

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

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Speaker: Lidia Santarelli

Topic: "Barbarous Greece: Antihellenic Racial Theories in Fascist Italy"

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Summary of Presentation:

Santarelli began by citing a few reasons why discovering increasing evidence of antihellenic racial theories in fascist Italy, and particularly in the occupation of Greece, came as a surprise to her during her research. First of all, the Italian ruling class was nourished by philhellenism, including the people who were feeding the class of people who were officers in the occupation. Secondly, the interwar period was an amazing period from the point of view of production of knowledge concerning classical antiquity, and this flourishing of classical studies seemed to discourage any hypotheses of a widespread antihellenic attitude. Italy was supposed to be a philhellenic country, not a racist one. The evidence was thus particularly challenging; Santarelli found evidence of antihellenic ideas and stereotypes in a very diverse range of sources: in the press and war propaganda, in soldiers' letters and wartime diaries, in documents from the occupation administration. What then became the problem was how to frame the connection between Italian culture and Italian fascist political culture and ideology, the relation between Italian intellectuals and the fascist regime. How could a fascist reality make use of what seemed to be a widespread antihellenic culture in Italian society?

As one of her sources Santarelli referred to an article in *Mediterranean* magazine in 1940 by the youngest de Chirico brother, Andrea Savinio, about who the Greeks were and why Italy was fighting them. Savinio denied that the Greeks were European, saying that even the Greeks didn't consider themselves European. Savinio, like de Chirico, was born in Greece, known as a member of the surrealism movement, with works that idealized classical Greece, but there was an argument of moral/civil degeneration that resulted in Greece being presented as a prostitute in his article. This article is an exemplar of the fascist racial beliefs that suggested that the Balkans under Italian rule were in a state of moral and anthropological inferiority, and the people there inadequate to exercise their rights of self-government and self-determination.

Santarelli traced this attitude back into the late 19th century, when Greece was firmly placed in Levant in the Italian imagination, and seen as a possible site of Italian expansion. The Libyan war in 1911-12 was a turning point, the discovery of Greece and the Aegean as a possible site for imperialist movement. Corradini reports from the Libyan

war, engaging in the “Africanization of the Aegean” and the racialization of Italian imperialist hegemony in the Mediterranean. We then have a series of writers, of fiction as well as memoirs, who are writing about Greece as an oriental place, with parallels and similarities with Africa. The *Risorgimento* had offered a fertile ground for romantic philhellenism in Italy, but this was replaced starting in the mid 19th century with the Italian nationalist movement, which brought about the erosion of the cultural and political tradition of philhellenism and the subversion of philhellenic tendencies in Italian culture. In Mario Praz’s *Viaggio in Grecia*, for instance, we see the subversion from within of the tradition of the grand voyage, and the open disdain and repulsion toward the human and cultural landscape of contemporary Greece. In 1942 when two-thirds of Greece was occupied by Italy, Praz’s text, which had originally appeared in periodical form a decade before, was collected and published as a book, and the presentation of the Greek people as an anthropologically inferior form of humankind—of Greek society as not just inferior but alien to European society, and of this dichotomy between ancient and modern Greece as a polarity between civilization and barbarity—provided a justification for, or reflected the upsurge of, this kind of antihellenic sentiment.

In 1940 fascism could thus rely on the existence of a cultural substratum for the construction of Greece as an enemy, this polarization between ancient and modern Greece, the latter relegated to the position of subaltern. This polarization is not to be taken to mean that classical Greece remained untouched: there was a profound revision of the construction of historical narratives about the relationship of classical Greece and Rome, which subsumed classical Greece within the narrative of Rome. In this racialization of ancient history, racial arguments were used to explain the decline of classical Greece, and to present evidence of Italic-Roman racial superiority. The war against Greece was conceived as a step in a more general historic process of Italian expansion in the Mediterranean, and in terms of an anti-British war, with racial theories significantly intertwined with other political/ideological components of the fascist war.

With regard to anti-bolshevism, the conflation of an ethnic enemy with a political one becomes clear. This antihellenic impulse was thus part of a total war, and in Italian military sources the Greek insurgents were turned into an ethnic racial enemy and labeled as Slavo-communists. In the 1930s we see the ideological intellectual offensive against the grand narrative of the historical continuity of Greece from classical antiquity to modern times, which tried to deny claims to a Greek nation that had been conceived on the basis of historical continuity. We also see a central role played by contemporary anti-Semitic theories: the same intellectuals, scientists and professors who were leading figures of Italian colonial studies in the 1930s then theorized the inferiority of both Slavs and Greeks.

Summary of Discussion:

Q: So much of this resonates with the more general western discourse on Greece, and the Greek discourse itself, the fractures of the 1930s along class lines. No doubt people here acquainted with Italy are perhaps thinking about how these issues play out within Italy itself, among various regions.

Q: I'm wondering if there is any sort of connection or influence from the German point of view, because I have always seen this sort of campaign by Italy in Greece as a sort of counterbalance to the great power Germany had: Italy needs to show Germany that Italy also has power and can be a good ally. Also, can you make a comparison between the anti-racial laws against the Jewish people and this situation against the Greek population?

A: To go back to the first remark, what I have presented as a major grand national narrative was extremely complicated by the fact that both Italy and Greece were affected by regional linguistic fragmentation. Most of the grand narrative was in fact meant to address this issue within the nation itself. For some the cultural construction of the other on the other side of the Adriatic is always interconnected with the perception of the others on the inside. From my point of view I'm more interested in the problem of how this became a dynamic of psychological mobilization for Italian soldiers or Italian society at war with Greece. I would like a more precise answer to the question of how this affects the war on the ground, if the ideological machinery provided by fascism just remained there, or whether things were more contradictory. Now, Greece was a contentious testing ground for different conceptions of racism, philhellenism, and antihellenic attitude. Within the occupation Germany and Italy were on different positions on this, with the philhellenic Germans on one side and the antihellenic Italians on the other side. In terms of the anti-Semitic issue, the problem is that have the antihellenic theories ever turned into legislation? I think that we can find evidence of how antihellenic theories influenced the political and military behavior of troops in Greece, and antihellenic values were used to mobilize troops in the repression of the resistance movement, or in inspiring the outlines of the Italian policy of occupation. There is a connection or influence we can document between ideological production and military behavior, but there is not a corpus of laws, as there was with the anti-Semitic discourse.

Q: Yes, but also the figure of the Jew was considered something of an outsider, something which cannot be integrated into the model of the fascist regime. The fact that it was eliminated was a sort of solution to maintain the image of national unity.

A: The occupied territories were difficult in this regard. In Salonika the Italian occupation, in order to pursue long-term political goals, tried to save Italian Jews and their properties. The kind of picture you were drawing was more prevalent within Italian national territory, while the occupied territories, particularly toward the end, exhibited contradictory outcomes on this front.

Q: I think the most interesting thing is that there are several pre-existing patterns of otherness, of the easterner as outside European civilization, including the anti-Semitic. Many of the patterns you describe of Greeks outside the European pattern were used against Jews; there are some patterns for constructing what is external to Europeanness which are instrumentalized in this period to serve one or another discourse, like the war against Greece to justify Italian superiority, or the Slavo-Communist example, which I think is very interesting, to see how in the interwar period this anti-bolshevist urge takes on a geostrategic element. There was this British-German negotiation of a separate peace

in Greece against the idea of this Slavo-Communism. Today in Europe we could see some of these patterns used in talking about the role of southern Europeans in the financial crisis, this cultural substratum of patterns that are used to define the borders of what is European and what is extra-European. In this period, in the regions Italy is supposed to annex, the politics and the discourse must be very different, cultivating a kind of Greco-Roman common past and so on. Might the same political elites use one discourse and its opposite in order to achieve different political aims here and there?

A: So you think that if we assume the racialization of political enemies was just instrumental we don't solve the problem of how it works in the mobilization of Italian society into war, the cultural construction of Greeks as an enemy?

Q: You could say that there is a timing to this, the specific repertoire and its mobilization at a particular moment.

Q: What makes the difference is the momentum. At the beginning of World War II Italy needed to mobilize its population in order to fight a war of conquest in the eastern Mediterranean.

Q: But you're also saying there were concurrent forms of domination in this ideological sense. In the Greek case, when Praz is traveling to Greece in 1931, the country is just coming out of the Asia Minor debacle and has a million refugees who are eastern-looking, finding government support inadequate, and are joining the Communist party.

A: This obsession with racial contamination and miscegenation is the perspective is the framework in which Italian fascism and new imperialism defines itself in opposition to this. It's a tone we find in other Italian writers, a widespread feeling, a cultural construct of the Mediterranean as a space of contamination. This is also related to all of the seaports, Athens, Tripoli, Marseilles.

Q: I'm interested in this issue of topology or topography. The area of occupation is the Dodecanese, and so we have island culture, Rhodes with its ladino Jewish population. I'm wondering about the degree to which topography can explain any of the features of the discourse. Did the Italians treat the Jews in Rhodes any differently than they did in Thessaloniki, where the Jews had a strong elite pedigree?

A: This is actually a very controversial aspect of what is happening. The fascist machine is trying to instrumentalize the Jewish elite all over, from North Africa to the Dodecanese, but the wartime period is a special period because of the anti-Semitic laws already enacted in Italy. The Dodecanese was also a long-term colonial experience.

Q: But did something come out of the specificity of that relationship?

A: Well, the Jewish people in the Dodecanese were Italianized, and were approached initially as usable subjects for the colonial administration. After 1938 they became subject to anti-Semitic law. During World War II there was a program of forced

denationalization, and the offensive against local and political elites coincided with a strong anti-Semitic policy in the Dodecanese, but in Thessaloniki it was totally different. There the Jewish elite were the cosmopolitan subject which could be the best point of reference for Italian colonization.

Q: Weren't they planning to make a pattern of a fascist state in the Dodecanese? Was there not a plan by the Italian fascist government to make a state in the Dodecanese which would be the ideal fascist state?

A: The same policy was pursued in the Ionian islands. Generally the islands were approached as a more familiar space, a maritime space, and there was the legacy of Venetian colonialization. They were urban spaces, too. Whereas the Greek inland was Ottoman and unrecognizable to the Italians.

Q: Even today the Muslim population in Thrace doesn't live by the sea, they live inland.

A: But yes, both the Ionian and Dodecanese were conceived as laboratories for the social and political engineering of Italianization and fascisization.

Q: Perhaps the people in the Ionian islands are stressing the fact that they once belonged to the Venetian empire, or the Genoese, that they had the traces, could provide the link.

A: I see this, but I also see the implication of this dividing line between the islands and the continent. In my opinion there is a striking continuity in strategies from Ethiopia and inland Greece in terms of methods of repression and conceptions of total war, military violence against civilians. The map of civilization matters a lot in differentiating how the military behaves.

Q: How do the Balkans relate to this? The Balkans are quintessentially mountainous, territorial.

A: In this ideological narrative of the Mediterranean as the political space of Italian international hegemony, and the space to institute a new ideology, there is a difference between the Mediterranean and the Balkans, which are beyond the historical space of this urban, Mediterranean realm. There is the myth of the Balkans as beyond all that.

Q: I have two aspects I'm wondering about. The first goes by the label barbaricity, that the populace you're talking about is one that has just arisen from a period of decadence, and one question is whether it might merit looking more closely at the pressure that's present there, a self-imagining that has centuries of weight to it. And second, the international anti-Greek discourse. The talk has a national lineage of this kind of theorizing, but everyone hated the Greeks. In the U.S. at the beginning of the 20th century you've got anti-Greek stereotypes and discourse everywhere, as part of a broader anti-Mediterranean discourse. I wonder if opening up the national lineage might matter. And also the issue of Ohi Day, is there any evidence of this registering at all with the Italians thinking in terms of the barbarous Greeks killing us? And of course the legacy of *una*

faccia una razza. In popular memory in Greece, the Italians were decent, moreso than the Nazis.

A: Of course for historians, history is not the myth of collective memory, but I do experience the regionalization of memory and the fragmentation of memory. There are at least 400 cases of villages destroyed by Italians. The repression was not trivial, they used air power, massacred civilians, had concentration camps. But this memory was somehow replaced with the last year of German occupation without the Italians, so that the Italian brutalities were somehow overwhelmed by this later memory. There is no public site of memory about the Italians, even Greeks sometimes mistake certain events as having happened under the Germans. The Italians settled down in 1941 and were there for a long time, so there is a long-term settlement in occupying, there were phenomena of fraternization, but also of very sudden radicalization of conflict. In the same social microcosm of a village you can find fraternization and then suddenly massacre. We are talking about racial ideological statements made by the fascist regime, about a racial ethnic enemy, a new philosophy of history—and then on the other hand an army recruiting mostly from peasants, who were already objects of insufficiently deficit of nationalization, so what happened in the context of a long-term occupation war when the encounter with the other was related to dynamics of allocation of power in daily life, soldiers isolated in this environment, the encounter between peasants and peasants, segments of society that were insufficiently nationalized. In that sense it's very difficult to measure how pervasive was the rationalization of the Italians concerning self and other. Maybe the peculiarity of it lay in its being a latecomer, a specificity of that.

Q: There is one point, this issue of the events of October 1940 that another questioner mentioned. The way I remember it described to me was of the Greeks as barefoot, fighting with their bare hands and knives. This is simply primitivistic, but this is the discourse around that period—when the writers in the west are talking about Greece and the Balkans, Henry Miller, Rebecca West, talking about how noble these people are fighting down there where we went with Chamberlain. This really marks the descriptions among the British who were looking for some kind of German defeat at that time.

Q: I wonder if we can think about this from a perspective of aesthetics, de Chirico and Savinio's aesthetic ambivalence, if we can read them in light of a more broadly positive aesthetic engagement by way of these writings and their other work as continued instantiations of modernist practice, the foregrounding of form which is also conceived as a kind of decreation, as degeneration, decadence.

A: I don't have any precise answer for this, I'm using literary sources but not as a literary person, though at a certain point I decided to search for something else in literature, something I wasn't getting from the strictly historical sources. Certainly writers and artists played a major role in shaping the ideology of Italian colonial expansion, but I need to think more about that and I thank you for your comment.

Q: In looking back I was struck by Praz mentioning Winkelman, whose aestheticization of Greece is one that condemns modern Greece to never being able to live up to its past,

because they're degenerate, orientalized, disorderly. This feeds a larger discourse on which modern Greece is based, which you get at toward the end of the paper, modern Greece being what defies that kind of aesthetic.

Q: We have the aestheticism of people like Benedetto Croce, I wonder if he influenced at all this kind of ideology. He is a figure who is philosophically dominating, and could be the link between the decadism of modernity and the discourse uttered by those writers you were referring to. Rhetorically or stylistically speaking, the degeneration reminds me of the Italian image of the homunculus grecus, or grecus barbaratus, like the ape you were describing, in the early and mid-Renaissance periods. I don't know if there is any link here.

Q: Can you tell us where this fits in the schema of the work?

A: A short version of this is one of the chapters, dealing with the ideological background of the war and the cultural construction of Greece as an enemy in a process which was quite contradictory. There were so many questions coming up that I am tempted to write a longer essay; not everything can be contained in the book.

Q: And the book deals with social aspects of occupation?

A: It's a kind of sociocultural history of the war, dealing with aspects of military history, but my major interests are the ideological background of the war, the fascist political culture, how the war was conceived, and also the impact of the ideological equipment on the ground, the experience of the war. There is a chapter of the experience of the war on the ground, the forms of the war in Albania, and the process of the material invasion of Greek territory.