

The figure of Xeni: a politics of ideology in the Greek State

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Introducing the state

The geopolitical structure and location of Greece, has created a country with a history inseparable from mass migrational trends. Its sporadic array of islands amasses to over 18,000km of coastline at the juncture of Europe, Asia and Africa in the southeast of the Mediterranean sea. Since becoming a member state of the European Communities in 1981 it has been one of the most important European Union border states in terms of immigration control and refugee protection. Yet despite following all politico-legal developments in the Western European policy, including a harmonised asylum policy and practice across all member states, we are not only witnessing one of the most shocking European breaches to human rights law, but a new type of politics whose ideology and discourse rely on the disfigured image of the immigrant. Through a host of financial and state policy misconducts, coupled with embedded Greek ideologies of Civilisation as well as discourses of hospitality, the figure of the *xeni* (foreigner) has emerged as a positive cause for social antagonism. Those that are classified under various categories of non-state person or punitively treated as no more than living-beings are increasingly unprotected or ignored by international human rights law or trans-state political obligations. The refugee has ceased to be an individual with rights and claims and now holds a collective status, an epidemic which works to legitimise state violence, cement social-ideologies and promote its supporting discourses.

A complex network of contingent conditions can be seen to play a part in the rise of this new politics. The culturally blind expectation that a recently modernised cash-economy could be inserted into a formalised and systematic form of accounting that the Euro required, suitable only to northern European economic frameworks and mentalities, combined with the financially ludicrous enterprises such as the 2004 Olympic games, began the crisis in 2009 that saw the highest levels of debt in

modern history, amounting to 113% of GDP, almost double the Eurozone 60% limit. At a similar time Spain and Italy effectively ceased the flow of immigrants entering Europe from northern Africa via the sea, by negotiating bilateral repatriation agreements with several north African states forcing the migration flow to move eastwards into Turkey.

As such Greece has become the main entry point for immigrants into Europe, with the number of irregular boat arrivals to Spain dropping by 53.9% from 2006 to 2007 whilst irregular boat arrivals to Greece increased by 267% during this same time period¹. By 2011 *Evros River* at Greece's northern border with Turkey accounted for 80% of immigration into EU states. Although many of these refugees are transit-migrants seeking lives beyond Greece² until 2013 the *Dublin II Regulation* stated that the responsibility for examining the asylum claim of a 'third national' falls to the first EU state of entry, and so many refugees were returned and remain stuck in Greece. An Iraqi Kurd from Kirkuk explaining his position, exemplifies the difficulties this policy inflicts on refugees in Europe:

*"I got a white paper telling me I needed to leave the country in 30 days. I wanted to go to another country to seek asylum, but a friend told me that because they took my fingerprints, they would send me back to Athens. I have now been here a month without papers. Now I am in a hole. I can't go out. I can't stay. Every day I think I made a mistake to leave my country. I want to go back, but how can I? I would be killed if I go back. But they treat you like a dog here. I have nothing. No rights."*³

The Dublin system not only prevented asylum seekers from choosing a country for application, but creates an imbalance between the EU frontier states who carry the burden of processing far more asylum requests. Since June 2013 nearly all EU Member States have stopped Dublin transfers to Greece as a result of the *M.S.S. v Greece and Belgium*, yet the Greek state continues to conduct an informal immigration and refugee policy best defined as "a politics of invisibility"⁴. This is demonstrated by one of the lowest asylum recognition rates in the European Union, with a 92% rejection rate in 2013, as well as its purposefully poor reception infrastructure characterised illegal detention centres. While it is

¹ Human Rights Watch 2008 *Stuck in a Revolving Door Iraqis and Other Asylum Seekers and Migrants at the Greece/Turkey Entrance to the European Union*

² A Papadopoulou 2004 "Smuggling into Europe: Transit Migrants in Greece" *Journal of Refugee Studies* Vol. 17 No. 2

³ Human Rights Watch 2008:4

⁴ Rozakou 2012 "The biopolitics of hospitality in Greece: Humanitarianism and the management of refugees" *American Ethnologist* Volume 39 Number 3 August 2012

important to recognise that the huge influx of people is added strain to Greece's national economy, which is affecting Greek and non-Greeks living in the country, the manner in which is being dealt with is inexcusably outside basic legal requirements and humane standards of protection.

In particular the illicit use of these detention facilities is rife. The only national legal provisions which contemplate detention of asylum seekers are Articles 13(2) and (3) of Presidential Decree 114/2013 are not applicable to those returned under the Dublin Regulation. Yet an AITIMA report showed that the Greek authorities systematically issue this detention order to asylum seekers transferred to Greece under the Dublin Regulation. When asked about this detention the Police say that asylum seekers are not in detention, but under surveillance⁵. Irrespective of the mismanagement Dublin Regulation refugees, the Action Plan on Asylum and Migration Management updated in 2012 states that,

“Detention centres should not last more than 15 days but may be extended up to 25 days. Thereafter, a person will either be provided with an asylum seeker card and the appropriate support until such time as the request for international protection has been completed or preparations will be made for returning the person to their country of origin.”

Unsurprisingly perhaps the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) found in many instances that Syrian nationals had been detained, both in police and border guard stations as well as in pre-departure centres for periods of up to several months. Many were likely to be in need of international protection and could not be returned in application of the non-refoulement principle⁶ so remained in a position of being both inside and outside of the law, with no rights or claims.

The fantasy of the Xenii

Through a horror show of unofficial state practices like those mentioned above, which focus on the problem of the *xeni* (the foreigner), Greece has successfully created a reputation as an unwelcoming environment for asylum seekers at all levels of society and recast Greek citizens as victims. The success of the government and other right wing organisation such as the Golden Dawn has been to create a fantasy where the figure of the immigrant takes the form of a symptom of wider social issues⁷. Although this construction does by no means appeal to all Greek citizens, it is a growing trend that can be seen to justify unofficial immigration policy and policing.

The images of Greek refugee camps are an extreme example of this split of opinion. While it shocked many people, it is believed by some that they were released, like the publicised torture images supposedly leaked from Guantanamo Bay, not to denounce brutality but to advertise it. It demonstrated an active government, who had discovered and could now display a unified and identifiable figure responsible for a variety of condensed social antagonisms and frailties.

Yet the condensation of social problems into a identifiable figure is not sufficient to account for the way the immigrant captures desire that drives this politics. To understand its full force we must take into account the way *xeni* enters the framework of *fantasy*, in turn structuring a certain patriotic enjoyment or *jouissance*. For Slavoj Žižek *fantasy*, defined as “a scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility”⁸, is easily applied to the domain of ideology. A basic social-ideological *fantasy* is often constructed as a vision of Society without antagonism of any sort. The most popular view in the past and still employed today is of Society as an organism, where all its different parts contribute to the operating of an harmonious whole according to their function.

⁵ Asylum Information Database <http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/asylum-procedure/procedures/dublin>

⁶ 2013 “Report to the Greek Government on the visit to Greece carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 4 to 16 April 2013” available from <http://www.cpt.coe.int/documents/grc/2014-26-inf-eng.pdf>

⁷ S Žižek 1989 *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Verso

⁸ *Ibid*

As Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffé convincingly demonstrate in *Hegemony and the Socialist Strategy*, the Social is *always* an inconsistent field of antagonistic fissure structured around the constitutive impossibility that the Social can exist without such fissure⁹. The void between an ideology of a homogeneous Society and the empirical reality of heterogeneous social antagonisms is only successfully traversed when *xeni* emerges as the foreign element responsible for the corruption of the sound social fabric. In short, it is in the figure of the *xeni* that the “impossibility of ‘Society’ acquires a positive, palpable existence”¹⁰.

With Greece’s internationally acclaimed history as fathers of civilisation and a tendency for Greeks to select pastiches of various historical and mythological moments to represent themselves to each other and the outside world¹¹ the void between social-ideology and reality is made even greater. Professor Alexandra Koronaiou’s (Panteion University, Athens) demonstrates how the Golden Dawn party’s “ideological positioning stems from the stereotypical perception of the glorious history of ancient civilisation and the (supposed) unbroken historical continuity and superiority [of the Greeks] over the centuries”. The function of this ideological fantasy is to compensate for the failed identification with a Society that existed before and could exist in the future if only we could eliminate that foreign element.

As is widespread across Europe the figure to be eliminated is often a gendered, racialised and religious fantasy. The local commander of the coast guard in Lesbos, Apostolos Mikromastoras’s comments on the nature of the immigrants is tantamount to this fantasy:

“At any moment they could strike in Europe, beginning a war here. That’s dangerous, very dangerous. They are all men between 15 and 35 years of age. They are all very well trained, they swim very well! Europe has to understand that a very real danger is approaching. I

*believe we are dealing with an Islamic invasion. They are all warriors!”*¹²

The fantastical language here demonstrates how the European fantasy of the Muslim male structures the *jouissance* of its Social ideology. Far from being the positive cause for antagonism, the Muslim, male warrior is the embodiment of a certain blockage that prevents society from achieving its full homogeneous totality. In other words the fantasy of the immigrant or refugee as a disfigured embodiment of wider social inequalities, operates not just as a scapegoat, but a necessary counter-part to social antagonisms, a means by which an ideology can anticipate and include in its very existence its own failure¹³. The new politics emerging from this ideology relies on the *xeni* to be its chief antagonist so it can continue to affirm and legitimise control.

This fantasy does not only operate on individual subjectivities but penetrates deep into state policy. Facing criticism for its extremely low asylum approval rates, the Greek authorities decided in 2007 to resume hearing appeals of Iraqi cases, which had been suspended following the outbreak of the 2003 war. Yet a clear religious prioritisation of Iraqi cases during the appeals procedure meant that out of the 6,000 cases the Appeals Committee heard in 2007, it recommended granting asylum to 107 Iraqis, all of whom were Christian who had applied for asylum prior to 2003¹⁴.

In both these cases there is flagrant religious discrimination and partiality, bound by the figure of the brown, young, invading male whose presence threatens and offends. The success of this politics of ideology has created a unified figure across varying levels of state command. The refugee is no longer presented as an individual but a function to the ideology of Civilisation; it is a collective blockage that prevents the impossible, but is nonetheless required.

⁹ E Laclau & C Mouffé 1985 *Hegemony and the Socialist Strategy: towards a radical democratic politics*. Verso

¹⁰ S Žižek 1989:142

¹¹ See Stewart C. 2003 “Dreams of Treasure: temporality, historicization and the unconscious” in *Anthropological Theory* 3:481-500 (hereafter abbreviated to *DT*)

¹² Amnesty International 2007 “The truth may be bitter but it must be told: the situation in the Aegean and the practices of the Greek Coast Guard”

¹³ Žižek 1989:143

¹⁴ The asylum statistics are from Kordatos, Secretariat of Public Order, May 22, 2008. The statistics on Iraqis and Iraqi Christians, in particular, is from Human Rights Watch interview with Tsarbopoulos and Stefanaki, UNHCR-Athens, May 22, 2008.

Xenophobia-filoksenia

The historically grounded ideology of Civilisation and Society continues to penetrate state-policy and representation. The then minister of the interior and public order, Prokopis Pavlopoulos gave a speech on the island of Samos when opening the new detention centre for undocumented immigrants. This came in response to numerous accusations and reports from leading human rights trusts regarding the poor reception provided by the Greek state to asylum seekers¹⁵. His appeal to the historical continuity of Ancient Greek traditions, this time refers to *filoksenia* (hospitality):

“[This] project makes us proud of the level of hospitality that our country offers to illegal immigrants who stay here until their return to their country of origin. This high level of hospitality is indicative of the equivalent level of guarantees we ensure for the protection of Human Rights as well as for the total respect for the value and dignity of Anthropos (the human being). After all, our tradition and culture command us to do so.”

Katerina Rozakou who explores the discourse of hospitality in regards to immigrants and refugees in Greece, shows how it seems paradoxical that Pavlopoulos employs the idiom of hospitality as a traditional Greek value for the inauguration of what is clearly a detention center and not an open reception center. This is because *filoksenia* “is central to the Greek cultural and social imaginary for dealing with alterity and is at the core of how the Greek state represents itself”. It is presented as “a national virtue... rhetorically connected to the origins of Hellenism and to the discursive construction of the contemporary Greek nation-state as the direct descendant of ancient Greece.”¹⁶

The process of historical continuity characteristic of Greek subjectivity discussed above clearly informs this discourse. Indeed, in one of the first monographs of Greece, Ernestine Friedl noted that the people of Vasilika village in Boetia frequently

referred to the figure of Xenios Zefs (Zeus: the God of strangers and hospitality) when they spoke about the hospitality offered to foreigners¹⁷. Nowadays this image of Xenios Zeus still triumphs national attitudes and policies toward strangers. Between August 2012 and February 2013 the Athenian Police Force launched Operation Xenios Zeus, conducting thousands of abusive stop and searches. The police forcibly took almost 85,000 foreigners to police stations to verify their immigration status, of whom less than 6 percent were found to be in Greece unlawfully.

Eva Cossé of Human Rights Watch remarked that “Operation Xenios Zeus is anything but hospitable to migrants and asylum seekers, who are regularly stopped, searched, and detained just because of the way they look.” In its defense, Nikos Dendias, Minister of Public Order once more appeals to the discourse of historical continuity, placing the immigrant at the apex of this history and the forefront of wider contemporary social problems.

“From the Dorian invasion, 4,000 years ago, the country has never accepted such a large scale invasion... migration might be a bigger problem than the economic crisis”¹⁸.

The politics and discourse of *filoksenia* and Xenios Zeus point to the constitution of a sovereign nation-state, that supports processes of cultural homogenization which define difference as a danger. Hospitality masks a Greek ethnocentrism, in which cultural difference is perceived as a threat to ethnocultural similarity¹⁹. Through this practice hospitality symbolically places the host in a hierarchically superior position to the morally indebted and inferior position of the immigrant, who presence is subject to invitation. Jacques Derrida’s analysis, that *hospitalité (filoksenia)* and *hostilité (xenophobia)* are two tightly bound, interdependent aspects for the control and

¹⁵ Rozakou 2012

¹⁶ Ibid:564

¹⁷ Friedl, Ernestine 1962 *Vasilika: A Village in Modern Greece*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston

¹⁸ Nikos Dendias, Minister of Public Order, August 4, 2012

¹⁹ E. Papataxirchis 2006 *Isaghoi: Ta aithi tis eterotitas: Diastasis tis politismikis diaforopiisis stin Ellada tou proimou 21ou eona [Introduction. The burden of otherness: Dimensions of cultural differentiation in Greece of the early 21st century]. In Peripetias tis eterotitas: I paraghoyi tis politismikis diaforas sti simerini Elladha [Adventures of alterity: The production of cultural difference in contemporary Greece]. Evthymios Papataxirchis, ed., Pp. 1–86. Athens: Alexandria.*

management of strangers and the social-ideological fantasy they embody, seems pertinent here.

Derrida shows that the collusion between the violence of power or the force law on one side, and hospitality on the other depends “in an absolutely radical way, on hospitality being inscribed in the form of a right”²⁰. The perversion and the pervertibility of this law means that one must virtually become xenophobic in order to protect one’s claim, right and ability to be hospitable to the foreigner. In other words whenever there is a violation to the concept of the “home” on a national or domestic scale, you can foresee argues Derrida “a privatizing and even familiarist reaction, by widening the ethnocentric and nationalist, and thus xenophobic, circle: not directed against the foreigner as such, but, paradoxically, against the anonymous technological power (foreign to the language or the religion, as much as to the family and the nation), which threatens, with the “home,” the traditional conditions of hospitality.”²¹

The ideological fantasy related to the ancient virtue of hospitality that portrays the Greek city-state as welcoming to the foreigner, is thus threatened since the immigrant, who, by committing a violation to the ‘home’ in his role as the condensation of social antagonisms, prevents the exercise of the host subjects right to be hospitable. In order to protect this right to hospitality, whether private or familial, it must be exercised and guaranteed by the mediation of a public right or State right. This in turn depends on the collusion between traditional hospitality and power in its finitude. As Derrida makes clear, “no hospitality, in the classic sense, is without sovereignty of oneself over one’s home, but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence.” While this may appear negative and repressive it can by the same token claim to be protective - as is reflected in the comments of the commander of the Lesbos coast guard in Apostolos Mikromastoras. Hospitality thus emerges as complex discourse of ideology, an object of regulatory policies, as well as both a national and a private affair that discriminates between who is inside and outside, who has a right and who doesn’t.

At the legal threshold

²⁰ Derrida, Jacques, and Anne Dufourmantelle 2000 *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*. Rachel Bowlby, trans. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

²¹ Ibid 53

²² 1998 *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Daniel Heller-Roazen, trans. Stanford: Stanford University Press

Giorgio Agamben has argued that this distinction between inclusion or exclusion is the categorical pair of Western politics. He uses the ancient Greek distinction between *Zoe* (life to all creatures or “bare life”) and *bios* (social, political existence) to conceptualize the fundamental power of sovereignty that discriminates between socially included and excluded forms of life²². The essential characteristic of contemporary States as we witness in Greece is the need to define the threshold of the line which distinguishes who is inside and who is outside.

The unofficial immigration policy in Greece is in breach of countless laws protecting the human rights of man, the focus of the policy is to exclude the *bios* of immigrants. This is in part supported by the fact that the statute for the rights of man is chiefly humanitarian or social and not political in character, which has proven for a long time now to be incapable of resolving the problem. As such, the entire issue of the refugee has been transferred into a restricted and dangerous battle between the police and humanitarian organizations who concentrate on the protection or infliction of the state of *zoe*. No Greek political party or government has ever publicly presented a coherent plan of action for the creation of an integrated and effective refugee protection regime that includes *bios*. The Ministry of Public Order (Police), largely responsible for asylum law and practice, has failed to establish a just and effective asylum system. Instead, it has prioritized the field of illegal immigration and continues to devote most of its efforts to this field.

The recent infringements of the non-refoulement principle in international law by Greek State authorities demonstrates how the state power forcibly excludes those who international law promises to protect. While Greece is party to both the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the 1984 Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Punishment or Treatment (CAT) it is consistently violating the principle of non-refoulement not only by returning to Turkey Iraqis who may be subjected to onward return to Iraq, but also by returning any migrants to Turkey because they face a real risk of inhuman or degrading treatment there. Migrants returned from Greece are systematically and consistently subjected to inhuman and degrading conditions yet are frequently returned by Greek forces, sometimes in the middle of the night to Turkish soil. This report

from a 14-year Afghan boy demonstrates the level of brutality involved in refoulement procedures conducted by Police and Coast Guards:

“The police stripped us except for our pants. They took all our possessions. When someone asked about his possessions, they kicked him. We were on the Coast Guard boat from 3 am to 5 am. The police put us back on our rubber boat. We had a small engine, but the police took the engine and the two oars. The police made a hole in the boat. When we were at sea before we were caught the boat was okay, but when we were put back in the water, it was punctured. We tried to paddle with our hands. Some guys put their hands and feet on the hole. I couldn’t see how many holes there were, but I think there were many holes. All the boys kept their feet on the holes and scooped water. We paddled from 5 am to noon. The water level was up to four fingers below the rim so it was very difficult to move the boat. The wind was head on and nobody had life vests”²³

The Greek state illicit, unofficial practices include a reported 12,000 third-country nationals in 5 years “unlawfully deposited” on the shores of Turkey by Greek officials, many more remain unreported. Furthermore those that stay in Greece are subject to criminal detention practices, which according to Committee for the Prevention of Torture of the Council of Europe (CPT) do not respect the CPT standards and have not respected them at least since 1997. Although the CPT acknowledged the challenges faced by the Greek authorities in coping with the constant influx of irregular migrants, the conditions in which they are held appeared “to be a deliberate policy by the authorities in order to deliver a clear message that only persons with the necessary identity papers should attempt to enter Greece.”²⁴

From these instances of unofficial Immigration Policy, it is clear that the Greek state is purposefully working outside of the law in order to maintain this politics of ideology, that is dependent on a state power operating at its threshold. Its numerous breaches to basic human rights suggests that it has become a country whose policy is directed toward the social homogenization of people through violent expulsions and poor provision of aid. This unofficial state of exception, whereby the State exercises its fundamental power to exclude itself from the law²⁵, is tightening its grip around state policy and practices. The figure of the immigrant is presented as the condensation of

wider social frailties whose elimination can only be achieved through unlawful policy that chooses who is a social and political being worthy of rights and who can be justifiably made surplus and become a political being only in their exclusion.

Conclusion

The refugee, the figure to whom human rights laws are there to protect, is increasingly beginning to constitute a radical crisis in these laws. In the current Greek nation-state system, the inalienable rights of man prove to be completely unprotected once it is no longer possible to characterize them as rights of the citizens of a state. The status of the refugee is always considered a temporary condition that should lead either to naturalization or to repatriation, which in Greek policy is systematically refused. The UNHRC report concluded that there was no meaningful assessment of an asylum seeker’s claim in Greece. Asylum seekers “often lack the most basic entitlements, such as interpreters and legal aid, to ensure that their claims receive adequate scrutiny from the asylum authorities.” Noxious detention conditions, procedural obstacles to lodging claims, illegal summary removals and abusive police and Coast Guard conduct characterize Greek asylum policy. The Human Rights Watch ‘Recommendations to the government of Greece’ in 2007 advised to

“support the social integration of refugees and other protection beneficiaries by promoting Greek language instruction, access to health care, education and professional training, and the job and housing markets”²⁶

Yet it remains 7 years later that the only autonomous space within the political order of the nation-state for the refugee is the figure of the unwanted *xeni*, victimized for the position it holds as the condensation of social antagonistic struggles of ordinary and inflated proportions. Stripped to a condition of bare life and excluded from the political sphere, refugees in Greece are subject to countless cases of hatred and violence resulting a complex web of wider social problems, poor EU and Greek immigration policy, as well as a pervasive Greek social-ideology of an ethnocentric Society that relies on their status as unwanted. We are witnessing the presentation of refugees not as individual cases but rather a mass phenomenon (as

²³ Excerpt from Human Rights Watch 2008

²⁴ Asylum Information Database

²⁵ Schmitt, C. (1985) Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty [trans. G. Schwab] Chicago: University of Chicago Press

²⁶ Human Rights Watch 2008

is what happened between the two wars), that is employed to define, legitimize and support a dangerous politics of ideology in Greece that operates at all levels of state intervention.`