspects of mosques, but I can also imagine employing a different analytics in support of the project. So there is, I think, an institutional predetermine when it comes to the theories we use in order to make sense of, in this case, ethnographic experience. If one studies Anthropology at Columbia, it's very different from when one studies Anthropology at Princeton, and very different from when one studies Anthropology at Oxford, and people bring to their analysis the methodologies and a particular genealogy of analytics with their part. And at some point you can see that it's very obvious that x anthropologist is the student of that person. We bring what we know. So yes, semiotics could be...

Q.

So there is no censorship being imposed on architectural work during the junta – or is there? So what you are saying is that the question that you posed earlier – should architects stop building under authoritarian regimes – can we ask the ethnographic question: Have there been architects whose work was not allowed to be built by the junta?

So if one poses the question from within one's discipline – let's say architecture – is that a question that produces an epistemological answer or is it a question that produces a political answer.

A.

This is a question, of course, that I cannot answer, because I am not aware of architects who were not allowed to build a particular project.

Q.

Perhaps I can help a little bit. Just by looking at this, it really brings to my mind the fascist architecture in Italy, so of course during that time there was a great deal of censorship in Italy. The buildings had to look a certain way, from what I know. But if you just look at this image, something's going on. There's also paintings, for instance, by de Chirico that have this... There's other ways to read this.

A.

But when an architect decides to participate in a public or state project, one reads the project's description. And we have in this case three project descriptions, which are very general and problematic and say that, on the hand, architects participating in these competitions should make use of cement because we like cement. But at the same time they are free to draw inspiration both from antiquity but also to take into account what is happening in the world. So, of course Papadopoulos and Pattakos must have had an idea of what it is that they don't really like, but they are not very obvious from the supporting documents.

Q.

It's similar to the Renos Apostolidis anthology, where you get everybody – you get Doxiadis and everybody – to make buildings, and you make them part of your game for that period, which is what happened with the writers. They were all writing their things, and picked up and put into an anthology that was the regime's anthology. I think that there's a kind of parallel there, and what I find interesting is what you're saying about a kind of self-censorship there or the way you re-write history. Maybe the question you had about fathers and sons is also a question that literature of that period can help you with, because it's so generation-bound. There are writers like Seferis who come in and say, silence, we're not gonna write, and then there are the younger writers who haven't even had a chance to write yet, where actually they write differently, self-censoring. You're talking that generation. You were born Foucauldian. You can't not think that censorship is productive in some form.

Q.

But in architecture there is also a lot of writing in the last decade, let's say, on design and national identity. It's a big theme, for instance work on the Olympic Games, and the aesthetics of that.

Q.

You're trying to grapple with this question: How do you think of two kinds of domains of practice under authoritarian rule. One is at the level of the everyday practices, people that are located at a bureaucracy of city life – how do you think of the continuity of that kind of practices under conditions of authoritarian rule. And how do you then also think of creativity in particular? I find this an interesting question because if you look up, say,

Soviet Film under Stalinist rule, there's a whole number of Soviet filmmakers who actually are completely dependent on state patronage to produce cinema – there's no other way to make cinema – and this is a very long period of absolute authoritarian rule. And likewise in China, you have a whole fifth generation of filmmakers. Same in Iran. I'm just thinking of where this question gets inflected. We sometimes tend to think of the conditions for creativity as being naturally allied with the conditions of artistic freedom in a particular way, but interestingly, if we think of conditions in which certain kinds of aesthetic practice have had to articulate themselves under conditions of political authoritarianism, then how do we re-think our own political and aesthetic engagements with moments like this. Is there a difference between filmmakers in Iran or at certain moments in China or in 20s and 30s Russia, who are dependent upon state patronage in a particular way, and a participation in a public, spectacular instantiation of political projects like this? Are there ways to think of the distinctions between these realms?

A.

I just want to say that during the Greek dictatorship, the regime created a particular framework to produce particular architectures. So yes, there was state aesthetics at work broadly conceived, but at the same time – especially from '67 to '71 – that was the time when many families found funds to build their own houses. And I think that this is what differentiates the Greek case from the cases that you mentioned. On the one hand we can think of the state imposing a particular framework, but at the same time one has to take into consideration particular developments in Greek economy that gave very different avenues, and in those cases there was a chance for architects to participate and engage in different kinds of projects. So the state wasn't the only avenue for architects. At that time there was enough revenue to make the wishes of Greek families come true. The situation changes from '71 and '72 because there is less money but those first four or five years were a time when things really changed. I haven't seen studies of work of architects before the dictatorship and after the dictatorship, and I see continuities. Yes, they are to some extent in dialogue with what is happening abroad, in the West; yes, they develop ideas that were premature, but you don't see a radical break in the architecture they proposed after the restoration of democracy.

Q.

Let's wind it up with a blunt question. Why Tourkovounia? What's the business reason, what's the real estate reason?

A.

They had to demolish at least 300 houses. Most of the money of the special fund for the Church of the Savior was used to that end. So they had 400 million drachmas, and they spent 380 million to expropriate property. There were at least 300 houses there that had been built illegally, and the regime decided that these people should be compensated. And they did demolish these houses, and demolitions continued even after the restoration of democracy. This is why you see articles in TA NEA that say we still have to pay for the Vow, or the Vow never ends. But I think they had realized – especially Pattakos – that this was the most prominent location in Athens, and perhaps in dialogue with Doxiadis who had already understood that this would eventually become a very central location in Athens. Because in those monographs I referred to, Doxiadis says: I have to give them that, they changed the location even though I had originally thought of

Lycabettus Hill. The idea was to build a new Acropolis for Hellenism, so it was part of a larger project to create a national park and to create a new Acropolis for Hellenism whose most prominent component would be the Nation's Vow. Doxiadis's monographs are in dialogue with these ideas the regime pursued, and even more so because he could draw on his doctoral research and think of a new big space in the Greek capital that would host this. So he found this idea very appealing, and he knew that this would be his last chance. He was dying, he was aware of it, and he wanted the Vow to be built and this to constitute one of his major architectural legacies. I talked to Andreas Simeon who was his right hand and who was in charge of Doxiadis's offices here in New York, and Simeon told me that the Nation's Vow was for Doxiadis as important as the project for the new airport on Makronissos. If one is aware of his health condition, it becomes easy to sense this agony: Nothing is happening, and I won't be given the chance to build the Nation's Vow.