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On perspective and possibility in Mediterranean history

Transnational Patriotism widens our understanding of the Mediterranean and the interactions and entanglements that constitute its social and political landscapes at a conjuncture of great transformation. Zanou's anti-teleological reading of early-nineteenth century intellectual mobility challenges hegemonic frameworks of the nation-state that obscure her book's main protagonists in national historiographies. The perspective of the Ionian and Dalmatian characters (to simplify the complex array of languages of expression and locations of origin) retells in compelling fashion the history of modernity's possibilities and contributes to a growing body of scholarship on these Adriatic worlds. Zanou takes the reader on a journey beyond the sea's shores and into various hinterlands, but we also travel beyond ideas about exchange and interaction that insist upon port cities as primary nodes in regional connectivity. That geographical framework has come to dominate much of the recent historiography in and of the Mediterranean and, in Zanou's book, we learn how invariably intertwined are patterns of social and political relocation. She illustrates how 'patria' and belonging are at the centre of these mercurial intellectual circles, but that their definitions do not conform to *ex post facto* renderings imposed by the social and political containers of the nation-state. In focusing on this transformative conjuncture of meaning which defines the transition from early modern to modern worlds, *Transnational Patriotism* is a welcome addition to the historiography of the Mediterranean.

In her narrative, Zanou beautifully demonstrates the ambiguity of a historical moment in which categories of social and political belonging were neither defined nor clearly articulated, and therefore actors' deployment of these categories could be reluctant, riddled with stammer, and persistently looking towards the past to find a path towards the future. Indeed, the novelty articulated in this corner of the Mediterranean reminds the reader that it was not merely on the continent where individuals grappled with new temporal horizons.¹ These moments of uncertain horizons are, in many ways, the most interesting and temporally complex historical problems: I write this as someone working on the displacement of a community at the end of another imperial age, after 1945, when yet again the uncertainty of prevalent social and political categories contours individual and collective senses of history and possibility.

In detailing the ending of imperial worlds and the emergence of national ones, Zanou embraces a microhistorical approach towards the intellectuals moving in these milieus in order to question the teleologies of national literary canons (62). This is a successful and convincing approach. I did, however, wonder at times about this framing: the framing device of 'micro' and 'macro' occasionally appears forced. It is not always clear which measures of scale are at play in the balance between micro-phenomena and macro-level process. By being rooted in the individuals, are biographies (or their ideas) necessarily 'micro' and reflective of 'ordinary, workaday lives' (32), as Zanou writes? Can they, then, be extended into 'macrohistories' or broader changes occurring across wider communities and geographical regions? Or, are their ideas already macrohistorical insofar as the characters that populate her book envision transcendental possibilities, at times necessarily separated from the microhistorical worlds they inhabit? A clearer sense of their 'workaday' lives would aid the reader in understanding the connective tissues between the micro and macro, as well as shed further light on what the dynamic new methods of global microhistory do for *Transnational Patriotism*, as a book, and transnational patriotism, as a concept. In other words, more thick detail on the lives and

¹ I refer to Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

relations of the book's characters – on their families, their work, their property and belongings – would help to clarify the relationship between micro and macro. How did their socio-economic standing, their material worlds, and individual attachments shape their scholarly training and political imaginaries? What were the conditions of possibility for their training and imagination? *Transnational Patriotism* is an intellectual history, which “narrates the lives of a men (and a few women) of letters and politics” (1), yet their observations, thoughts, and practices divert the readers’ attention away from workaday lives, often taking us far from the very worlds they inhabited.

In this account, the intellectuals are framed as ‘embodying’ (3, 27) abstract ideas or the patria itself. This raised questions about the ways in which we understand and describe historical actors’ intentions. To take the example of Mario Pieri – one of the lesser-known characters in Zanou’s book, and deserving of further scrutiny – his work appears less prescriptive than observational – almost obsessively so. While we learn that he was involved in a number of intellectual networks pondering nascent concepts of social and political belonging, I wondered to what extent his writing reflects his location within constellations of *existing* categories. In other words, does Pieri ‘embody’, for Zanou, abstract ideas which transcend him in time or space, or is his embodiment a means of reflecting on and shaping ideas and practices? This is never quite articulated, but we gather that both are the case. Yet, I had the impression that there is something more at stake in this conceptual framing. I was drawn to older debates about intentionalist versus structuralist interpretations of the past, especially with regard to the body of scholarship on protection in the Ottoman Mediterranean and the need for merchants, diplomats, and the like to remain under consular authority, both to facilitate movement across imperial and national borders and to ensure their differentiation from local communities in matters of residence and taxation.² The number of individuals in this book who were either in close contact with consuls or themselves temporarily became consuls in these Mediterranean worlds made me ponder on the role of pragmatic engagement with categories yet unformed. In Egypt, for example, registration with consuls existed before the early nineteenth century, and many travellers and political exiles used their consulates as forums to claim protections, but it would not be until the end of the century that consuls took on a political or identitarian role -- and even then considerable confusion still reigned as to what and who these individuals were, and what their purpose was in relation to the state. To what extent could we say that some of these Ionian and Dalmatian intellectuals were similarly engaged in pragmatic endeavours, and less prescriptively ‘embodying’ changes occurring on macro-historical scales? As much as this represents my hesitation to see the characters of *Transnational Patriotism* as embodiments of wider worlds, this is also a caution about taking historical actors’ political visions for granted – a problem facing intellectual and social historians alike.

Along these lines, I found the example of Skanderberg particularly revealing of the multiple contexts that converge in this conjuncture, and yet are suggestive of future developments. Zanou writes: “[t]he fact that a work written in Italian by a Greek Ionian could function as a reference point for the construction of two distinct and competing national mythologies [Greek and Albanian] provides an invaluable glimpse into the multicultural and pluri-national world of the Italian and Ottoman Adriatic in the early decades of the 19th century” (148). Beyond its

² See, for example, Marcella Aglietti, Mathieu Grenet and Fabrice Jesn   (eds), *Consoli e consolati italiani dagli Stati preunitari al fascismo (1802-1945)* (Rome: Ecole fran  aise de Rome, 2020); Ziad Fahmy, “Jurisdictional Borderlands: Extraterritoriality and ‘Legal Chameleons’ in Precolonial Alexandria, 1840-1870,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 55, 2 (2013): 305-329; William Hanley, *Identifying with Nationality: Europeans, Ottomans, and Egyptian in Alexandria* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Shana Minkin, *Imperial Bodies: Empire and Death in Alexandria, Egypt* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2019).

testament to multiple, contemporary worlds, the case of Skanderberg is telling because it also illuminates how these intellectuals could fall within prescriptive models that attempted to forge political communities out of early-nineteenth century contexts, both micro and macro. This case also demonstrates the capacity for individuals – so central to Zanou’s narrative, framed as it is around biographies -- to resonate with a collective or shared experience of exile (the ‘stuff’ of community).

I want to return to Pieri to think through another issue. *Transnational Patriotism* makes much of the slipperiness between ‘home’ and ‘abroad’ in this moment of transition from empires to nation-states (141-143). For Pieri and other trans-imperial or transnational subjects who were, like him, members of the intellectual elite left in this *no man’s land*, it is clear that they thought of themselves as, in some way, caught in liminal spaces. And yet I wondered whether there were others involved in revolutionary struggles and upheaval who would have seen this notion of ‘liminality’ as an affront. To what extent did Pieri’s circumstances relate precisely to his mobility as an intellectual? His peers experienced angst and ‘slippery’ geographies (142), but others fought (and died) to forge new geographies, whether through conservative, liberal, or radical revolutionary means. In other words, how did this *no man’s land*, once populated (143), connect to or remain detached from contexts of social upheaval. On this point, I thought about the town on which I am currently conducting research in Calabria, where the landed aristocracy who were physically present in the town and ran its holdings during the nineteenth century supported the mobility of each family’s intellectual, as it were, and yet they were also in touch with the changing conditions on the ground in which peasants and artisans struggled over control and rights to the landscapes they inhabited. Here, political conflict was not *liminal*. Rather, it was inseparable from those material worlds of mobility that characterised intellectual spheres.

In the case of the historian Andrea Mustoxidi, we do see some of these tensions. Zanou draws attention to a revealing passage in which he suggests – through religious argumentation -- the idea that one’s language of communication does not matter. Zanou points out that this suggests something drastically – radically, even – different from the understandings of ethnolinguistic nationalist thought that have so often framed our understanding of this historical moment. Yet, the chapter on Mustoxidi begins with a reference to the subtle rejection he received from his fellow scholar Adamantios Koraes precisely because he wrote in Italian, and was held in such high regard for doing so (166). Koraes does not reprimand Mustoxidi for his knowledge and expertise in Italian, but rather for addressing another ‘Greek’ in Italian. He does not therefore dismiss plurilingual, literary erudition, but he does seem to question the ‘depth’ of Mustoxidi’s political commitment, or at the very least imply that he might want to consider the implications of his use of other languages over the ‘mother tongue’ in this historical conjuncture. Rather than take one or the other as offering paradigmatic depictions of contemporary worlds – keeping in mind that the chronological backdrop of *Transnational Patriotism* includes people fighting wars, dying or becoming displaced and exiled, and that insurrection and revolution are changing the landscapes of possibilities across Europe’s Mediterranean shores – I wonder what were the more contentious political stakes of language at play? In other words, how were the intellectuals who constitute Zanou’s narrative perceived – if they were thought of at all -- by those engaged in insurrections, by armies and generals, by militants and brigands, or by peasants. It is worth noting that when the political situation becomes unbearable for many of the book’s characters, they leave – even if they do so with regret. Perhaps the telling exception is Mustoxidi himself, who appears to take the more radical route, embracing the ‘low social strata’ and turning away from the intellectual elitism of Tommaseo.

In this evocatively told tale of intellectuals caught between crumbling old worlds and fleetingly possible new ones, a hint of nostalgia resonates in the landscapes of their *no man’s land*. There

is a common theme in the overlapping lives of *Transnational Patriotism*'s characters, one of tension between the promise of a nationally unified state and the pull of pluralistic origins. Zanou observes that the 'dissolving' of the Venetian Empire marked the space between these two horizons. I wondered how to conceive of nostalgia in this transitional narrative, not simply as a glance backwards in time, but also as a driving force for the intellectual ruminations of the story's characters, as a means to articulate the possibilities and perils of the emergence of transnational nationalism.

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