

«ΤΩΡΑ ΕΙΜΑΣΤΕ ΟΛΟΙ ΡΑΤΣΙΣΤΕΣ»: ΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ ΚΑΙ ΑΝΙΣΟΤΗΤΑ ΣΤΗΝ ΑΓΡΟΤΙΚΗ ΕΛΛΑΔΑ

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Περίληψη

Οι μετανάστες καταλαμβάνουν μια παράδοξη θέση στην ελληνική κοινωνία. Παρά το γεγονός ότι οι περισσότερες οικονομικές δραστηριότητες εξαρτώνται, άμεσα ή έμμεσα, από την εργασία των μεταναστών, οι ίδιοι οι μετανάστες είναι κοινωνικά και πολιτικά περιθωριοποιημένοι. Βασικό παράγοντα περιθωριοποίησής τους αποτελεί η κυριαρχία της ρατσιστικής συζήτησης και των πρακτικών που οδηγούν στην εμπέδωση της διαφοράς μεταξύ μεταναστών και γηγενών, γεγονός που ενδυναμώνει τον αποκλεισμό τους. Στηριζόμενος σε εθνογραφική έρευνα σε δύο γεωργικές κοινότητες της Αργολίδας, εξετάζω από τη συγκριτική και την ιστορική σκοπιά την ανάπτυξη του ρατσισμού στην ελληνική αγροτική κοινωνία. Υποστηρίζω ότι η ανάπτυξη του ρατσισμού, εκτός του ότι αποτελεί ένα ιδεολογικό πρόβλημα ή μια φυσική μορφή της «ξενοφοβίας», μπορεί να συνδεθεί με τις συγκεκριμένες πολιτικές και οικονομικές συνθήκες που συνάδουν με την ενσωμάτωση των μεταναστών στις κοινωνίες υποδοχής.

“WE ARE ALL RACISTS NOW”: LABOR AND INEQUALITY IN RURAL GREECE

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Abstract

Immigrants occupy a paradoxical position in Greek society. While most economic activities have come to depend on immigrant labor, directly or indirectly, immigrants themselves are socially and politically marginalized. An important factor in their marginalization is the rise of racist discourse and practices that have served to naturalize the difference between immigrants and natives and reinforce their exclusion. Drawing on ethnographic research in two agricultural communities in Argolida, I examine the development of racism in rural Greek society from a comparative and historical perspective. **I argue that, rather than an ideological problem or a natural form of “xenophobia,” the development of racism is more accurately attributed to the specific political and economic conditions surrounding the integration of immigrants into host communities.**

Λέξεις κλειδιά: ρατσισμός, ξενοφοβία, μετανάστευση, γεωργία, εργασία.

Key words: racism, xenophobia, immigration, agriculture, labor.

As in other European countries, one of the most significant social transformations in Greece over the last two decades has been the introduction of a new stream of migrant labor from Eastern Europe. This paper focuses on the emerging discourses of racism that have accompanied the economic integration of immigrant labor into rural agricultural communities. Analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork begun in 2001 in several neighboring villages of Argolida as well as comparative-historical research. Fieldwork consisted mainly of participant-observation, extensive informal interviews and discourse analysis. In this paper I hypothesize that the emergence and spread of racist ideology and

practices is primarily a product of contemporary political-economic conditions, specifically conditions surrounding the integration of Greece into the EU, rather than a result of **historical conditions (i.e., the disruption of cultural "homogeneity" or traditional ethnic animosities) or ideological factors (i.e., generalized "xenophobia" or ethnocentrism)**. This would imply that the future of racism in rural communities will be shaped primarily by the conditions and organization of rural production, and that educational and legal programs to promote cultural tolerance will have only limited effects.

In my fieldwork, which examined the role of migrant labor in several agricultural communities in Argolida (Lawrence 2007), I found the issue of racism was a constant practical as well as theoretical concern. Villagers are very conscious of the emerging social dynamic between natives and immigrants and avidly debate the nature of the divide that separates them. In this discussion, ideas of race have become prevalent. One villager, by **way of explanation, asserted "We are all racists now. Bad, I know, but it is true."** The development of an extreme form of social and political marginalization marked by racial differentiation seems paradoxical, especially within the context of increasing liberalization and **"Europeanization."** Villagers often explain the emergence of racist discourse as a **"natural" reaction to the large numbers of foreigners in their midst. In the halls of academia,** as in the villages of Greece, contemporary European racism has proven to be a contentious and often emotional issue. As with many other terms that are shared between academic and **popular discourse, like "globalization," or "transnationalism," the concept of racism, by the weight of its connotative baggage, often obscures more than it illuminates about the nature of social relations and the trajectories of social change.** In this paper I wish to delve more deeply into the issue of contemporary racism and the ways in which it both masks and exposes the emergence of a new political-economic order in rural Greek society.

In the villages I studied, **local Greeks most often frame the "problem" of immigrants in terms of their cultural difference and perceived lack of assimilation of Greek cultural and social mores.** This was often attributed to a perceived genetic or racial difference, giving rise to a widespread discourse of racial inequality. Clearly this ascription of identity benefits local Greeks by creating a category of people eligible for labor and living conditions that Greeks, for various reasons, will no longer accept. Immigrants, for their part, do make efforts to **"blend in" to local society, through for example the adoption of Greek names, the baptizing of children, and the invocation of historical and cultural links.** A few are successful (for example, the so-called **"Northern Epirotes"**), but most are rebuffed by local Greeks, who tend to look upon such efforts cynically. Despite the fact that, unlike other European countries, most immigrants come from neighboring countries with a long history of cultural and social interaction with Greece, the problems faced by immigrants largely follow a pattern common to all the most developed western countries.

One commonality that contemporary patterns of immigration seem to share across the capitalist core is the simultaneous economic inclusion and political and social exclusion of immigrants in host countries. In practical terms, this has given rise to the **paradoxical situation in which Greece, like other countries, has become dependent on "illegal" immigrant labor (DeGenova 2002).** Despite the fact that host countries, due to various factors such as declining birth rates and economic development, are in need of immigrant laborers, they have found it exceedingly difficult to regulate or legalize the flow of migrants. This in turn has led to the **widespread perception of immigration as a social "problem" rather than an economic solution.** The problem of immigration is often framed in terms of culture or race, as a problem, in other words, of cultural and social assimilation. However, framing the problem in these terms obscures the more fundamental problem of class formation (see also Brodtkin 2000). Immigrant laborers are first and foremost a class of labor, whose culture and race is imposed as a basis for their subordination and exploitation within the specific political-economic context of the host country.

There is, of course, nothing new about labor migration. Migrant labor of one sort or another has been a fundamental element of state-level societies for centuries. In varying forms, cultural constructions of difference have commonly been used to condition the integration of immigrant labor into host economies. Among the more well-known examples are the Americas, where history has been profoundly shaped by intercontinental movements of labor and the attendant constructions of racial difference. There are several important conclusions drawn from the historical analysis of race in the Americas. First and foremost is the fact that categories and concepts of race are cultural constructions, not biological categories (Smedley 1999). Racial ascriptions and identities vary over time and place. This can be seen clearly in the case of Jews, who over the last century have shifted from a **distinct racial category to being "white" (Brodkin 1998)**. It can also be seen in the contrast between racial categories in Latin America, where blackness and whiteness co-exist with intermediate categories, and North America, where intermediate categories have historically not been recognized. The second important conclusion is that racial constructions seem to vary across time and place according to specific political-economic regimes (Harrison 1995). That is, racial constructions tend to arise in response to specific historical, social and environmental conditions. Thus, in Latin America mixed or intermediate racial categories tended to form in the absence of a white European middle class of small farmers, merchants, craftsmen, etc. In North America, where Africans and Native Americans competed with poor Europeans for subsistence, racial categories became more dichotomous, becoming most strictly enforced and codified with the rise of cotton production in the U.S. south during the early 19th century.

Greece, even though it has been commonly considered to be sender of labor, has also hosted patterns of labor migration, both in the form of internal migrants and larger influxes from outside its borders. Despite the common assumption today that Greece is a relatively homogenous cultural entity, historically it can more accurately be described **as an "ethnic mosaic" (Andromedas 1976)**. Cultural and ethnic differences have often defined divisions of labor and differences in political and economic status as well as competing subsistence strategies. In addition to internal variation, Greece has also experienced periods of massive in-migration as well as extensive interaction with foreign cultures through conquest and, more recently, tourism. Therefore, the present influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe, while novel in some ways, is not wholly unprecedented. These historical points of comparison are useful in analyzing current immigration patterns.

The influx of Asia Minor refugees, who by the 1930s made up a proportion of the Greek population roughly equal to today's immigrants, in many ways provides an illuminating point of comparison. While the Asia Minor refugees did not come to Greece as laborers per se, their arrival provided the impetus for a broad transformation of the Greek economy. In urban areas, Asia Minor refugees provided an impoverished and vulnerable workforce that facilitated early industrialization (Hirshon 1989). In rural areas refugees helped to develop **unproductive land and spurred land reform (Karakasidou 1997)**. Like today's immigrants, Asia Minor refugees in Greece faced varied forms of discrimination and even what can be described as racism (Pentzopoulos 1962). Asia Minor populations, expelled from Turkey for **being "Greek" and marginalized in Greece for being "Turk" entered Greek society mostly at the bottom as an exploited and oppressed group whose racial difference was constructed in response to larger political and economic conditions both in Asia Minor and Greece**. **Assimilating into Greek identity and society was a slow and arduous process. Unlike today's immigrants, however, they enjoyed the rights of citizenship, at least on paper, and were able to form permanent, corporate communities.** These factors, together with the social dislocations produced by the German occupation and subsequent civil war, undoubtedly played a positive role in the assimilation of Asian Minor populations.

I would argue that a historical and comparative analysis of racism suggests that racial

constructions should be viewed not so much as a xenophobic reaction, or a cultural-ideological characteristic of host populations, but as a specific practice in the production of inequality. Race is a way of naturalizing or legitimizing the production of inequality under specific political-economic conditions. In stratified societies, inequality is always defined arbitrarily, and the vulnerability of labor that is necessary for its exploitation cannot be defined in economic terms alone (Miles 1987). Cultural constructions of difference define and enforce vulnerability, and because they must generally be presented as more inevitable than they actually are, difference is often defined in terms of nature, whether it be gender, race or genetics. The wide variability of how social difference is practiced, both between and with locales, suggests that while concepts of inequality may be generalized as a structural characteristic of class society, their enactment is subject to individual agency operating in a context of variable possibilities and opportunities. That is, while the Spanish and English colonizers of America shared some basic beliefs about the incompatibility of races, how racism was practiced differed significantly based on the contrasting opportunities and constrictions of their particular (historical and spatial) locations. Furthermore, I would argue that race, as **a particularly "hard" form of social difference, generally signals more extreme, and thus potentially more unstable, forms of inequality.**

From this perspective, I wish to examine the emerging tropes of racism present in rural Greek society. My examples here are based on fieldwork in two neighboring villages of Argolida, each with contrasting agricultural production strategies. One village is located in the valley of Argolida between Nauplio and Argos and subsists primarily on citrus production for export. In the other village, located in the hills above the valley, truck farming for the **farmers' markets of Athens and herding are the main occupations. The residents of the hill village are primarily "Arvanites", while the valley residents identify themselves as mainly Greek, although some consider themselves to be Arvaniti descendents.** It is also common for the residents of both villages to hold jobs in the nearby towns of Nauplio and Argos. Both villages have become dependent on immigrant labor of Eastern Europeans, mainly Albanians over the last several decades. The truck farmers of the hill village employ immigrants as day laborers, most of whom have become year-round residents. Immigrants make up between 10 and 20% of the village population, depending on how residents are counted. The valley village also contains a small number of year-round immigrant laborers, although proportionally less than the hill village. During the citrus harvest, however, the number of migrants increases significantly as immigrants harvest virtually all the fruit. These differences in production between hill and valley village contribute significantly to differences in the practice of racism between the two villages.

From stories I was able to collect from local residents describing the early years of Albanian immigration into the area (late 1980s-early1990s), residents of the two villages seemed to have similar reactions to arriving immigrants. In this early period, immigrants from Albania were met by local residents with a combination of pity and empathy. Many early arrivals were regarded as ethnically Greek (Northern Epirote), and indeed some of these early arrivals were able to assimilate into village society. Many local residents, and early immigrants who remained in the villages, have recounted stories of hospitality on the part of villagers. This was particularly true for the hill villagers who, being Arvanites who consider themselves descendents of Albanian immigrants from the 15th and 16th centuries, saw the new arrivals as ethnically similar to themselves. Many hill villagers claimed that older residents who still spoke Arvanitika were able to communicate with Albanian immigrants.

The arrival of immigrant laborers from Eastern Europe in the villages of rural Greece coincided with extensive economic and social changes in the wake of EU accession. Pressures on uncompetitive agricultural markets, rising consumption expectations, and decreasing birthrates- all tied to new forms of European liberalization- put new pressures on

rural families. Many farming families found themselves trapped between falling profits in agriculture and growing consumer needs. These pressures reinforced the tendency toward the economic diversification, or pluriactivity, of households and discouraged the exploitation of family labor in agriculture. The value of agricultural labor declined, but agricultural income remained as a substantial part of household incomes, in many cases buttressed by EU subsidies. Immigration became a means by which many of the contradictions of rural development were, at least temporarily, resolved.

A common thread in the stories local residents tell of the early period of immigration is how the immigrants betrayed their hospitality, becoming ungrateful and stealing from locals. At the same time however, local farmers acknowledge that they quickly realized the potential of immigrants to fill the labor shortage that had become increasingly acute after the 1960s. **Immigrants, in the words of one local citrus farmer, "rescued us." I would argue that this dynamic, between the "ungrateful" and "dangerous" immigrant on the one hand and the need for labor on the other, arose precisely because the condition of immigrants' incorporation into the village economies was predicated on their severe vulnerability and their inequality to Greek labor. The labor of immigrants was only useful to local farmers because of its low cost, and the low value of immigrants' labor precluded their assimilation into Greek society on an equal basis.** By the mid 1990s immigrants made up a new class of labor that was legally and socially marginalized and thus vulnerable to the levels of exploitation required by local farmers. This process happened in the valley village as well as the hill village, where by the mid 1990s most Arvanites were renouncing any social or historical connections between themselves and the new arrivals (see also Gefou-Madianou 1999). As immigrants found work in the villages, more and more arrived, fueling tensions with local residents and reinforcing social barriers.

Today there are pervasive ideological, institutional, and practical forms of exclusion in the villages that serve to isolate and marginalize immigrant laborers. Among villagers there is a pervasive sense that immigrants are different from native Greeks in a fundamental, **biological way. This includes popular ideas about "Greek genes" and beliefs that immigrants are physically different from Greeks in such things as head shapes, intelligence, and the ability to endure hard labor and lower living standards.** While it is certain that not all Greeks share these beliefs, their prevalence in popular discourse, along with the pseudo-scientific discourse of genetic determinism promoted through mass media, has legitimized the assumption that social differences can be accounted for by biological variation. In the villages I studied, I found that the discourse of racial difference fit easily into traditional concepts of ethnic and kin-group identity.

The ideology of racial difference tends to reinforce practices of inequality that have become essential to the division of labor between immigrants and natives in the villages. In agriculture, wages for immigrants are generally fixed by informal agreement among landowners at 25-30 euro per day, much less than a Greek would accept for the same work. Tasks, too, tend to be divided, especially in the valley where citrus harvesting is done almost exclusively by immigrants while Greeks will carry out pruning, planting, and fertilizing. Immigrants are also subject to discrimination in housing and a lack of access to basic services such as healthcare, police protection, etc. While this division is enforced by a lack of citizenship rights for immigrants, an ideology of racial difference serves to make such distinctions seem natural and legitimate.

While the valley and hill village I studied generally share these patterns of discrimination and exclusion, there are also significant differences between them that point to the importance that the type of production plays in conditioning relations between immigrants and natives. In general, I found that immigrants are better integrated into the hill village society. Immigrants there were more likely to have on-going social relations with natives. Immigrants and natives were much more likely to socialize together in the hill village and in

some cases establish quasi-familial, enduring bonds such as baptismal sponsorships and shared meals. Some hill residents explain this difference in terms of the Arvaniti identity, which they argue makes them more sympathetic to Albanian immigrants. However, most hill villagers reject any idea of ethnic solidarity with Albanian immigrants. I would argue that relations between the two groups in the hill village are shaped more by the nature of the labor requirements for truck farmers. Many truck farmers establish paternalistic relations **with immigrants and often claim to treat them "like family."** Such relations in fact establish a web of obligations that are much more one-sided than traditional patterns of household labor. **Immigrants are expected to be "loyal" to individual farmers and to carry out tasks** with a certain amount of independence and responsibility. However their labor is not rewarded with any of the long-term benefits that family labor once afforded subordinate members, such as inheritance. In the valley village where the bulk of immigrant labor is used seasonally, by contrast, the social exclusion of immigrants is much more strictly enforced, with immigrants confined to marginal social spaces and with far fewer opportunities to establish on-going social relations. **This division between the "soft" racism of the hill village and the "hard" racism of the valley is somewhat reminiscent of the difference between "house" slaves and "field" slaves in the U.S.**

The differences between hill and valley in terms of the social conditions faced by immigrants point to the importance of the organization of production for the future prospects of social integration. In the hill village truck farming is a dynamic form of **production that has been able to exploit improved access to the farmers' markets of Athens.** Immigrants are needed on an on-going basis and, compared to the valley, have established more enduring social bonds within the local community, mitigating some of the extreme forms of social exclusion. Over the last several years, some immigrants in the hill village have begun to rent land from local residents and farm their own crops, often hiring other immigrants as day-laborers. This has led to rising tensions between immigrants and local farmers, who feel threatened by competition for access to low-cost labor as well as water. However, immigrant farmers are at a serious disadvantage due to their precarious legal status and inability to secure vendors' licenses, **which forces them to sell produce for about a third less than Greeks.** Thus, while immigrants in the hill village enjoy certain advantages over those in the valley, there are still institutional and state practices which serve to keep immigrants in a subordinate position. In the valley village, where citrus production faces enormous market difficulties and intense competitive pressures, low profitability and the seasonal nature of labor requirements has made conditions for immigrants much worse. Except for some niches, such as skilled construction trades, immigrants are lower paid (often working for piece-rate rather than daily wages) and more transient. This more extreme condition of inequality provides a more fertile atmosphere for social conflict and the spread of racist practices and ideology.

The social and political exclusion of immigrants in both villages is a fundamental and perhaps even necessary aspect of their economic integration. To explain this paradox in **terms of a natural "xenophobia" or "cultural fundamentalism" (Stolke 1995) is insufficient,** given the long history of ethnic diversity and cultural interaction in rural Greece. Instead, I would argue that social exclusion and the rise of racist ideas and practices are better explained by the contemporary political and economic constraints faced by rural communities. Given the economic pressures on Greek agriculturalists from the deregulation of markets and growing consumption expectations as European citizens, low-cost labor plays a critical role in propping up the local economy. The exploitation of this labor is legitimized by the fact that it is specifically non-Greek, that is, with no claim on citizen or kin rights that in the past has mitigated the effects of inequality. As inequality has grown, the division **between "Albanian" and "Greek" has become more strictly enforced. This, I would argue, is why immigration has been characterized by simultaneous economic integration and social "intolerance" (Kasimis and Papdopoulos 2005).** However, there is evidence that this

development is proceeding unevenly and that the specific relations between natives and immigrants are strongly affected by different production regimes. Thus in problematic productions, like citrus, that depend heavily on seasonal labor, we can expect more extreme exclusion of immigrants and a harder boundary legitimized through racist ideas and practices. In more dynamic and expanding productions, like truck farming, that requires on-going relations between employer and employee, we can expect to see less exclusion and a correspondingly softer boundary. The future prospects for the assimilation of immigrants into Greek society are thus dependent to a large degree on the future of the Greek rural economy and the direction of its transformation and development within the political and economic constraints of the EU.

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