

Paths Not Taken: Imperial Legacies and Diasporic Imagination in the Nineteenth-Century Mediterranean

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Transnational patriotism in the Mediterranean, 1800–1850: stammering the nation. By Konstantina Zanou. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xviii + 248. ISBN 9780198788706.

Konstantina Zanou's *Transnational patriotism* is a thought-provoking book, which offers a multi-faceted perspective on its subject that brings together scholarship on nationalism and diasporas with modern Greek and Italian intellectual history. Written in lively and accessible language and based on thorough research, it makes the reader rethink some of the major dilemmas of our own time while still remaining true to the perspectives of its protagonists. To take but the most salient example, the word 'patriotism', which features prominently in the book's title, has dominated public debate in Britain in recent years, as so-called 'Brexit patriotism' has become a fashion statement.

Transnational patriotism in the Mediterranean takes the reader to a paradigmatic contact zone, the early nineteenth-century Adriatic. It captures the moments of productive interaction among communities and individuals whose mobile lives, affective attachments, and intellectual networks suggest that patriotism could be the product of travel and movement along the routes of exile and displacement, as much as belonging and fixed roots. The book reconsiders centre-periphery models of cultural diffusion and places the circulation of ideas

within more complex regional and transnational geographies. Moreover, the use of a biographical scale of analysis makes the early nineteenth-century Adriatic tangible and enriches our understanding of the formation of national identity in this part of the world as an essentially diasporic phenomenon.

When we turn to the book's key arguments, we must first pause at the original and deliberately paradoxical core term, 'transnational patriotism'. For Zanou, this term refers to an upper-class mobile patriotism based on a bilingual imperial subjectivity that is unimaginable without the political and cultural space of the Venetian empire. An interesting point in this respect is that, even after the fall of the Republic of Venice in 1797, these diasporic intellectuals continued to define themselves in terms of their relationship to the imperial centre, Venice, and its centuries-old Greek community.

Zanou is right to point out that 'nationhood and empire were not mutually exclusive' (p. 10) in the early nineteenth century. Consequently, many individuals 'were experimenting with new forms of imperial nationalism' (p. 10), which she defines as 'some form of self-rule within larger, layered systems of imperial rule' (p. 92). In fact, empire was such an important form of political organization for so long that nationalism could not immediately replace it, instead developing a difficult and yet closely symbiotic relationship with imperial forms of political organization that lasted well into the twentieth century and the time of decolonization. Within this particular context, transnational patriotism emerged as a new form of political identity among affluent merchant diaspora communities caught up in a situation defined by bilingual and bicultural traits, creating a way of being in the world analogous in some ways to what postcolonial scholars have called the 'double vision of the colonized'.¹

¹ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and postcolonial literature: migrant metaphors* (New York, NY, 2005), p. 110.

A particularly noteworthy theme here is that of language. Zanou shows how language and literature acquired urgent new political meanings in the early nineteenth century and how intellectuals in the Adriatic worked across different languages to address complex issues about the nation and national belonging. This translanguing creativity brings us to the book's evocative subtitle, *stammering the nation*. While this metaphor works well on a number of levels and captures effectively the efforts of Ionian intellectuals to articulate new ideological and political projects, it does not always do justice to the fact that most of them were eloquent mediators who came from a multi-lingual environment. To be sure, Ugo Foscolo (1778–1827) did use the word 'stammer' to convey his own struggles with Italian, but one should not overlook the existence of a long-standing Italian-speaking tradition in the overseas territories of the Venetian empire, including his native Zante. This multi-lingual milieu was linked not just to trade but also to imperial governance and its related bureaucratic practices of translation and mediation. Venice's Greek colonial subjects were important go-betweens in this process, acting as cultural brokers. This was especially so in port cities like Corfu and Zante, which for centuries had been dynamic nodes of transregional interaction and circulation.

It is thus particularly striking – and ironic – that those Ionian intellectuals who advocated the abandonment of Italian in favour of Greek wrote their declarations in the Italian language. In many ways, this is the well-known paradox of colonial education, which brings to mind Shakespeare's famous monster from *The tempest*, Caliban. In the play, Caliban tells Prospero: 'You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse.' Caliban, himself a native inhabitant of a Mediterranean island, uses the language of his master, but can never forget that his acquisition of this language is the product of political domination.

Another significant facet of Zanou's study is the manner in which she uses the intellectual biographies of these Ionian intellectuals to underline the tensions between individual agency and contextual realities. In varying ways and degrees, this approach is

applied to all the major figures discussed in distinct chapters, namely Foscolo, Andrea Mustoxidi (1785–1860), Dionysios Solomos (1798–1857), Andrea Kalvos (1792–1869), Mario Pieri (1776–1852), and Andrea Papadopoulo Vretto (1800–76). The book provides a collective biography of a group of key personalities and networkers who constantly repositioned themselves in relation to shifting political and cultural configurations. All were praised and held in high esteem by their contemporaries. Zanou cites the example of Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837), who dedicated his *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* to Andrea Mustoxidi. Indeed, Mustoxidi in particular enjoyed other prestigious connections, including his little-known friendship with the great Italian novelist Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873).²

These remarks give rise to two key questions. The first is the book's observation that Pieri's story should be considered as that 'of a failure' (p. 143). Zanou makes the point that the Corfiot intellectual ultimately chose to remain an exile, and notes his penchant for melodrama: 'Yet if I were in my homeland, a longing to take my leave would immediately return ... yet when I am in Padua ... I am still not content, and wish always to be where I am not' (p. 125). This assessment, however, makes one wonder: is not such ambivalence a defining feature of exiled intellectual life? As we know from an extensive literature, a strong sense of placelessness is common among émigré intellectuals. Recall, for example, the title of Edward Said's autobiography, *Out of place*, or his remarks on the duality of the exiled writer's perspective in his *Representations of the intellectual*.³ What is more, if Pieri's conflicted attitude about choosing between Italy and Greece is deemed 'a failure', then what is the book's

² Claudio Povolo, *The novelist and the archivist: fiction and history in Alessandro Manzoni's The Betrothed*, trans. Peter Mazur (Basingstoke, 2014), pp. 62–3, 89.

³ Edward W. Said, *Out of place: a memoir* (London, 1999); idem, *Representations of the intellectual: the 1993 Reith lectures* (New York, NY, 1994).

criterion of success? Zanou is clear on this point. In a comparison with Greece's two great national poets, she remarks: 'Whereas other Ionian intellectuals like Kalvos and Solomos had ... taken a timely and conscious decision to turn themselves into Greek poets and writers, Pieri remained forever indecisive and suspended in a liminal state' (p. 140). In other words, the yardstick of success for these transnational patriots is, rather surprisingly, the ability to become national patriots. Yet, rating Ionian intellectuals on the basis of how well they converted their multiple cultural affinities into a singular national project risks reproducing the traditional Greek narrative of national apotheosis, with its pantheon of heroes. In so doing, the analysis betrays an underlying evolutionist viewpoint which assumes a linear teleology from empire to nation.

Last but not least, one is left with a sense of unfulfilled curiosity about the place of Ionian women in this landscape, and the ways in which their own diasporic lives intersected with the history of Adriatic transnational patriotism told here. The Greek countess and scholar Maria Petrettini (1774–1851) from Corfu, who makes a brief appearance in the book because of her love affair with Pieri, spent part of her life in Venice and translated into Italian the Ottoman letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. She also wrote a biography of the late fifteenth-century Venetian female scholar Cassandra Fedele to make the case for female education and underline the impact of women on the 'spirit ... of the nation'.⁴ The book could have made more of these examples to explore a gendered history of transnational patriotism in which women appear not only as accessories in the lives of 'great men', but also as autonomous subjects with their own perceptions and historical agency. In doing so, it could also have

⁴ Maria Petrettini, *Vita di Cassandra Fedele* (Venice, 1814), preface; eadem, *Lettere di Lady Maria Wortley Montague, moglie dell'ambasciatore d'Inghilterra presso la porta ottomana durante i suoi primi viaggi in Europa, Asia ed Africa* (Corfu, 1838); and eadem, *Sulla educazione femminile* (Padua, 1856). See also, Mara Nardo, *Maria e Spiridione Petrettini. Contributi allo studio della cultura italo-greca tra fine del dominio veneto e Restaurazione* (Padua, 2013).

examined women's translation activity in the nineteenth-century Mediterranean in comparative perspective. Recent research in this field has showcased the role of Greek women translators in late Ottoman Egypt and their attempt to construct a distinct gendered diasporic identity.⁵ These female writers raised key issues of gender in the hybrid context of the Greek diaspora in Egypt. The parallels with Petrettini in the Ionian are striking and worthy of further investigation.

As one can see from the range of questions it raises, Zanou's book offers exciting material for reflection and makes a timely contribution to the scholarship on early romanticism and nationalism in the Mediterranean. It casts a fresh perspective on the lives and ideas of revolutionary intellectuals who struggled with loss and renewal in the twilight of empire.

⁵ Titika Dimitroulia and Alexander Kazamias, 'Gender and diaspora in late Ottoman Egypt: the case of Greek women translators', in Marilyn Booth, ed., *Migrating texts: circulating translations around the Ottoman Mediterranean* (Edinburgh, 2019), pp. 151–92.