University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies
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Speaker: Dr. Eleni Papagaroufali, Department of Social Anthropology, Panteion
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Topic: "Town-Twinning In Greece: Towards The Construction of a New European
Identity"

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Summary of Presentation:

Papagaroufali's presentation focused on the institution of town-twinning within the European Union, a post-War institution established in the name of peace that has been reinforced during the post-Cold War era. Since 1989, the European Commission has been funding town-twinning enterprises with two major aims: first, to strengthen existing links and encourage new ones between "central" nations (France and Germany) and "peripheral" ones (Scotland, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece and the newly accepted countries in Central Europe and the Balkans); second, to strengthen local municipalities, as well as the political federations established between them, and to encourage efforts at encouraging an "active and participative European citizenship," fostered at the local level. Town-twinning involves exchanges of visits and gifts, of sporting and folklore dance- and music events, the establishment of information and communication technologies, as well as the development of small-scale business partnerships. The pedagogical dimension of town-twinning is reflected in the way in which the Commission particularly promotes projects submitted by "peripheral" communities, as well as groups involving women and children.

Today, there are more than 13,000 twinning links in Europe, including not only cities, towns and villages, but local chambers of commerce, libraries, N.G.O.s and other organizations, football teams, even streets. Each local agency is encouraged to twin simultaneously with more than one regional agencies of countries that are members of the European Union; non members are equally accepted. While multiple "twinnings" are encouraged for schools, they are, however, expected to twin exclusively with schools from other member states. The immense appeal and expansion of this institution should be seen as part of a recently developed moral and socio-economic "imperative to connect," which is met with a *desire* to connect, on the part of the peripheral groups and communities, so as to combat social exclusion, and to claim a share in structures of power. The E.U., drawing on the discourse of "active citizenship" discourse, thus demands the formation of social actors both able and willing to confirm its neo-liberal, expansionist plans. One way to reinforce the element of "willingness" is to make both adults and children, feel powerful: institutions such as twinning stress the individual's autonomy and capacity for self-realization. These activities thus need to be perceived as productive rather than constraining, and to make people engaged in such practices find pleasure in them, to amuse and entertain themselves while/in "learning" how to feel/become "Europeans."

While this "imperative to connect" could be seen as part of an "imperative to control," on the part of the E.U. itself, Papagaroufali suggested that twinning actually highlights or creates categories of Europeans that are difficult to control, because of their full exposure to "difference": through twinning, hundreds of thousands of "local" participants of all ages are asked to learn to deal officially with "cultural differences." Although some of these differences are usually contained in the "diversity" discourse and the pluralist politics of difference, others remain uncontainable, thus revealing the impossibility rather than the possibility of the European Union's post-nationalist, multiculturalist, and humanist plans. Furthermore, the very persons engaged in twinning belong to social categories usually considered "different," such as children, the elderly, women, "undecided" voters, or a town's "foreigners." And because twinning occurs in encounter with "Others", it reframes the experiences defined as "local," and provokes tension among the inhabitants of the towns to be twinned; hence internal ethnic, political and other "differences" are forcefully brought to the forefront.

Papagaroufali spent the latter half of her presentation discussing specific Greek twinning enterprises, and particularly the Greek municipalities' preference for twinning with cities and towns that were once part of Magna Graecia, ancient Greek colonies in Sicily and southern Italy, where the indigenous populations still speak a hybrid Greek-Italian dialect, "Graecanica." Unlike the cases recorded by postcolonial studies, where the repressed periphery returns to the metropolis in order to reread and subvert its history and fiction, in this case it could be suggested that it is the (repressed) metropolis that returns to the periphery in order to reread, interrogate, even subvert *its* history and fiction. Papagaroufali presented two case studies—the twinning of an Athenian suburb with a poor Greco-phone town in Southern Italy, and the e-partnership of an Athenian high school with a school in a Greco-phone Italian town—to explore such questions as: How do Greeks re-read their inter-national history through trans-national encounters, such as twinning, that take place both within the margins of their nation-space and with nations-peoples considered "almost the same"? and, What kind of feelings are generated by returning to one's ex-colonies in the context of a postcolonial era, or of a neo-colonial globalization, and how are they performed and negotiated vis-à-vis the Other?

Discussion:

Q: It seems like the goal of twinning is to develop a stronger European identity, a stronger European Union that might be a prerequisite for international EU confederation. But does twinning strengthen or weaken the nation states themselves?

A: I think that this is the central question, and very interesting, but it isn't really a question of either or. answered by the either/or. Twinning is a large-scale and expansive institution, and it causes a lot of tension within each community, each town, because within the community there are people who are in favor or against, and nationalist feelings do come to the fore. But it does seem to be a very clever mechanism on the part of the EU because it has spread to so many communities all over Europe. It seems to me that people are getting used to these exchanges. And it is definitely a long-term mechanism.

Q: But is it really a mechanism? Is there some centralization on the part of the EU in terms of catalyzing this idea?

A: Yes, there is centralization; there is an official, concerted effort on the part of the European Commission to support these efforts at twinning. You do have a coordinating unit in the Commission, with appointments made by political authorities.

Q: Listening to the discussion about Greater Greece, Magna Graecia, I thought of the "megali idea." Does that play in in any way? What is the importance of the fact that Greece has chosen to twin with regions that used to be a part of Greater Greece?

A: Well, it's not exactly the Great Idea, not really the same. The Great Idea was really more oriented toward the future, the actual domination of certain lands. Whereas this twinning is much more oriented toward the past.

Q: Are there substantively different kind of twinnings? You mentioned city to city, and twinnings between schools, and between business councils; are these coordinated as well? I'm trying to understand the various agendas that might be operating here.

A: Yes, there is a general coordination, but at the same time municipalities are left free to decide for themselves what kind of twinnings they will be engaging in—economic or otherwise, with whom, and so on. Politically speaking this apparent freedom is very interesting. I don't think the European Commission knows exactly what's going on, where this phenomenon is leading. I would say it's an experiment.

Q: But isn't the problem here that there isn't any model of European identity, and that's what allows Greece or Spain to push for these projects of neocolonialism? There's an understanding of national sovereignty in certain places of Europe, particularly the smaller states, that doesn't contribute to the formation of a European identity.

A: Are you asking if this is the problem? It must be, I suppose, though I don't think that the European Union has a very clear idea on this. I think we could call it a new form of governmentality—but this doesn't say anything about what the outcome will be of all these twinnings, and of other similar institutions.

Q: I'm interested in the limits of the imagination of the Magna Graecia. Are cities in Egypt, for instance, considered possible sites for twinning? Or other sites outside the EU?

A: I would say that they would imagine Alexandria, for instance, much more Greek even than the cities in Southern Italy, because there has been such a strong history of Greek presence in Alexandria. And as I mentioned, there have been twinnings outside of the EU, but I'm not in a position to know about all of those twinnings, since there is no formal list available to me.

Q: Do these people who go back to these places in Magna Graecia consider themselves to be colonialists in the old sense?

Q: There was an example a few years ago, of a municipality in Kalamaria that forged links with a part of Pakistan or Afghanistan populated by the Kalash people, and that was covered in the press and pushed quite a bit; some forms of exchange were even funded by the government, I believe.

Q: I also remember that during the junta, the first examples of brothering or sistering were happening with places in the then eastern block, with communities of political refugees; students from those places would come and spend some time in Athenian homes, and the idea was to show to these children of political refugees that there could be a different way of accessing Greece rather than the trauma of the civil war.

A: I haven't looked at those types of twinning; there are so many categories of this phenomenon, and in order to get the proper information I would need to go to those places and do research. But I am trying to get a more general idea of the range of these endeavors, in time and place as well as in type.

Q: If I might give an example, I had this discussion with someone involved in the municipality of Naxos over the summer. They have a twinning with the Giardini Naxos in Sicily. Certainly the first impulse is to create an association by name and history, but the other factors that went into the decision showed that the idea of regionalism creates itself by fulfilling a number of other factors as well. One was that Giardini Naxos was relatively close by, so that if the kids went with a school exchange it would be "safe" because it was close. Secondly, it was on an island, so there were enough links with tourism that something could be learned. Also, while the municipal bureaucrats certainly wanted to get ideas about how to further the economy and so on, they also wanted to use that as an excuse for taking a vacation altogether to an island, for which without that excuse they would undoubtedly be criticized by the community. So there are a whole set of factors that went into the decision. A second point, about the Ministry of Education and why it doesn't offer classes in Greek in the areas of Italy where Graecanica is spoken. It does consider this important in the Balkans, for instance, so there is some kind of understanding of the role of Hellenism as a cultural superiority in the Balkans, but it's much more alive there than anywhere else. Maybe they understand that it won't really serve them in Italy at all.

Q: Wasn't the policy of the Ministry of Education to place Greek language teachers in regions where there were Greek migrants—in Scandinavia and so on—so as to encourage language learning among first or second generation Greeks? I think that's certainly true for places like Georgia, the former Soviet states.

Q: But that's the Foundation for Hellenic Culture. The idea behind the Ministry sending teachers was that these migrant workers were seen as potentially coming back to Greece, so their children had to learn Greek.

Q: But there is this other move, to teach the Greek language in the Balkans; and there's a very different rationale at work here, an economic rationale, of Greece pushing out economically into the surrounding region.

Q: Even now in the US, if a community wants to teach its children Greek, they can request from Ministry of Education from Greece to send a teacher, and the Ministry is required to send the teacher, who will be paid half by the ministry, half by the community.

Q: And what constitutes a community?

Q: It's all managed through the church, of course; that's how it's constituted in the States. But the official policy is that if there is a request, it has to be filled.

A: And I assume that, speaking more generally, the EU is trying to achieve something like here in the US, where each state has its own ideology, a "nationalist" ideology, but at the same time they have this feeling of a general American identity, right?

Q: What are other processes that are funded by the EU that are aimed at creating this new European identity?

A: Well, first of all, the kinds of exchanges I discussed in my paper.

Q: Though it also seems like the main thing that is produced is a feeling of mobility: they fund the travels and the meetings, without being particularly interested in the results of the collaboration, or what actually happens at the meetings.

A: Yes, I find this very interesting. In the academic or research arena, there's a great deal of control over projects that are being funded, but when it comes to exchanges of this type, no one is really monitoring the outcomes. But speaking of mobility, I wanted to add that with these exchanges you have a lot of personal changes, too—people who have never flown before, women who have never left their communities.

Q: It really is interesting from a macro point of view: you have the manufacturing of a politically plural society, which attempts to use a model of a more homogenous thing in terms of identity. So you end up with counter forces; you end up as a Greek European or an Italian European but not really European, in terms of identity; you enter the public domain not as a European, but as a regionalized European. So there's no universal incorporation of the individual, and that becomes very interesting structurally.

Q: It also seems to me important that you go to Brussels and see what's going on on the level of bureaucratic control. I spent some time in a nondescript suburb of Athens that's twinned with five cities in Europe; they have obviously been dipping into this fund for a long time. There's a kind of slush fund of sorts that's raising these issues of mobility and exchange, which is how you address these things when you don't know quite what to do with them.

Q: But he interesting thing here is power being given to people who usually don't have power, housewives and school children, so this is a part of the European identity that the Greek people have taken up: people who aren't so empowered in the civil life are for the first time appearing as a real force here.