

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

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Speaker: Dimitris Vardoulakis (University of Western Sydney, Australia)

Topic: "The Greek Utopia: Aris Alexandrou's *The Mission Box*"

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

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Attendees: Christos Tsiamis, Stathis Gourgouris, Neni Panourgia, Karen Van Dyck, Eric Poulos, Yiorgos Kalogeras

Summary of Presentation:

Vardoulakis divided his presentation into several sections, entitled "Interruptions," "Autarchic Utopia" and "Anarchic Utopia."

In "Interruptions," Vardoulakis drew on Dimitris Raftopoulos's monograph on *The Mission Box* to say that there an interruption structures the "geometry of the narrative" in Alexandrou's novel. In the first half, the anonymous narrator—a soldier in the communist forces during the Greek civil war—describes in a logical, chronological manner how he was given the mission of carrying a "mission box" to a town, arrived to find the box empty, and was incarcerated; the narration is written in the form of a series of reports to "Comrade Interrogator." In the middle of the book, a report introduced a rupture of distrust, a suggestion that there might not actually be anyone reading the reports; the narrative falls out of logical and chronological order and becomes more digressive, following a stream of consciousness. It also exhibits a discursive interruption: the rationally organized narrative of the first part is written in a kind of officialese, reminiscent of the language of the Party; in the second part, Vardoulakis said, the narrator's disillusionment and doubt continuously subvert this rational narrative. Taken together, these two kinds of interruption enact what Vardoulakis calls "a critique of a utopian vision based on teleology."

Vardoulakis explored two types of utopia, the "autarchic" or totalitarian utopia that characterizes the structure of the Communist Party during the Civil War—a dystopia that shows the impossibility of simply negating teleology, and is present in the play *Silence* referred to in the novel, written by the narrator's friend Alekos, a thinly disguised self-portrait of Alexandrou. There is also Alexandrou's own "anarchic utopia," whose chief characteristic is the opposition to any form of oppression; it is anarchic not because it negates the law, but because it denies the hold of law and regulation over time, undoing linear temporality and thus teleology.

In "Autarchic Utopia," Vardoulakis discussed the play *Silence* that the narrator refers to; written by his friend Alekos, it describes an Orwellian scenario where a state eavesdrops on the conversations of its citizens, who react by communicating verbally only about the most mundane things, and using a code of silent gestures for meaningful matters. The narrator criticizes the play for not "calling a spade a spade" (or "calling things by their proper name," in Greek), and for not envisioning the success of the revolution. The play

stages a confrontation between a project of liberation and the argument that freedom can only take place as a theatrical enactment—a conflict between a utopian belief and the refusal to speak explicitly about the future. Both of these positions, however, share a belief in the decision-making power of the subject, of the citizens in *Silence*, the writing subject of Alekos, and the audience itself, who are here mouthpieces of the Party. And yet the determinative role of the third power—here, the Communist Party—presents the impossibility of simply negating teleology; neither Christophoros and the narrator’s utopian teleology nor the dystopian vision in *Silence* can contain that third power. This mirrors the structure of the novel as a whole, in which the silence of the Interrogator necessitates a third power which owns the utopian vision and guarantees the teleological structure which is the final destination of power. And yet through its presentation of anarchic utopia, *To kivotio* also erodes the myth of decisionism, in which the decision maker is divested of any impact that is not controlled by a third party.

In “Anarchic Utopia,” Vardoulakis refers to the debate about Oedipus that is threaded through the novel, which allows for a mediation on chance and the involuntary by linking them to temporality. Teleology and utopia are still present, but rather than encountering a dialectical negation, they are confronted with the figure of suicide, which subverts utopia’s teleological thrust. Vardoulakis spoke of the importance of time and watches to the novel, and to the fact that wounded soldiers slowing down the mission are required to commit suicide by swallowing cyanide. The watch is linked to the cyanide capsule, and the measuring of time to death. The discussion of Oedipus comes from the memory of a conversation the narrator had with Soldier, the leader of the Communist group to which the narrator belonged. Soldier had claimed that there is no such thing as chance, but only a lack of knowledge; he speaks against fatalism and in favor of a pragmatic grasp of the future, and hence of utopia and teleology. In saying that Oedipus thus wasn’t responsible for his acts, since they had all been commanded by Apollo, however, he lets fatalism in again through the back door, and transfers it from the individual to the divine realm. Unlike Alekos’s *Silence*, in which a dystopian vision necessitated a decision on the part of the subject in the historical unfolding, here the cosmic harmony dialectically determines in advance the decision of the actor who can never be in full possession of knowledge. History, the knowledge of time and the creation of the future, is in the hands of gods, and utopia is deified.

In listening to this, the narrator’s watch had slowed down, and he subsequently arrived at an arsenal just in time to see it blow up; had his watch not been slow, he would have been killed. On seeing this, he thinks again of Soldier’s talk of Oedipus, and notes that Oedipus, had he not wanted Apollo’s command to come true, he could have committed suicide. The narrator thus counteracts Soldier’s utopian vision. Predetermined events are made possible by the passing of time, by the ticking of the seconds, which ineluctably leads to a stasis outside time. The historical actor can decide, the narrator claims, to prevent this. But this objective power can only be exercised in the form of suicide. Suicide is the telos of teleological time. The narration ends with an invitation to his captors to purge him, to execute him in front of the “steel double-doors,” moving from personal suicide to sacrifice for the larger purpose of a Communist victory. The invitation to his captor to execute him at the “steel double-door” appropriates the logic of autarchic

utopia. And yet the question mark, the final character of the novel, simultaneously *dis-*appropriates that utopian logic. The narrator fully embraces the logic of objective rationality and a teleological understanding of history, putting his own life on the line in order to accomplish its fulfillment. But this fulfillment is not present in the form of a stasis of time as the autarchic utopian vision demands, but rather as a suspended question.

Vardoulakis ended with a brief discussion of the “prison-cell effect,” in which the potential inscribed within confinement to interrupt both the totalitarian impulse as well as the illusion of a stasis of liberation. Thus a new sense of freedom is enacted – the anarchic freedom to work outside, towards interrupting autarchic utopia.

Summary of Discussion:

Q: I had read the book fifteen years ago, and I reread it for tonight. It’s just a great novel, and I’m not sure why it hasn’t been more widely read. Having just read Faulkner last summer makes me appreciate it even more. My question is, I see things differently when you speak about the second part of the novel and the disillusionment it displays. With other books about disillusionment of people involved in the Stalinist movement, it’s usually a different type, someone very idealistic imprisoned for reason they don’t know, and the imprisonment grinds them down, but here in the imprisonment he finds his own voice. So when you talk about disillusionment in the 2nd part, I find quite the opposite: he’s standing up against the interrogator, he says, You could be a government agent but I don’t care—and then he goes on and brings in all of his memories. He knows that nothing will help him, so why not stand up? I also do wonder why it hasn’t been compared to those other novels or memoirs that deal with Stalinism. It’s all kind of like Kafka’s *Trial*, the emptiness of the promise of communism, it’s an empty box.

A: As far as I know there’s been very little work done on *To kivotio*, even in Greece, remarkably little. When I read Neni’s book, which is about the left in Greece, you conclude the book with Oedipus, but there’s no reference to Alexandrou, even though there’s this incredible discourse on Oedipus in Alexandrou’s novel. I asked you why, and you said for people on the left in Greece it’s really traumatic novel, I don’t know why people don’t write about it, but perhaps that’s one reason. To answer your point, I don’t think he finds his voice at the end, when he says, Kill me, Kill me, he’s essentially saying, Take away my voice. The imperative to find your voice is the first part of the narrative—the imperative to talk about events, giving the facts of the mission. He tries and he fails, again and again. And then the second part starts, and I see it as a meditation not so much on how he finds this voice, but on the danger of attempting to find your voice, the erasure of this ideal of finding one’s voice. In the second part he completely appropriates the clichés and narratives of the autarchic elements that are described in the first part, but by using Proustian and Kafkaesque techniques, without directly negating them. This leads to an absurdism in this logic of sacrifice. He says, I can’t find my voice, the logic that tells me to put my individuality here on display in front of you—ultimately that logic leads him to the double steel door with the firing squad. But at the same time, by the very fact that he appropriates this logic to show that endpoint, which is death, the claim “kill me” presents the *ad absurdum* of this logic.

Q: But it's not a command, "kill me," it's a question. The kill me with a question mark is really a performative, playing, taunting, and of course not taunting the interrogator because at that point it doesn't matter. This novel runs for some 30 pages in a single sentence with no punctuation marks until the last question mark. We can say it's an appropriation of modernist technique, but at that point the interrogator is gone and he's taunting the void. I think there is something there about finding his voice, even if you have to subject that to some kind of deconstruction. There's a certain void in the very condition of the law, that authorizes the entire enterprise in relation to history. This book exists outside of history from the beginning, it starts on the day after the communist army has been defeated. It thus begins at the point where this is no longer at play, it's already outside of history, already operating in a void, and it says that the Stalinist or communist understanding of history doesn't allow the void, this understanding of history is predicated on the void, the breakdown of the Enlightenment idea of law, *arhi*, which is also the idea of time. *Arhi* as in law, *arhi* as in beginning, a chronological, timebound beginning.

Q: Obviously it's a fantastic novel for a Lacanian-based interpretation: the imaginary, the symbolic, time, the idea of history, the law, the symbolic order, and then the real. And it is a novel about the real, which is void, and the question is, where is the subjective voice inside this void, this idea of nullifying, the objective that can never be in the hands of a subject. That would be the Lacanian real. It's a grand novel in terms of those issues.

Q: But there's a nagging historical premise here that we might need to take into account: the time between September 29 and June 1958 when we have the *oplo para poda*, the only void the party has allowed for itself. This is why it's important that you're talking about autarchic and anarchic utopia, this is where the party finds itself at that moment. The war has perhaps ended, though it doesn't really until the legislature decides that in 1963, so the only thing that has happen in those few months is that there are no battles taking place. Yes, the party doesn't allow for the void, anything that is not objective reality, but on the other hand it does find itself in that void where nothing really happens. I'm not really sure if that void operates the way our first impulse would lead us to want it to work.

A: Can I say a few things about the void? I agree with you, I would see the void in terms of temporality, the notion of a void in terms of a linear temporality that leads to a teleology. The void is different in these two logics. Ultimately the argument of paper is that the void in the linear temporality, the history of the events as they really occurred, the stages of the struggle, the void is the void of death, of suicide—that's the void that the Communist Party faced. Maybe that's a reason why *To kivotio* wasn't really taken up so much, because it's actually a critique of the Communist Party.

Q: A devastating one. But I have to insist on one issue: you can't avoid the fact that the void is the box. It's a spatial issue, *topos* as much as *chronos*, I agree with your analysis of the temporal aspect of it, the novel is obsessed with that. But there's also the box, which is empty, and the mission is passing the void on. Even Raftopoulos's schema of the two utopias that you use is a very interesting one: a no-place of plenitude would be

autarchia, a wholeness that has no place, a utopia, self-sufficiency, plenitude. Anarchic utopia is of course the negation, because there is no *arhi*—not only no law but no beginning. It's a utopia that does not exist in time, there's no *arhi* and therefore it also can't have a *telos*, because it hasn't even begun. So there's also this topoanalysis, and of course because you're talking about utopia that does come in.

A: And of course it becomes the coffin, too: he says, Kill me and put me in the box. The box is the coffin, the *topos*, the place that memorializes the logic of suicide. He's carrying his own coffin. So the Faulkner metaphor is very apt.

Q: It's also giving the whole thing meaning. Everyone was killed except for him, the only meaning he has is as a martyr, that gesture of, Put me in the box. Communism had no meaning, this mission was doomed, he was the only one who survived. It makes me think of the Black Panthers, and revolutionary suicide.

Q: I think there's a very subjective traumatic position to try to give an answer to why this novel is not known. It's a traumatic position for many Greeks, a historical situation that was never resolved, the war continued past '63, '74, '92.

Q: Tsoukalas said last week that the reason why *To kivotio* is not being read is because we always know it's end: we know that the box is empty from the beginning. But who is this we? It's not the Communist Party, it's everybody else. The Party does not know from the beginning that the box is empty, though the entire left knows this.

Q: When was the book published?

A: 1974.

Q: So we should probably also look at the publication date and the existing critical environment in Greece, and the political environment. Alexandrou was living in Paris, on the outside, and he was also outside the Party at that point. There were certain books from outside that were supported and others that weren't, Hatzis was embraced, Alexandrou shunned.

Q: The book is a bestseller in Greek literature, it has incredible sales. Maronites writes about it very early, and recognizes this book as a formidable contribution. It's a very canonical response, Maronites is at this point the pope of Greek criticism. Then there are a couple of pieces, an article by Rhea Galanake which is also canonical in the way she interpolates the novel, Tzina Politis, Lizy Tsirimokou. And then it stops. From 1980 onward it's rendered irrelevant. But there's a kind of weird temporality, the traumatic element has a radiation effect as the intensive politicization of the postwar period subsides this trauma until it works on an even deeper level. There's not much criticism anymore, but it's still being bought, still being read, very much so.

Q: This book is very spooky. On the discursive level you have this phantasmatic element, everyone he talks about we suspect is dead, he's the only one who is alive. Even the woman he's married to is described as having only one arm, like a statue.

Q: He was a poet primarily, he only writes one novel, like Pasternak.

Q: And Alexandrou is Russian, his mother tongue is Russian, his mother Estonian.

A: You're correct that there are a lot of responses in the press when the book appears, but there's no book on it, no monograph, except the Raftopoulos, which isn't really literary criticism. It is clearly a book that provokes passion among Greeks, but this inability to speak about it is very interesting.

Q: I would like to ask what is the relationship, if you're making a homological argument, between suicide and sacrifice?

A: I've been working on sovereignty, and there is the well-known structure of the logic of sacrifice. The basic idea is very simple, and informed by Christian theology. It's an understanding of how the sovereign is sustained as a concept, as the "most high," sustained as a concept by those it excludes, those that are placed on the outside and ultimately sacrificed. The martyr, the sacrificial victim, and the persons in power are in this mutual relationship of support: the oppressed and the oppressors are mutually supportive. That's the logic of sacrifice. From that point of view I just took the references to suicide here and called on the very well-described logic of sacrifice to call it here the logic of suicide. If you want to read this paper in terms of the discourse on sovereignty, Alexandrou, by putting forward this notion of anarchic utopia, if you see the end as a form of martyrdom, it does nothing but support the logic of sacrifice—but if you see this as a form of irony, it deconstructs that logic.

Q: But can you really equate sacrifice and suicide?

A: Well, I was definitely thinking of this logic of sacrifice when I was talking about the logic of suicide here. Of course it has many other elements that we don't find here, a very long history, but I do think that the references to suicide in *To kivotio* are informed by this logic of sacrifice as it is constitutive of a notion of sovereignty in the western tradition. When I was referring to autarchic utopia, there was in my mind a reference to the logic of sacrifice.

Q: But suicide is different, and you need to consider the verb "cyanided" as well. These people were "suicided,"—it's a verb here.

A: One characteristic of the logic of sacrifice if we think of sovereignty—well, it changes in the 18th century, but before that the sovereign himself says, These people are excluded because I can kill them. With the rise of popular sovereignty, Rousseau, and so on, the logic of sacrifice is inflected like this: Everybody is a part of the general will, and for the protection of the general will as the representation of sovereignty in the state, everybody

has to stake their lives. The lives of everyone who participates in the general will belong to the state. When another state, another general will, attacks the state, our lives are open to sacrifice. From the 18th century onward, the logic of killing yourself for the state—or even for the creation of a state that doesn't yet exist, a utopia--this logic is given a new twist, as self-sacrifice.

Q: But you've added one more element here, the element of killing. This is a problem that we see in Foucault when he talks about the sovereign and those the sovereign lets die and those he decides will live: "to make life and let die," which is very important to keep in mind. Foucault doesn't talk about killing, but letting die, which is a very diff thing from killing. My question is, what does it do for you to conflate suicide, sacrifice and killing on one line, when sacrifice has a very specific genealogy that can or cannot or does not have to be brought all the way back to the ancients, but is not an unproblematic genealogy, and when suicide has the dialectically opposite genealogy of sacrifice. What does sacrifice give you? Alexandrou doesn't talk about sacrifice, so what does the notion of sacrifice give you in your attempt to tread *To kivotio* obliquely? Why is it sacrifice and not killing?

A: First of all, I think I extemporized when I said sacrifice, I never use it in the paper, though I could have. When Foucault talks about "to take life and let die," in "Society Must be Defended," he says there's this new paradigm that moves from the right of life and death to the paradigm of make life and let die. In the next section of the lecture he talks about racism, the logic of racism is the logic of killing and of a generalized civil war. The paradigm for that is the Nazi state, and I would say he describes that as a logic of sacrifice, that the notion of biopolitics for Foucault is not the "make life and let die" which everybody takes up, but that the main feature of biopolitics is the way that old forms of sovereignty are resurrected or reinscribed, how logics of violence such as self-sacrifice are very strong, very operative, and at the same time disguised within biopolitics.

Q: I think Foucault is wrong when he says that biopolitics is based on "make live and let die." The second part is wrong, part of biopolitics is to kill, not to let die.

Q: We have to talk about that killing. You've talked about Rousseau, but at the same time you also have St. Simone, the sacrifice of the revolution, all the way through to 19th century, Benjamin on the violence of god. But this is important, because we have two different ideas of applying violence. One is embracing the state and the other is revolutionary terror. And I think this is an important thing to apply to your talk. Where does the author stand between these two types of violence that can be read as sacrifice and suicide?

A: On this point, at least, I think Karl Schmidt has given the right answer. The theory of the partisan is that so long as you have a notion of revolution, and you have the partisan who aspires to establish a new sovereignty, exactly the same notion of sovereignty applies to the revolutionary as applies to the sovereign. With Benjamin we move to a different logic which is not a logic of sacrifice. It is a logic of interruption. All the

references to interruption I have are a conversation with Benjamin happening in this paper. Even the notion of a nonlinear temporality that is ruptured—that's me almost plagiarizing Benjamin.

Q: But how can you separate messianism from sacrifice? Any messianism engages with the notion of sacrifice.

A: Not Walter Benjamin's messianism.

Q: I think some of this discussion is ahistorical, and we should restore the historical element. First of all, the narrator is told that this mission will win the war, so of course he'll do anything, but it's also a comment on the KKE, and on Stalinism. There was one chapter when I started underlining the word secret, or conceal. When you don't know what you're doing it's the ultimate sacrifice. And this is after the war has been lost. You're carrying this empty box and all your comrades are being killed. I think this is the ultimate sacrifice.

A: "The purges are good for the party." There's a very clear critique of that logic, and of the desert islands, which is what Alexandrou rebelled against—and that's why he was excluded by the inmates in the desert islands. The problem with how to contextualize the novel is that it does take place after the apocalypse, in a sense, after the end of time. The war has been lost, the letters he writes possibly do not go to anyone, so who is he addressing? There are no names, and if you trace the narratives there are huge discrepancies between them. The space he describes is hard to contextualize, and though Raftopoulos has gone to some effort to do that, it's but mostly in terms of what took place in Athens, the purges in Athens, which are a very small part of the narrative. I don't actually know how to put the narrative in historical terms, and in that sense the reference to Kafka's *Trial* is apt—it's almost like a kind of merging of a Proustian type of narrative with the Kafkaesque idea of imprisonment, and the Kafkaesque element is this decontextualization. But keep in mind that Adorno tells us this decontextualization make the Kafkaesque narrative more historical than an actual historical narrative: it shows the logic of history. Something very similar is happening in the *Kivotio* I would say, the negative dialectic of that historical moment—precisely because it's mythical rather than historic.

Q: Can the poetry help us at all in this? There are certainly resonances in terms of anti-teleology, annihilation of the subject, that would obviously refer to a lot of the themes in his poetry. But there's also someone like Michalis Katsaros, who writes in an anarchic way, who plots a destruction of the speaking subject—the whole discourse of resistance written in the beginning of the '50s against the party is dismantling all that, so that there is a kind of suicidal aspect to it, so much antithesis: resist those to tell you to resist, including me.

Q: There is a poem by Alexandrou about Mayakofsky's suicide. I think we should also think about this novel as an epistolary novel. These depositions are like letters with no

addressee—and there's the confluence of *apostoli* and *epistoli*, both of them to nothing. It's like mission and missive, actually, it works in English, too.

A: I haven't read his poetry in a long time, but the way I remember the poems, I wasn't that impressed. I thought they were too reliant, you could hear Ritsos. He was too constrained by other voices. I may be wrong, but I found them slightly derivative, while *To Kivotio* is just light years beyond. And you see Ritsos's response, when he read the manuscript, he was full of praise for it. They'd had a falling out, a major one, in fact Ritsos was instrumental in having Alexandrou excluded within the camps. And then he sends him the manuscript of *To Kivotio*, after he's broken with Ritsos and the other left-wing poets, and Ritsos has an amazing response. But you can hear their voices in the poetry even though he's trying to write against them.