



## Kalfopoulou, Adrienne. Review of *The Empty Cradle of Democracy, Sex, Abortion, and Nationalism in Modern Greece*, by Alexandra Halkias, Duke University Press, 2004, 413 pp.

Alexandra Halkias' multi-faceted inquiry raises fundamental questions regarding the agency of the female subject and the issue of abortion. While this study focuses on modern Greece, the polyvalence of the political, religious, social and gendered discourses that construct the female subject in relation to abortion, addresses the broader reach of narratives on nation and the female body as a site of contest and resistance with a recurring focus on the U.S.

An Assistant Professor of Sociology at Panteion University in Athens, Halkias tells us, "In mapping the meanings of nation, sex, and the body in Greece," she attempts "to expose the shaky foundations at the heart of contemporary liberal democracy and to chart the troubled waters of agency in late modernity..." The 'troubled waters of agency' in the not-so-late modernity of contemporary Greece become an interesting reflection of more general assumptions underpinning the choice of abortion, and the freedom to make those choices. Greek women's use of abortion and repeat abortions as a means of birth control, or more viscerally as a means of taking control, foregrounds Foucault's premise of sexuality as the site of power politics as much as Butler's theorizing of the violence implicit in "the conceits of liberal humanism" that this book directly contributes to.

*The Empty Cradle of Democracy* is an ambitious project, an amalgam of history, cultural politics, compilations of empirical data on Greek demographics and abortion, and primary source testaments; it braids together various interdisciplinary terrains to suggest their interdependencies in the construction of a national identity in gendered, social contexts. Yet the book's main, recurring ambition is to unveil or "make visible" the various embedded functions of power structures as they serve dominant discursive hegemonies and, in so doing, to advance contemporary theorization of the subject. As such Greece, with its history of oppressions (from the Ottoman Turks to various 'imported' foreign rulers to the Nazi occupation during WWII), becomes a kind of blueprint for the processes of subjugation and subjection that come to define, at least in part, some of the dynamics of gender relations that Halkias discusses. "Compulsory motherhood" and the role, for example, of the Orthodox Church in the formation of family gloss rather than problematize the interconnections between the individual and the state.

The individual's tenuous negotiations of agency within modernity and a national imaginary do not, therefore, ensure greater democratic access to acts of free will, a foundational assumption of the liberal humanism that Butler critiques. Halkias expands on Butler's critique of the subject's required identification with a normative "phantasm of 'sex'" in her consideration of how such discourses of naturalization privilege specific patterns of behavior (such as the choice to reproduce), while excluding or ignoring others, and upholds, with Foucault, that the individual is "an *effect of power*" (my emphasis). In this context the Pill and the condom are read as interventions, even invasions, by many of the women Halkias interviews, and as such these readings suggest a historical script of nationhood that produces cognitive categories by which "the body and life itself, including the fetus, is defined and experienced." Halkias' almost obsessively inclusive embrace of the various categories that construct and fragment the individual is both challenging and rewarding, but one wonders at times if this work isn't a two-volume effort somehow condensed into one.

In addressing the realities that have come to construct the Greek subject, and Greek women in particular, Halkias engages with semiotic, psychological, and historical realities that have contributed to positioning the subject in relation to the power structures that have come to define the culture, not least of which are pivotal moments of US government



involvement. This proves yet another layering of the complications that make Greece a site of ever shifting and destabilizing influences. For myself, I found the focus on these still fluid and contested boundaries that configure the discourses of say the Church, or the hierarchies of social classes, to be the most intriguing part of the study, and the most original. It is perhaps Halkias' American educational background (she earned her PhD from UC San Diego where research on this book first began) that privileges some of her insights on Greece and, in Foucault's words, "the specificity of [its] mechanisms of power." It is also what makes possible her ability to step back from those colluding moments within those mechanisms and make observations such as the one that takes place when she is visiting a Greek ob-gyn doctor who makes the repeated mistake of calling her doctoral research, a "master's": "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'".

If this study focuses on Greece, shifting from "abortion and national identity to sexuality and nationalism" its strength lies in how it compiles the multiple perspectives on a body of information, national and gendered, that resists the broader discursive hegemonies of what Halkias terms "formally democratic contexts". The empirical material is articulated through an analytic schema that defends a complex theoretical and political argument—a pivotal part of which targets deployments of power that the U.S. is signaled throughout the book as spearheading domestically and internationally. The very polyvalence of these multiplicities of perspective documented and analyzed becomes a site of resistance, usurping our ability to read this material in any one way. As such the interconnections made between the political and personal with the biological and social become significant to any discussion of how the female body remains embedded in the operations of power regardless of its cultural specificity.

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