

Upon the encounter of ‘politics’ and ‘culture’: rethinking the history of the Left in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus

Leonidas Karakatsanis | British Institute at Ankara

doi:10.18866/biaa2017.03

When the concepts of ‘politics’ and ‘culture’ meet, their encounter usually takes three different – albeit intertwining – disciplinary paths. Following the first path, the most established one, we find ourselves within the fields of anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and political philosophy. Here, the main focus is on the role that different tropes of human life (such as ethnicity, race, religion, but also elements of gender or sexual orientation) play in societal relations (Rockhill and Gâomez-Muller 2011: 1). From the perspective of these fields of enquiry, the encounter between culture and politics is sought across the ‘private’ and the ‘public’: from the mundane and the non-strictly-political conduct of everyday practices (such as performing one’s belief or fulfilling one’s desire), to their entanglement with wider public morals and values, which, in turn, create boundaries between outsiders and insiders. The heated debates about ‘multiculturalism’, for instance, take place here. The same goes for the – sometimes complex – intellectual battles on whether one can speak of *a culture* (national or even regional) or fragmented and multi-vocal *cultures*. We could codify this first relation between politics and culture as **cultural politics**.

However, when *politics* takes the conceptual lead in the encounter with culture, we are usually drawn to a different trajectory, broadly coined, since the late 1950s, as **political culture** (Gabriel Almond’s article ‘Comparative political systems’ published in 1956 in the *Journal of Politics* is considered the birthplace of the term in contemporary political science: Welch 1993: 3–4). The disciplinary fields of political science and comparative politics drive us along this path. Here, ‘culture’ refers mainly to the recurrent political behaviour of specific groups or within specific national or regional boundaries. According to this approach, political culture ‘has to do with fundamental core beliefs ... [one’s] basic attitude towards democracy, authoritarianism or freedom’ (Wiarda 2014: 2). The concept of ‘political culture’ is helpful to identify patterns in a state’s history regarding the separation of powers and the safeguarding – or not – of fair elections; to distinguish different types of relations between organised interests and those in power; or, finally, to examine the ways in which citizens use their votes (for instance, as a result of ideological affiliations or in expectation of being rewarded for it). The persistence of certain types of behaviour moulds a political ‘heritage’, and so, political scientists argue, political cultures can take generations to change.

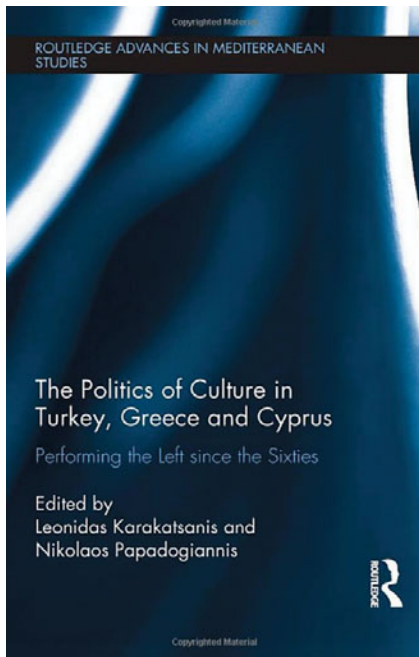
Finally, the third path of the encounter between politics and culture leads us into the world of art – in its most expanded notion. In other words, art here is understood both

in its material and immaterial forms, as an expression, activity and production, as well as a result: from the ‘sublime’ and the ‘monumental’ or ‘high’, to the ‘local’ or ‘popular’ imprints of human culture. Under this approach, the encounter of culture with politics turns attention to the way in which politics act upon culture, i.e. the way in which the state and its apparatuses regulate, control, restrict or promote cultural production and cultural heritage within a given polity. This debate is examined extensively in heritage studies and other relevant disciplinary fields (museum studies, art management), as well as cultural studies, as part of what is coined **cultural policy** (Paquette 2012: 2). Work undertaken here expands the focus to examine decisions taken on what to preserve or destroy, the choices made to expose or hide, and the strategies adopted on what – and how – to remember (or, for that matter, what to forget) as part of a ‘common’ past (see, for instance, Peter et al. 2013).

But, what about when all these different trajectories of the encounters between politics and culture align and take place simultaneously? What happens when one’s political identity is expressed not only through voting patterns or not only through the kind of relation one builds with a political party or the state, but also by different types of remembering and commemorating the past, and different ways of performing one’s everyday life. What happens when the political aspect of cultural production is related not only with the regulative force of the state, and the direction of action is reversed? That is, when the material and intangible cultural products themselves acquire a political agency: from songs sung, recorded and circulated in a minority language, to sculptures used to promote a way of remembering that contrasts with the dominant narratives of the nation-state. What happens when race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality themselves become relevant to political belongings and intermingle with party political identifications?

In our recently published edited volume, *The Politics of Culture in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus: Performing the Left since the Sixties* (Karakatsanis, Papadogiannis 2017), my co-editor, Nikolaos Papadogiannis, and I explore the encounters between politics and culture across these three different fields of enquiry with reference to the history of the Left in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus. Some questions are probably already looming here. Why adopt a specific focus on the Left instead of looking at all political parties involved in the politics of culture? Is there something unique about the relation of the Left with ‘culture’ in all its different forms noted above? And, if so, why then focus exclusively on Turkey, Greece and Cyprus as specific objects of study?

These are all valid questions that the book and its 12 chapters try to answer. The starting point of these answers is that Turkey, Greece and Cyprus represent the only non-communist states in southeastern Europe that found themselves part of the North Atlantic Treaty and the ‘Western’ sphere of influence at the end of the Second World



War. This was in contrast to many neighbouring countries in the Balkans which became part of the Soviet sphere of control. At the same time, all three locations saw the growth of significant and massive left-wing and/or communist political movements and parties, before, during and/or after 1945. The Cold War that followed had, of course, a significant effect on what it meant to be a 'left-winger' in these three geographies: illegality, persecution and prosecution – if not exile and death – became the norm, albeit in different periods and at different levels of intensity in each of these settings. Consequently, the experience of living under the suffocating oppression of an all-empowered right-wing state (and, on many occasions, of deep-state structures) constituted a *common experience*, lived by thousands of left-wingers in Greece, Turkey and Cyprus.

Cultural production and art – taking the forms of reels of film, of poems written in custody or music recorded and circulated illegally via tapes – became for those left-wingers a primary means of political expression in times when straightforward political action was difficult, if not impossible. And indeed, this created a unique bond between the Left and culture as art form. As the years passed and less confrontational politics evolved (including, in most cases, the legalisation of left-wing and communist parties), the memory of these experiences of pain and loss became a significant part of left-wing cultures. The very act of remembering and commemorating this past constituted a continuous *performance* of what the Left was

and still is in these three places. This was a performance through which *despair* and *hope* cohabited – and still cohabit – the same spaces; *despair* and *hope* became co-constitutive of each other in creating the political 'culture' or 'cultures' of the Left.

The book consists of four parts, each examining a different theme in this relation between left-wing cultures and politics. The first part focuses on memory as culture and its role in shaping left-wing identities. This section takes into account the significance of issues pertinent to gender, nationhood and ethnicity in the moulding of such cultures of memory. The second part examines the production and regulation of art as a political form (from Kurdish music and revolutionary cinema in Turkey, to curatorial practices in Cyprus). The third explores the way in which the Greek, Turkish and Cypriot Left participated in the tensions – or even transitions – between tradition and modernity in each setting. The fourth part focuses on the spatial aspect of culture (such as Greek university campus life and the position of the Left in it and the local cultures of the *Gecekondu* shanty neighbourhoods of Istanbul in the 1970s). The book aspires to expand the examination of political cultures beyond the narrow realms of political behaviourism and offer a set of concepts that facilitates communication across the different fields engaging with 'culture' and 'politics'.

References

- Karakatsanis, L., Papadogiannis, N. (eds) 2017: *The Politics of Culture in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus: Performing the Left since the Sixties*. London/New York, Routledge
- Paquette, J. 2012: *Cultural Policy, Work and Identity: The Creation, Renewal and Negotiation of Professional Subjectivities*. Farnham, Ashgate
- Peter, F., Dornhof, S., Arigita Maza, E. 2013: *Islam and the Politics of Culture in Europe: Memory, Aesthetics, Art*. Bielefeld, Transcript.
<https://doi.org/10.14361/transcript.9783839421765>
- Rockhill, G., Gâomez-Muller, A. (eds) 2011: *Politics of Culture and the Spirit of Critique: Dialogues*. New York, Columbia University Press
- Welch, S. 1993: *The Concept of Political Culture*. New York/St Antony's College, Oxford, St Martin's Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-22793-8>
- Wiarda, H.J. 2014: *Political Culture, Political Science, and Identity Politics: An Uneasy Alliance*. Farnham, Ashgate



Detail from the exhibition 'The museum of shame', organised by the Federation of the Revolutionary Generation of '78 and presented every September in Ankara on the occasion of the anniversary of the 12 September 1980 coup. Its purpose is to commemorate and honour the 'lost comrades' assassinated or disappeared during the turbulent 1970s, 1980s and 1990s (photo L. Karakatsanis).