



Dimitra Lampropoulou, University of Athens

“Student, laborer and young”: youth action and remembrance of youth in post-war Greece

Since my topic is the remembrance of youth, I’d like to start by recounting two individual stories:¹

George was born in Kastania, a village on the western part of the island of Samos in 1945. His father was a landless peasant who participated actively in the Resistance, was deported to the concentration camp of Makronisos in 1948, released in 1950 and moved as an internal migrant to Athens to work in the quarries of the area of Petroupoli. George, the youngest of the four children in his family, was left behind, with the grandparents, to finish the elementary school in Samos. Those years were the happiest of his life, as he recalls, because of the absolute freedom he enjoyed. “As long as I stayed there, he remembers, I was completely unaware of what was going on, who were the friends and who were the adversaries in the village; I had no idea. I even went to the summer camp of the Queen’s Fund, and joined her reception once, when she came to Karlovasi.” George moved to Athens to join the rest of the family in 1958 and one year later he got a job and enrolled in the night school. After having spent three years attending night school, working, and socializing with street urchins downtown (the “Gavroches of Athens”), he experienced a major turnabout, when he felt the urge to react against the anticommunist sermon given by one of the professors at school. He then got in touch with leftist pupils whose influence led George to join the ranks of the Working Pupils’ Association of High Schools (ΣΕΜΜΕ/SEMME) and later on become a member of the Youth Organization of the United Democratic Left (Νεολαία ΕΔΑ). Through his new relationships, he became acquainted with literature, political theory and Marxist economics and participated in groups of self-study, an activity that completed his various organizational duties. “From an urchin to become a leader, that was a big change”, he says. George never finished high school. Instead, he took classes in a cinema and television school and began working as a journalist and a writer, which

¹ The stories are based on the oral history interviews by George Voiklis (16.4.2014) and Mary Toliou (19.11.2014).



gradually became his main occupation. During the dictatorship, he was arrested and detained. He participated in the formation of a New Left political group after the fall of the junta and remains an activist in the ecological movement.

Mary was born in 1949 in Divri (Λάμπεια), a village at the mountainous region of western Peloponnese. She was the seventh out of twelve siblings. Her parents were peasants and small farmers, “simple and descent people, what we call ‘good-egg’”, as she says. A few days before Christmas of the year 1960, Mary followed her elder brothers and sisters who had already settled in Athens. She finished the elementary school in the city and in the meanwhile she took care of the household. She had always liked school; “that was our only joy when we were little kids. It was a kind of breath for us in the village. It was no chore. At least for me it was not; I experienced school as the best thing ever. I loved drawing maps, taking part in the dancing acts, I loved everything, everything; and when school closed, I used to cry. [...] We looked forward to the autumn reopening, so that we could be with our friends..., because, to be honest, staying in the house meant lots of heavy tasks”. Having been an excellent pupil in the city school as well, she enrolled in a public day high school which she left for a better one in the second grade. However, in spite of her accomplishments, she had to leave day school at the age of 15 in order to work at the grocery store that her older brother had opened. She enrolled in the same night school where her siblings had studied before and finished it three years later, the only girl left in her class, determined to give and pass the exams for the university. She entered and finished the Pharmaceutical School at the University of Athens and had been working as a pharmacist until her pension last year, 2014. During all these years, she was active in trade unionism and political activity. In 1973, Mary participated in the students’ insurrection against the dictatorship, was arrested and imprisoned. She had first gotten involved in political activism during her school years and her connection to the Working Pupils’ Association of High Schools. The decision was easy to make as her elder siblings were already affiliated with that collectivity in terms of formal participation and informal, friendly relationships. Although their parents had nothing to do with politics, “the circumstances brought us elsewhere”, she says, “because as you pursue life and you search and read, there comes a moment when you become aware of certain things whether you like it or not. You



become aware”. Life within the association meant of course fighting for better schooling, but it also represented sound interpersonal relations and a high quality of recreational activities. “It was too important for me, a girl of only 15 years old, to have a part in a theatrical play”, she remarked. During the interview, Mary had a lot of old pictures to show me, pictures taken in different occasions of the association’s activities –theatre, parties, demonstrations, excursions-, all crowded with young faces and bodies that seemed to share feelings of familiarity.

These are two of many similar stories of youths and youngsters that attended night schools in post-war years. Both Mary and George had actively participated in SEMME. They both narrated stories that were at the same time personal and collective: stories about social relations and bonds, full of friends’ and relatives’ names as well as emotions by which they were bound to them, and very often still do. As memory, narration and biography connect with one another, the stories of the subjects are woven in different levels of intersubjective communication. They can, therefore, be read as stories of sociality. In this perspective, notions of sociality or, to be more exact, of versions of public or semi-public sociality, work as a means to narrate the condition of youth in its different moments. Youth, on the other hand, is generally acknowledged as a privileged context for social, cultural and political communication and, so, the ways in which it is connected to public sociality may seem useful for the history of the latter. In what follows, I will present briefly the main points in the history of the association and then try to develop in more detail the meanings that personal memory attributes to the participation in the night-schools movement during the sixties. That was by no means a social movement culminating in striking protests, dynamic occupations and resolute clashes with the police forces – which has become the rather stereotypical image of 1968. But it was part of youths’ popular democratic mobilization in the sixties, which retained its interesting to trace joints with youth politicization during the dictatorship and right afterwards. Of the multifarious meanings of participation and action that can be studied in different kinds of archival material, I will focus here on two, closely interwoven, that personal memory seems to underline as it creates the history told in oral accounts: the first one could be defined as the theme of intellectual emancipation and the second one as the initiation to collective life and collective aspirations. Both are



invariably highlighted in all oral accounts; both have their limitations. For the economy of time, I will constrain the direct citations of the testimonies in the most necessary ones.

Working Pupils' Association of High Schools was founded in the early sixties as an organization that intended to protect working pupils' interests and elevate their intellectual and educational level. The term “working pupils” referred to boys and girls who attended secondary night schools in the evening after having finished their daily waged work. In general, that part of youth population was experiencing both the constraints and fears of usually precarious forms of child and youth employment and the hopes of an upward mobility fostered by the dynamics of post-war economic growth. This seemingly absurd mixture of precarity and hope represented the particular way in which the Greek people of the lower social ranks were entering the post-war era. At the time, Greek society was located on the economic periphery of the West but at the centre of the Cold War ideological and political conflict, due to the experience of an elongated Civil War (1946-1949) which bequeathed to the country a turbulent political life and authoritarian forms of governing both state affairs and social relations. Social policy was more than poor in the Greek post-civil war context and the efforts to build a life could not actually count on the benefits of a welfare state. Family strategies of the lower social strata comprised the education of children, principally of boys, in forms that would fit in the overall familial project. So, combining daily work with night schooling was a practice followed by a large part of working-class –or, more generally, urban poor- kids.² Still, evening schools were broadly valued as inferior educational institutions. The Working Pupils' Association of High Schools was linked with an effort of the Greek Left to promote various forms of youth mobilization. It functioned as an organization aiming to improve the educational conditions and dispute the inferiority attributed to young people that attended night schools. It did that by acting simultaneously as a conventional union and as a cultural collectivity that encouraged literary thinking, writing and publishing poetry, reading and commenting on history and science, putting plays on stage.

² For an overview of post-war Greek history, see David Close, *Greece since 1945*, London 2002; William H. McNeil, *The Metamorphosis of Greece since World War II*, Oxford 1978.



It is precisely that last set of actions, which are connected to the importance of intellectual emancipation, that is the first meaning attributed to the associational participation through the mnemonic accounts. By intellectual emancipation, I mean rather a process than a moment, which encompassed at first making use of any kind of educational chances and rupturing pre-existing cultural constraints. Educational chances were not the same for boys and girls within any social environment at the time, no less for the girls living in relative poverty. Girls in night schools were far less than boys, a fact indicating that families either were afraid of the effect that night schools environment might have on their daughters or continued to restrict the choices of the latter in an absolute manner – or, most probably, both. Whatever educational chances offered by the state were considered to be incomplete or irrelevant without an access to culture, to high culture, and that one could be attained only by venturing on personal-but-not-lonely quest and self-development.

“I have a photograph... when SEMME took the initiative and we visited, twenty to thirty persons, the national art exhibition in Zappeion. [...] We got acquainted with other artists, too. In the department of Kallithea, there was Notis Mavroudis, who was the coordinator of the group and when the meeting had come to an end he used to take his guitar and play Segovia for us. In the 5th [Night High School] there was Linos Kokkotos [also a musician]. And then we produced that theatrical play and Linos wrote the music, that awesome play of the “A child counts the stars””.³ (George)

Mary was one of the actresses in that play. “We acquired a quality in whatever we did. Look at me, for example, I was 15 when I got involved in the theatre, there was a quality, I didn’t go to play cards or do other things... or read fancy magazines... [...] I moved to Athens when I was 12 and my older brother already had a huge library. [...] And me, since I was very young, I was reading, reading literature [...], that is, when I got 15-16, I had already read the complete works of Jules Vernes [...]. There was a different kind of sense [...], a different sense of what I wanted to do with my life. And all that was a tangle that you unrolled little by little. And in the association, there you could also listen to music. I remember Savvopoulos and Farantouri coming there. That

³ Notis Mavroudis and Linos Kokkotos are renowned musicians; *A child counts the stars* is a novel written by the author Menelaos Lountemis.



is, there was a quality in what we did and, consequently, there was a different kind of contact”. (Mary)

What made that intellectual emancipation possible? There is a general historiographical consensus on the cultural changes that mostly affected post-war youths in a great part of the planet: expanding educational provision, urbanization, proliferation of cultural products in both commercial and non-commercial form, increased income of the respective age groups. Those were changes that might render existing power relations more vulnerable to challenge and generate feelings of hope regarding future prospects. Still, they did not manifest themselves in uniform ways. For the men and women that concern me here, cultural transformation was primarily related to the fact that for the first time youths coming from a working class, lower peasantry or urban poor background could have access to higher education and, therefore, to the riches of civilization. But this major shift was not experienced as an offer on behalf of the organized society and the state but as a personal goal which took a lot of hard effort to achieve. Memory bears the traces of that cultural transformation, as the narrators elaborate on their ability to make their own planning in life, based on exactly that access to culture. From a certain perspective, individual and collective efforts for access to culture might be seen as acts of transcendence; on the other hand, though, respect for knowledge officially transmitted, at least for most of it, set a limit on the emancipatory process.

Be that as it may, intellectual emancipation was the basis for a new freedom of behavior on behalf of the subjects.⁴ But it did not entail a total estrangement from the past. In that respect, it is not an antihistorical position but rather an attitude prone to history. Memory has recorded the suffering due to inequalities experienced not only by the narrators themselves but by the former generations, the mothers and the fathers, as well. Those were inequalities emanating from gender, class, age, political or even spatial positions. The interviewees’ own itineraries, which embraced intense political commitment as a very important part, seem to right the wrongs of past inequalities: for

⁴ Intellectual emancipation as one of the elements that underpinned the new political culture of the “1968 generation” is also mentioned in Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation. Italy, 1968*, Middletown 1996



example, the educational constraints for women, or the fear and the disappointment for the defeated leftists of the 1940s.

As I mentioned earlier, intellectual emancipation was not a lonely venture; it was connected with the spaces of freedom that were created within the context of associational life in itself as well as in other spots of communication, loosely or tightly knotted together. Remembrance of youth means to a large part recollection of common life that peers share with each other; this memory is organized by reference to different spaces of collectivity: the association, the movement, but also houses of peers who lived by themselves or in groups of friends and siblings and, therefore, out the range of the parental surveillance. Youth as a mode of organizing sociality tended to trespass the boundaries between the private and the public. Within the accounts of individual lives, the transition to “communication and appropriation of new times and spaces”,⁵ like the cultural activity and the city, consists one of the most touching points in the unfolding of the narration. It is astonishing how networks of relationships established in those times are still valuable today.

It is in all these senses that participation and public action through the Working Pupils’ Association of High Schools acquires in memory the meaning of initiation to collective life and collective aspirations. Many times during this research, reading across archival material and transcripts of interviews, I wondered why there was so much insistence upon describing, commenting and recalling the production of the theatrical play “A child counts the stars”, as if that was the colophon of the association’s activity. One answer might be that this was indeed their distinctive emblem. Stephen Greenblatt has proposed that we should take seriously the collective production of literary pleasure and interest. The theatre, in specific, is manifestly the product of collective intensions and manifestly addresses its audience -and its creators, if we may add for the needs of our case- as a collectivity. The theatre depends upon a felt community.⁶ I suggest that this is exactly how memory, at least the mnemonic accounts I can point to here, has conceptualized that experience of public participation and

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 98.

⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, “The Circulation of Social Energy”, in Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, Sherry B. Ortner (eds), *Culture/Power/History. A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, Princeton 1994, p. 504-519.



collective action: as a felt community; and this, of course, brings us to the importance of emotions in the relation that people develop with politics.

Because of the collective life it encouraged, the Working Pupils' Association contained within itself a push toward democracy and equality. But here again we can outline limits and contradictions. We know of archival material and of testimonies that the push toward democracy coexisted with the didacticism and the control on behalf of the party mechanism. Of course, this is no news. Yet, marking out contradictions is indispensable, if we wish to historicize memory and make sense of how subjectivities are formed.

In a good part of these mnemonic narratives, there is embedded a notion of politics as a matter of collective commitment -of *felt community*- which is, but not necessarily oriented toward the struggle with central power. What we have here is a recollection of the pre-junta sixties that lacks sharp edges, represses but does not totally silences questions of power in terms of political engagement, family relations, or gender differences. This epoch emerges more like a time of preparation for the following big battle but also as the time of the creation of cultural stances and collective values that would prove to be an anchor also for less activist moments in the narrators' lives. To what extent and in what ways this kind of retrospection relates to today's social and political reality would be, if anything, questions interesting to tackle, because they would very likely help us historicize not only past, but present forms of public sociality as well.