

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

March 23, 2005

Speaker: Neni Panourgia, Columbia University

Topic: Desert Island

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

Rapporteur: Karen Emmerich, Columbia University

Attendees: Ioannou Laliotou (visiting scholar, Columbia), Stathis Gourgouris (UCLA),

Liana Theodoratou (NYU), Artemis Leontis (University of Michigan), Catherine

Yatrakis (Columbia), Elena Tzelepi (Columbia)

Summary of Presentation:

Panourgia began by drawing a diagram on the board:

Oedipus		modern Greek history
Freud	Anthropology	dangerous person
anti-Freud		DNA politics
anti-Oedipus		miasma

Because all of the attendees had had the opportunity to read her text before the seminar meeting, Panourgia did not present the text but rather used the material in it as a jumping off point for a discussion of her project more generally.

Freud, Panourgia explained, has colonized readings of Oedipus, though there is now a psychoanalytic strain which is anti-Freudian but keeps Oedipus, as well as an anti-Oedipal strain. Anthropology, which is concerned among other things with the study of myth, has taken up Oedipus through (but also against) Freud (Malinowski). Panourgia is trying to complicate or even refute the Freudian reading of the Oedipus myth by asking questions concerning the status of Oedipus as dangerous person or miasma, and concerning what she calls “DNA politics.”

In the Oedipal text, miasma is something which can be embodied in a person; a person can become miasmatic. When we come to modern Greek history, we see that the notion of miasma arises in conjunction with the category of dangerous person, a person who puts the polis in danger. In the Oedipus myth, there is a long line of this curse that predates Oedipus himself, ending only with the complete annihilation of his line. In 1929, for the first time, the term “miasma” is used to refer to the left. In 1936, with the establishment of the Metaxas dictatorship, this “DNA politics” is activated: the miasmatic person belongs to a family, which can become miasmatic as well; offspring of a dangerous person become dangerous, too. In the accounts of people who were exiled and imprisoned from the 1930s onwards, up to the present day, with the trials of those who

participated in Nov 17, we see a specific, clear employment of an understanding of this lineage of miasmatic politics.

What happens to political descriptions, when the citizen is conceptualized as dangerous and thus dispelled from the body politic and contained in a space of exclusion? How do certain biomedical metaphors pervade this discourse of the dangerous and suspicious person? What are the parameters that make a state categorize part of its citizens as dangerous, and what are the long-term implications of the way this society comes to understand itself as a political and cultural entity? The effects of civil war last a long time, and this is what makes Greece important: the civil war ended in 1949 but its effects are still felt and talked about. We see in this period the roots of a deep mistrust of the political sphere in Greece, which manifests itself as an anthropological problem. The camps in Greece, from 1936 to the closing of Makronisos in 1958, were rehabilitation camps that happened to become extermination camps by default, and thus had very different biomedical projects than the concentration camps in Nazi Germany.

These issues are still alive today, particularly with the recent surge in interest in the issue of terrorism. November 17 was the longest existing, non-infiltrated terrorist organization in Europe. Its dismantling has opened discussion on many controversial questions: the relationship of November 17 to the traditional left, the relationship of the traditional left to armed struggle, November 17's use of the historical past of the Greek left, and its move into violent political action. The watershed event that organized the experience of twentieth-century history in Greece was WWII and the civil war, both of which have informed the ways in which we organize our lives. With the downfall of junta, when everyone in Greece expected a catharsis, it became apparent that this was not possible, that people were unwilling. Thus November 17 appeared on the scene, with the aim of doling out justice when justice had not been done, of punishing collaborators (with both the junta and the Nazis before), and of acting as a public conscience.

The Cold War was announced through the occasion of Greece and the Truman doctrine, which fostered the emergence of urban guerilla groups. These people soon fell into the category of "dangerous persons," which in 1936 was expanded to "dangerous and suspicious persons." They were depicted as the carriers of infectious diseases, so that not only were these individuals (declared members of the left) dangerous and suspicious, but so were their kin, or even those suspected of being on the left. These populations were controlled through the institution of rehabilitation camps, which had been constructed in 1914 (in the case of Makronisos) to house cholera-infected Turkish prisoners. They were re-opened in 1936-1958 to house dissidents or suspected dissidents, and then again in 1968-74. The metaphorical discourse that arises around these camps and these people has a strong medical element: political dissidence is a social disease, and there is a need for the intervention of non-infected political figure. This metaphor, even used by Simitis, demands that citizens will entrust themselves to the state as they would to a physician.

The Oedipus myth also keeps arising in this context. Why is Oedipus so appealing that new references keep appearing? What are the key issues being negotiated in this text that make it relevant to us? The myth of Oedipus has provided critical theory and

anthropology with different vocabularies and idioms, concerning issues of kinship, friendship, the monstrous, the human, understandings of the divine, who is a mother, who is a father, who is a sibling, who is a foreign, who is a stranger, who is a native, and so on. These issues help us raise certain questions about the status of the dissident in modern Greek history. How is the leftist both a member and not a member of the social body? How can the state think of itself as a social body when large portions of it have been expunged? The fundamental Oedipus question is how we know who the self is, who the other is, and how we negotiate the difference between the two.

Discussion:

Q: Can you plot the four parts of the book for us?

Panourgia: [writes on board]

Part 1: Oedipus

Section 1: Freud's Remnants

Section 2: The Fateful Triangle: Oedipus and the "Germans" at the Crossroads

Part 2: Anthropolos

Section 1: Desert Islands: Ransom of Humanity

Section 2: Left to Left

Q: Why do you think the *Oedipus at Colonus* has not been part of the story, and what do you think you might do with it? It's the story about the creation of a hero cult, an Athenian patriotic play, written by Sophocles, a member of the oligarchy, at the end of his life. In it, Oedipus revises his story. Ultimately, it's about taking the ultimate outsider and making him the ultimate insider. There is also the irony of Colonus in Athens now being a neighborhood of outsiders, immigrants.

Panourgia: The interesting part about the existence of these two Oedipuses is this: the first one that was ever staged in Greece was *Colonus*, not *Tyrannus*. The first play that was staged on Makronisos after the junta was *Tyrannus*, not *Colonus*. My reading is that *Colonus* is the play that has been appropriated by the state, *Tyrannus* the one that has operated in the upstaging of state narrative: it is the narrative of the dispossessed.

Q: I think there are different ways of reading it, though. If you're talking about what happens to the left, the way that miasma can also become hero, there is both the sense of appropriation but the sense that the miasma ultimately becomes a boon to whoever it is who takes the person in.

Q: I find this very interesting, it could be a way of reading Oedipus the way Freud reads Moses in *Moses and Monotheism*, a deflective, subversive reading that the nation is based on a stranger, an outsider.

Panourgia: Also to clarify, with regard to why I use *Tyrannus* rather than *Colonus*, I am basing that use on how the people I'm writing about conceive of Oedipus. My reading is guided by my material. It is also guided by the way anthropology itself deals with the Oedipus myth, which is entirely based on *Tyrannus*.

Q: Yes, but then I guess I'm wondering why anthropology has not concerned itself at all with *Colonus*.

Panourgia: Because anthropology concerns itself with Freud, who concerns himself with *Tyrannus*.

Q: Again, I see, but I'm suggesting that perhaps you could consider moving the discussion in another direction, challenging this fixation on one version, one portion of the story, by considering *Colonus* as well.

Q: And there are other things going on in *Tyrannus*, too: how much the other is he, after all, if he's the king?

Panourgia: That's precisely the thing about Oedipus in *Tyrannus*, he upsets all of the categories. Is he an insider? Well, he is and he isn't. But regarding the possibility of pushing my research in the direction of *Colonus*, don't you think that would complicate my text even more?

Q: Yes, but that's your job to manage.

Panourgia: The most complete discussion we have of Oedipus in anthropology is Levi-Strauss, and that's a page and a half. He doesn't even deal with the text itself, he gets his information from various places and produces a conglomerate of the myth. In my text I present almost exhaustive versions of the myth itself, from the first mentions of it in Homer all the way up to Judith Butler. All these have become versions of the myth. Levi-Strauss he assumes that the myth behind the play the Athenians are watching is one well-known to them; he also assumes that the text of the play is coterminous with the myth, which is not necessarily the case. This page and a half is the most comprehensive treatment of the myth in anthropology. The setting has been set by Freud, who of course had a very specific reading of the play, and concentrates on things that did not present a problem in fifth century Athens, where the problem was not incest, but regicide.

Q: Why do anthropologists deal with the myth at all?

Panourgia: Freud published his two pages in 1914. Then we have Malinowski, who wants to show that psychoanalysis cannot deal with the human psyche cross-culturally. He says that Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex may be true for patrilineal societies, but it doesn't apply at all to his experience of matrilineal societies in the South Pacific. He writes a whole book about how Freud's work can't be used to explain matrilineal relationships. Everything after that has been trying to prove either Freud or Malinowski wrong. My thinking is, it's an incredibly rich myth, so why not go to the myth itself and

see what in it can be revisited, see what different types of dynamics can be engaged. Nobody deals with it anymore; the last serious discussion we have is in 1968. Everyone in anthropology who deals with Oedipus deals with the Oedipus complex. There are collections that look for variations of the myth from around the world, but they only ever deal with two themes: incest, and then the complicity between incest and regicide, regicide as part of an incestuous relationship.

Q: So why are you going to Oedipus?

Panourgia: I go there because my material sends me there; this is a discussion that has been raised by the people I'm writing about. But also because I think that as a myth, this one has other things to give us than incest and patricide.

Q: So it's a way of staying with the myth but expanding it.

Panourgia: I'm trying to come at it from a different point of view, to see what it is that the people who mentioned Oedipus in 1948, 1949, 1956, 2003, find in that character that allows them to index different elements of their own experience. It isn't the issue of incest or parricide. It has to do with miasma, with the fragmentation of the body. From front page titles during the trial of Nov 17, the front page of *Eleftherotypia* had a big title that said "Σφίγγα," and everyone understood what that meant. Myth operates within this social body in a way that manages to animate different historical experiences. But I've been trying to figure out, if the references to Oedipus that we have and see include both plays, or if they refer to the myth in general, and how much of that myth is being indexed. Lots of allusions to Oedipus are clearly allusions to *Oedipus Rex*—the Sphinx, the swollen feet, the eyes. So what would be indisputable indexes of *Colonus*?

Q: The question of justice. The question of unjust treatment is what's raised in *Colonus*. The revision Oedipus makes in that play is that everything has been misunderstood.

Q: But because there was never a reconciliation after the civil war, there has been no *Oedipus at Colonus* in Greece. Instead, there was a travesty: they burned the files.

Q: I am wondering what the connection is between Part 1, Section 1 and Part 2, Section 2, as you have them on the board.

Panourgia: I don't know.

Q: Because you made references to the psycho-history of the Greeks, and somehow that's what I suspect "Left to Left" is. But what does Freud not tell us about Oedipus that you're doing in "Left to Left"?

Panourgia: Freud doesn't allow us to consider what Oedipus wants to do, or does, with the polis. The question of the polis is completely absent in Freud. And yet the question of the left is precisely the question of the polis. What is the polis without its citizens? How can we expunge one tenth of the Greek population and still call this a polis? That's why

I'm very interested in the urban guerilla groups, because the historical line that they plot goes back to some deep unresolved political trauma. We look at the banner of November 17 and we know that they're looking at the civil war. The American guerilla groups also talk about the war, not only the Vietnam War but also back to the Korean War; they plot the trajectory of the cold war.

Q: Can you say more about what you called DNA politics?

Panourgia: In the beginning there was the idea that leftists were made, not born. So we can remake them, rehabilitate them. When that was proven not quite to be the case, we get the construction of a history that this is a disease, it's something that afflicts families. Just think about the fact that you must be able to produce a *pistopoiitiko politikon fronimaton* that goes back four generations.

Q: I'd like to ask about the category of dangerous individuals, because I work on a similar category in the psychiatric context in Greece. What relationship do you see between the camp and the clinical context? Is it a historical elaboration of that legal apparatus, or a metaphorical use, or are both of these contexts operating according to a third logic that has something to do with normalizing processes but also with the end of normativity?

Panourgia: On a very practical level, the legal framework that operated and governed the internment of the leftists from 1929 onwards is not the same one that governs psychiatric clinics. They were two totally different legal frameworks. I've thought about this a lot but I'm not quite sure yet where it's taking me. Agamben wants to propose the clinic as equivalent to the camp, but it's not. He does this because he needs the camp, the well-defined confines of the space. But there is a deep qualitative difference between the rehabilitation of the leftist and the management of the psychiatric patient. When the patient can't be cured, he is maintained; when the leftist can't be rehabilitated, he's killed.

Q: It's actually the moralization of the people in question that's so interesting.

Panourgia: Not to mention the example of the women at these camps, who up until 1952 were subjects of the state but not citizens, because they didn't have the right to vote. They were undergoing the whole process of rehabilitation and re-education, and yet they weren't citizens to begin with. And that's where the DNA politics comes in: their danger lies in their role as mothers or potential mothers.

Q: Of course the rehabilitation that takes place within the camps (which were referred to as educational institutions) is directed also towards the people outside.

Panourgia: One thing we need to do is straighten out what we mean by biopolitics here, too. When Foucault talks about biopolitics he talks about one thing, while Agamben talks about something different. I think it's really what Foucault tells us it is, the idea that you have a body politic that you can re-educate and rehabilitate, thus engendering a politics

that will enable a different body politic to be formed. With the extermination camp, you don't care about any of that, you just exterminate a segment of the population and you'll end up with a body politic that you can reproduce in a purified form.

Q: But that's still biopolitics.

Panourgia: No, because it doesn't engage with the body of the citizen.

Q: But one might argue that the politics of the Nazis was a kind of suicide of the German—it's a kind of destructive biopolitics, which assumes that societies have a right to commit suicide. It's certainly of a different order, but I'm not sure I'd say one is biopolitics and the other isn't, they are just two different kinds.

Q: What are the disciplinary methods used on these islands?

Panourgia: Torture.

Q: What about the building of the model Parthenon?

Panourgia: No, the ones who built that were the ones who had already signed, who had been rehabilitated. There's an interesting timeline here. February 1947 was when the first group of people was sent to Makronisos. They were sent there to be removed from the general population and be convinced to sign the declarations, though from the beginning it was understood that if they didn't they would be killed. For the first year or so very few signed, and many were killed. The main group of people sent were Communists, and one of the first buildings they were forced to build was the administrations building. They used the remains of the old Turkish buildings, and they built it simultaneous to being tortured and exhorted to sign. When more people came, and there was the first group of signers, after the massacre of 1948, they start building the monuments.