

Miltiadis Zerpoulis
Dreaming Big in Post-War Greece

Culture and Social Practice

I dedicate this book to the memory of my grandparents, Stefanos and Kleopatra Karaiskakis.

Miltiadis Zerpoulis holds a PhD in social anthropology from the Department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies at the University of Macedonia in Thessaloniki, Greece. Between 2017 and 2021 he worked for a migrant organization in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. Since June 2021 he has been working as a research associate and deputy head at the Institute for Transcultural Competence at Police Academy of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg. His academic interests include material culture, anthropology of space, state culture, social classes, post-colonial theories, ethnic/religious minorities and migration.

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Neighborhood, Life Style, and Everyday Practices in the City of Thessaloniki

[transcript]

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“[...] It was an introverted city. After that decade of bloodshed, people were swallowing again silently the gloom of every day. On their clothes, latches seemed to be hanging from buttons, locking their bodies in jackets and gloomy skirt suits, to make sure they wouldn't move graciously and wouldn't live. They rarely ever smiled and even when they did so, it was only to comply with the order of a photographer on the esplanade. Their faintly smiling lips were hardened. Oily brilliantine and stiff hair-sprayed hair were a shy attempt to achieve a poor and scrawny beauty.

Their joy had now been localized. Their past grace and nobility had been burned in the fear of recent memory. In a way, they were all turning peasants. Former bourgeois Israelites had been burned in the fumes of the camps in Poland; most of those who survived left for Athens and Palestine. The famine memory was turning all other bourgeois, who stayed there and did not leave for the capital, into peasants. Real peasants, too, were coming with the intention to stay forever in the injured city armpits. The provinces, wounded by civil stabbings, were vomiting their people like infected blood. No wealthy people had been left; only those making money and thousands of labourers. They all wished to forget: the former their guilt, the latter their memories; most of them had buried their family members with their own hands. They wished to forget, fall asleep not to remember anymore; this is maybe why they loved so much the lulling noise of the concrete mixer in the construction sites, mixing the concrete blend and sending it so high up to reach the newly built framework of the apartment buildings.

These were now sweeping away the detached houses with metopes and tiles, those compassionate houses of the old city that had their walls torn by bullets, those houses that made them remember.”

“[...] And all those big trees with the apartments appeared broken down from the very moment of their creation: narrow corridors like catacombs, dark entrance doors with eyes, such and such family, air shafts, spotty stairs with mosaic patterns, slow old-fashioned lifts with a red eye in the darkness of the corridors. Smell of sizzled onion and peppers, sounds from a whispering radio, smoker's cough, because those waiting for the lift were coughing to dispel the evil, as if this coughing could change the burnt-out light bulb in the corridor.”¹

1 Excerpt from the novel by Isidoros Zourgos (2005), *In the Shadow of the butterfly*, Pataki editions. I would like to thank the author and the publisher for allowing me to use this excerpt in this publication. This extract has been translated from Greek into English for the purposes of this publication.

