

# The Modern Greek Foetus

David Sutton

## **The Empty Cradle of Democracy: Sex, Abortion and Nationalism in Modern Greece**

ALEXANDRA HALKIAS

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## **Making Modern Mothers: Ethics and Family Planning in Urban Greece**

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Writing from the vantage point of the America of Bush and Bill Frist, in which the banning not only of abortion but also of many forms of contraception seems a distinct possibility, it is refreshing to read about a place where abortion rights are not imminently under threat. One might think that such a place would be considered a bastion of rational ‘modernity’ when compared with the embrace of an imagined ‘tradition’ or ‘good old days’ of the US Christian right. But as Heather Paxson and Alexandra Halkias vividly illustrate in their ethnographies, the politics of what garners the label ‘modern’ and what ‘backwards’ continues to be linked to power and wealth. Those countries on the ‘margins of Europe’ or worse are forever in the position of playing catch-up to the West, perennially finding the Golden Fleece of ‘modernity’ just beyond their grasp. Why should this be, and what do reproductive choices have to do with national identities?

Two new works by anthropologists, both based on fieldwork in Athens in the mid-1990s, explore the tangled web of gender/nation/modernity through the lens of abortion, contraceptive practices, assisted conception and the politics of *reproduction* in the broadest sense. These works complement each other in numerous ways, but they also diverge significantly—in their writing style, methodologies, focus and how they choose to contextualize their ‘explanations’ for practices related to controlling reproduction in contemporary Greece. Taken together, they provide an indictment of nationalist concerns with the ‘population question’ (*to dimographiko*), as well as of the unexamined gendered assumptions that lie behind much of this discourse.

The two authors agree on the ‘bad guys’ in this story. On the one hand they are the politicians and the media which use fears over the declining birth rate among ethnic Greeks to fan barely covert racist hysteria over the ‘death of the nation’, as well as perennial concerns over a Turkish invasion. On the other hand, they are the medical professionals who blame Greece’s ‘high’ abortion rate on popular ignorance of modern contraceptive advances, and who reveal themselves to be far more ignorant of the gendered practices and ideologies that in fact make abortion a reasoned choice for many Greek women.

Halkias is particularly thorough in analysing the discourse surrounding the *dimographiko* as found in political speeches, newspaper reports and letters to the editor of the leading Greek news publications. She argues that in the discourses analysed, abortion is not constructed as a sin against God (as in US abortion debates), but rather as a sin against the nation, which is seen as ‘committing collective suicide’ because of the selfishness of women (p. 115 ff.). She also notes the contradictions that abound in this discourse, in which abortion is viewed negatively both because women need to be educated to produce more children for ‘the ethnos’, but also must be educated to use more modern forms of contraception (p. 315).

While Halkias notes some differences across the political spectrum as to whether women are seen as ‘to blame’ for the *dimographiko*, she argues that there is almost no questioning of the need for ‘population renewal’ and the assumptions that only certain kinds of people (ethnically Greek) should be taking part in such a renewal, even among the normally critical left press (p. 312). However, I wonder how true this remains in 2005, after a decade that has seen the legalization of many of the immigrants to Greece in the early 1990s, the growth of multiculturalism (Yiakoumaki 2000) and the public discussion of the incorporation of Albanian students into the Greek nation in highly public controversies over whether these students should carry the Greek flag on national holidays.

The role of medical practitioners in this story is documented in a reflexive—and harrowing—chapter, in which Halkias provides an account of her observations inside an abortion clinic. It is harrowing largely because of the way professionals—obstetricians/gynecologists and nurses—treat their women patients as backward, misinformed or merely stupid (one doctor refers to his anaesthetized patient awaiting abortion as a ‘cow’). Halkias sums up her encounter with one doctor as follows:

The performance Polakis strove to uphold, and which I permitted, was that he and I were professionals interested in helping the subject population in good liberal, if not also out-and-out colonizing, reformatory fashion. Ostensibly, his expertise and experience were being used to point me in the direction of how best to go about assisting the ‘natives’ to control the negative effects of unthinkingly following their ‘urges.’ (p. 100)

For doctors, nurses and family planners invested in a discourse of modernity, abortion is not only a mark of backwardness and ignorance, but simply irrational. Their view of the backwardness of Greek reproductive practices is informed by their education at Western European universities (Paxson, p. 123). For them,

the 'tools of modern rationality', i.e. knowledge of proper contraceptive practice and a cost/benefit analysis of the superiority of the pill or condoms over abortions, will set Greek women (and men) free from the burdens of this putative cultural backwardness (p. 105). In this way they ignore the fraught relations of 'tradition' and 'modernity' which form the very core of contemporary Greek identity.<sup>1</sup>

Both Halkias and Paxson focus their ethnographies on the voices of women who have had multiple abortions. In refreshingly non-judgmental fashion, they delve into the everyday ideologies and practices of contemporary Greek heterosexuality not to rationalize, but to understand and contextualize why abortion makes sense to many women in navigating contemporary sexuality.

Halkias moves back and forth between a consideration of her informants' views of specific birth control techniques and a larger discussion of the ideologies informing heterosexual relations in Greece. The condom is spurned by most women and men for its material attributes: its smell, its feel, the way as a barrier that it represents 'non-naked' and thus less 'honest' intercourse (p. 167). The pill, by contrast, is seen as problematic for what it does to the woman, a medical intervention into the woman's organism which is seen, in the context of the hegemonic superiority of the 'natural' in Greece, as intolerable. 'The social construction of the Greek female body has established itself as an . . . almost holy site of *nature* in which the Pill intervenes as a foreign body that messes with the heart (not only literally) of the female body by "blocking," among other things, what is implicitly seen as the God-given capacity to reproduce and thus opening the way for other trespassers' (p. 190). In this context, withdrawal and 'the days', or counting, emerge as the preferred contraceptive methods, for the way they do not intervene in the woman's body or the couple's intimacy, and, positively, for the trust and control that they signify.

As for abortion itself, Halkias and Paxson both dismiss the idea that women typically get pregnant either to trap their partners into commitment or to demonstrate their fertility in a society where a woman's nature is often equated with her ability to be a mother. 'Motherhood must be demonstrated by the proper care of a child' (Paxson, p. 123).<sup>2</sup> However, Halkias suggests that pregnancy and abortion represent a *trial* in another sense: for a number of her informants it was a way to bring out aspects of their relationship with their partner that might not be clear: 'abortion is used to further secure a relationship that successfully passed through the *dokimasia*, or trial. In other [cases], the abortion experience becomes a catalyst for the termination of a relationship that was not satisfactory. In either way, in most cases abortion is used *to see*' (Halkias, p. 208). Halkias also notes that women experience abortion as a painful process, not because of religious or state discourses, but because it involves the loss of a dream of 'deep intimacy wherein even the decision to abort is experienced *together*, with both subjects equally emotionally involved' (p. 254).

Thus, both Halkias and Paxson suggest that resort to abortion has little to do with women's relation to motherhood (since, of course, in many cases married women who have had a number of children have also had a number of abortions), but rather is related to Greek concepts about heterosexual relations and practices. Both note that

the avoidance of other forms of contraception is linked to larger ideas about the creative aspects of *risk* in Greek social life. Risk is engaged for its productivity. It is not something to be avoided. Rather it heightens social, and in this case sexual, engagement (Paxson, 148 ff.). As Halkias argues, risk plays into a larger national discourse on the relationship of danger to freedom. In this context, sex that involves risk is positioned as ‘perhaps one of the last remaining vestiges of resistance against the onslaught of the . . . forces of modernity’ (p. 154). Thus all contraception—counting days, the pill, the condom—represent the loss of freedom, the loss of *Greekness*, which ‘modernity’ is seen to threaten, and the engagement with risk is not a submission to *fate*, but rather an active engagement with what Halkias pithily calls ‘the gaming of *erota’s agon*’ (p. 164).

One major difference between the two books is the way each differently frames its explanations. Halkias’s main interlocutors are critical theorists such as Foucault and Butler. Her keywords are *discourse*, *power* and *text*, and she sums up her project as an attempt ‘to identify . . . through their textual remains, the relations of power that animate and shape social reality’ (p. 342). She is most concerned to show the hegemonic aspects of these discourses that interrelate gender, ‘reprosexuality’ and modernity, to show how the *nation*, while often not explicitly discussed by her informants, is present ‘in the cultural air that lovers strenuously breathe in and out during lovemaking’ (p. 152). This is reflected in Halkias’s analysis of a variety of cultural texts, from the popular songs of Haris Alexiou, to the film *Rembetiko*, as well as suggestive snippets of modern Greek art and poetry. While she does not ignore anthropology, she also barely addresses the work of other anthropologists, instead relegating discussions of previous work by Greek anthropologists primarily to endnotes. This is a shame, for such engagement might have had benefits in a number of places, such as in her discussion of ideas concerning *pain* and the *witnessing of pain*, which might profitably have been compared with the work of Seremetakis (1991), among others, and in discussions of risk with the work of Thomas Malaby (2003).

Unlike Halkias, Paxson focuses on a background of changing *gender and kinship relations that are related to* changing socioeconomic structures and values. In particular, she looks at the shift from an extended-family, agricultural and inheritance-based system of kinship to a nuclear, urban-professional and individualistic system, and the repercussions of such shifts on understandings of the practices of motherhood. Drawing on the work of Jane Collier (1998), Paxson suggests the notion of ‘ethics’ to encompass the ways in which practices surrounding motherhood are experienced. Paxson focuses in on what she sees as key changes in Greek society, not simply in how people act, but in how they justify their actions. Paxson sees a key change from what she describes as a formerly dominant ‘ethic of service’ to a now dominant ‘ethic of choice’. However, the ethic of service has not simply been replaced by the ethic of choice. Rather, it has been identified as ‘traditional’ and opposed to a desired ‘modernity’. Thus the ethic of service, said to have flourished before World War II, has not disappeared; it has been overlaid with

an ethic of choice and well-being. “Old” and “new” attitudes and ethics fold in on one another, even as each is called upon to explain everyday life’ (p. 40).

This is a useful framework for dealing with some of the changing challenges of motherhood and abortion. The ethic of service or ‘care’ still lingers in beliefs about providing the best for one’s children, but the demands that this entails have shifted from dowry and reputation to the new requirements of a competitive consumerist society. In the past women’s sexuality was more closely monitored on the community level, but their practices of mothering were not; indeed having children was a key marker of their adult status (p. 50 ff.). Now, with greater sexual freedom, but often without community and family support, women find their motherhood subject to the dictates of social commentary, television programmes and self-help manuals.

For the healthcare professionals, the ethic of choice and well-being allows them to address women as self-interested individuals who realize their inner desires through conscious planning (p. 56). Such professionals thus frame abortion as an unhealthy and hence *immoral* choice for self-interested individuals (p. 134). Through healthy childbirth and birth control practices, individual desires will be welded to the desires of the nation for population growth. Paxson argues that while her informants may draw on ideas about choice and well-being in their discussion, they have not abandoned the discourse of care, or some of the practices that accompanied it (e.g. women living with their grown daughters in order to help them balance childcare and professional life).

Both Paxson and Halkias write in an accessible style that would be suitable for advanced undergraduate or graduate teaching. Paxson enlivens her interview materials and analysis with fragments of narrative. Halkias provides more extended self-reflexive discussions, particularly of her ambiguous relationship to health care professionals as an educated, but ‘inferior’, social scientist.

One odd aspect of Halkias’s text is her use of untranslated or not fully translated Greek expressions that supplement her English text. While noting her informants’ claims that Greeks have a ‘unique capacity for the appreciation of pleasure’, she adds, untranslated, ‘O Ellinas xerei na glendaei. Kai o pio ftohos ehei poiotita zois. Tha piei to krasaki tou, tha tragoudisi. The pane ta farmakia kato’ (p. 154).<sup>3</sup> I scratched my head numerous times over this practice, repeated throughout the text, and wondered why University of California Press or its readers did not question this. Toward the end of the book Halkias suggests that abortion clinic workers use English on patients’ charts as a ‘code’ to write the ‘truth’ of their patients’ previous abortions (presumably to make them illegible to the women’s partners). Given her argument that sexual practices in Greece are seen to escape the discourse of modernity, might these fleeting untranslated quotes perhaps be meant to escape the modern project of academic clarity/transparency?

Taken together the two books are important additions to the longstanding debate over ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ in Greece, showing how ‘the modern’ creates its own zones of opposition. Where elsewhere this has been shown with respect to food, music, dance or death rituals, in this case it is the practices surrounding sexuality

and motherhood which show how Greece's ongoing struggle to be both European and *truly Greek* continue to be fought over, and that women's bodies remain a key site for such struggles. However, despite the rantings of Greek politicians on the 'population question', abortion rights remain relatively secure in a country on the 'margins' of Europe. Perhaps one day the US will modernize and catch up with Greece.

## Notes

- [1] The relationship of notions of tradition and the past to contemporary Greek society and ideas about Western modernity has been extensively studied by anthropologists. See e.g. Argyrou (1996); Herzfeld (1982); Panourgia (2004); Sutton (1994).
- [2] See Paxson, p. 122 ff. I summarize a much more complex argument here. The thrust of Paxson's argument, however, is that family planners view women's use of abortion as a kind of trial fertility because this allows them to see the women as rational actors. Paxson argues that family planners must construct women as *rational*, but simply misinformed, if they are to hope that contraceptive knowledge will lead to women choosing *appropriate* contraception (pp. 125–126).
- [3] The Greek knows how to party. Even the poorest person has a good quality of life. He will drink a little wine, he will sing. He will wash down his pain [literally 'the poisons will go down'].

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