

Occasional Paper 5

Greek- American Radicals:
The Untold Story
Ταξισυνειδησία:
Η άγνωστη ιστορία του
ελληνοαμερικανικού ριζοσπαστισμού

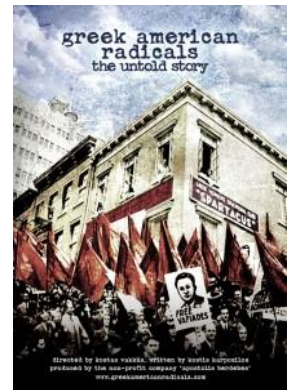


In connection with the special section on Public Scholarship published in the May 2015 issue of the Journal of Modern Greek Studies the editors conducted an interview with Kostis Karpozilos, the historian behind the acclaimed documentary [Greek-American Radicals: The Untold Story](#), on questions regarding public scholarship, Greek-American radicalism, and the hidden folds of history.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrkgPNnV-Js>

Please give a brief description of the documentary you prepared: identify, date, and summarize it, state what was the impetus of its making, indicate the people on the production team, its funding sources, the process and schedule of its distribution, its different public audiences, including audiences inside and outside of academic settings.

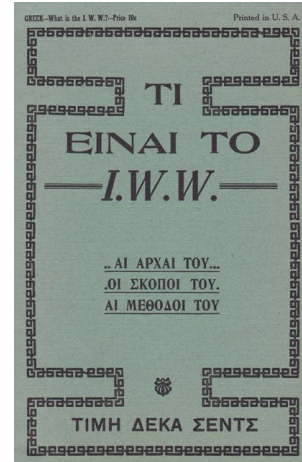
Greek American Radicals: The Untold Story (Ταξισυνειδησία: η άγνωστη ιστορία του ελληνοαμερικανικού ριζοσπαστισμού) is an hour-long (64') documentary focusing on revolutionary diasporas in the United States and more particularly on the Greek American Left from the era of mass migration in the early twentieth century until the postwar Red Scare. Funded by the non-profit organization Apostolis Berdebes (who was a leading figure in the anti-junta movement in the United States) and directed by Kostas Vakkas, it was first screened in the 15th Thessaloniki Documentary Festival (March 2013). This was from the very start a collaborative project (Kostis Karpozilos, script-writer and historical research; Frosso Tsouka, producer; Nontas Skarpelis, editing) aiming to highlight a neglected aspect of the Greek immigrant experience and to generate debate on the links between labor immigration and the contemporary global financial crisis. Following the Thessaloniki Documentary Festival launch, *Greek American Radicals* was screened for six weeks in two theaters in Athens, broadcast nationally in Greece



through the occupied ERT, and watched by thousands of viewers in numerous screenings in social and cultural centers, film festivals, film clubs, and academic seminars. It was conceived, written and produced in Greece, but it has also been widely distributed and screened in the US, United Kingdom, France, Canada, Australia, Cyprus, and Belgium.

What are the prospects for projects about Greek America in Greece?

The recognition that the documentary has received, which has allowed it to circulate so widely in so many venues, illustrates the potentiality of projects on Greek American and American themes in Greece. Even though the politics of austerity limit the resources available for filmmaking, the time has come for a fruitful conversation that will go beyond the traditional Americanism/anti-Americanism polarization. I think the *Greek American Radicals* project has contributed to this end, and this is one of its main achievements.



In what way did the documentary entail public scholarship, and how do you understand the notion of the “public”?

The recent interest in public scholarship shows the productive recognition of the need for an encounter between academic and wider community concerns. The transformation of academia from a space of public intervention and ideological debate into a detached world of intellectual exercise and introverted reproduction has finally reached its limits—and for good reason. This recognition though might lead to the opposite extreme in the form of financial dependency measured by the quantitative impact of project and ideas. Therefore I am quite skeptical of the evolution of public scholarship to the absolute criterion for academic success. However, the *Greek American Radicals* documentary was not conceived as an academic project. Even though it reflected my own scholarly interests, the intent was different: to contribute to an existing debate outside academia on the history of the Left and on the broader question of how political imagination was shaped and reshaped over the twentieth century.

What internal debates arose among those involved in the making of the documentary (i.e. how to present the material; the question of audience)?

Any collaborative effort entails lengthy, often exhaustive, debates, which frequently lead to incomplete projects. Despite existing differences, we avoided this peril, because we all shared a basic agreement: the importance of producing an alternative narrative of the Greek American experience. One thorny issue we had to overcome was whether the narrative should conclude with a definitive remark on the history of social movements in the United States. This question reflects popular conceptualizations of history that portray the past as offering useful lessons for the future. The Left also shares the idea that history provides contemporary political movements with instructive lessons and therefore all historical narratives should end with a conclusive statement on the fallacies of the past and the tasks for the future.

I do not share this view. My motto is a line from Karl Marx, in Chapter 6 of *The Holy Family*: “history does nothing.” Unfortunately history has nothing to teach revolutionaries; it can only offer insights on the contingencies of historical development and the complexities of social transformations. In this context, I think we do not really need conclusions but space for free associations and open-ended questions.

What was the primary audience for the documentary? How did you imagine that audience while making the film? How did you target that audience? What were the challenges for presenting the material of the film to that audience?

The documentary is bilingual (English/Greek), as it addresses a meeting point of Greek, American, and Greek American history. The audience for the film expands from the radicalized youth in Greece and the US, to the many people who have personal immigration background or stories to share. The meeting point of these diverse audiences is the eagerness for a neglected aspect of the immigrant experience in the United States. Our limited resources did not allow us to launch a centralized publicity campaign, but after a while it became evident that it was not really necessary. The success of the documentary in reaching a large audience was based on a grass-roots



interest reinforced by social networks and extensive coverage spanning a range of media from mainstream Greek newspapers to radical journals and alternative media. It was like a snowball effect; not a huge avalanche, but a visible snowball. The challenges were diverse, as it happens with different audiences. The politicized audience of social movements often requested a direct link between the past and contemporary struggles, while Greek American audiences often insisted that the Greek immigrant experience was exceptional and therefore devoid of political radicalism.

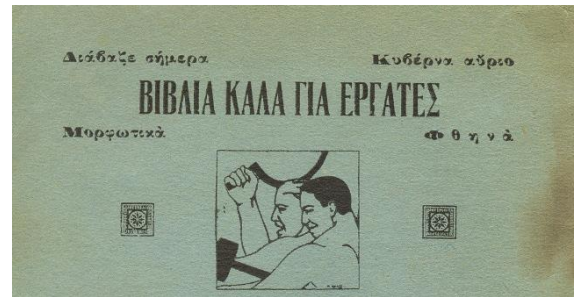
Were there any venues that particularly welcomed or alternatively resisted its showing?

I have attended around twenty screenings (out of more than a hundred in social centers, academic rooms, and political venues) and I am grateful to every group, organization, and program that has hosted *Greek American Radicals*. From the University of Reno, Nevada and the Greek community center in Brussels to the New York City Greek Film Festival, I had the opportunity and privilege to discuss aspects of my work and research. This is truly unique. An open-air screening in Athens organized by the Archives of Social Contemporary History (ASKI) and attended by 300 people was a particularly moving experience, since the audience reflected the intersection of engaged scholarship and political awareness that has contributed to the transformation of Greece in the post-2008 world. In contrast, the over-publicized event in the Stathakeio Center in New York where a small group of neo-Nazis attempted, unsuccessfully, to disrupt the screening was a nasty episode. More disturbing though was the indifference of Greek American communities and institutions alike: up to this point with a handful of exceptions, *Greek American Radicals* remains an untold story for the vast majority of the contemporary Greek American world.

What were the Greek American organizations with which you interacted for the promotion of the film? What was your experience in this interaction, if any?

There was no actual interaction—with some notable exceptions. The *National Herald* interviewed me twice, but refrained from any publicity aside from a dry account of events at the film's showing in Stathakeio. On the other hand, it would be erroneous to draw an equation between Greek American organizations and the numerous alternative worlds of Greek Americana. At every single screening I have attended, there are always people coming up afterwards sharing their views and experiences as they were formulated both in Greece and the US. They do not necessarily belong, or represent, Greek American organizations; but they are Greek Americans.

The documentary works against the grain of a conventional narrative of Greek American struggle and success. Would you like to share your thoughts about this narrative, as both scholar and filmmaker?



Greek American communities are trapped in the narrative of struggle and success—which by the way has shifted from labor and economic assimilation to an understanding of success in an entirely folkloric fashion. Constructing a homogenous microcosm, this narrative promotes a sense of Greek exceptionalism that does not correspond to the historical and contemporary interactions between Greek and other immigrant/ethnic groups and American society in general. I am not a historian of ethnicity; I addressed issues relating to ethnicity through my interest in social and political movements of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, I firmly believe that the narrow understanding of the Greek American experience solely as one of success marginalizes something more than radical politics. It targets every narrative that addresses the cornerstones of the Greek immigrant experience: wage labor and discrimination.

The documentary represents an example of work bringing to the foreground silenced or forgotten peoples and the violent histories of repression. Is there a possibility for a productive dialogue at this moment between those who advocate the histories of the forgotten people and those who have contributed to this forgetting? Or with organizations promoting Greek American cultural preservation?

The experience of the *Greek American Radicals* documentary suggests that there is not much space for dialogue with the institutionalized representatives of the Greek American world. The distinction though between these institutions and the organizations promoting Greek American cultural preservation is an important one, since the latter reflect a grass-roots, community-centered awareness that encompasses the preservation of diverse cultural and social memories. It is extremely important to further promote the ongoing preservation projects and to enhance the participatory dimension that they entail, as is evident, for instance, in the success of Facebook pages devoted to the documentation of cultural practices of the past and the contemporary dimensions of cultural heritage. These diverse preservation projects offer a unique opportunity for dialogue and debate expanding beyond the academic world.

We know that you had a deep knowledge of Greek American class relations, both intracommunal and with its wider, non-Greek surroundings, before you started working on the documentary. Did any of your findings while working on it surprise you? Was this a process that afforded you new knowledge or new insights?

Yes and yes. On a broader level, transforming the academic narrative into a scenario was an illuminating experience that allowed me to rethink the overall structure of my research. At the same time, the impressive footage that is so intrinsic to the documentary challenged some of my earlier assumptions. For instance, in my thesis on *Greek American Radicalism*, I had overemphasized the process of assimilation and Americanization as a constitutive dimension of political radicalism. My renewed research in moving images collections that documented the social world of ethnic radicalism allowed me to rethink this concept and recognize the persistence of ethnic patterns within the broader context of working-class Americanization. In this context, my forthcoming book on *Greek American Radicalism* (University of Crete Press, 2015) reflects my transformative documentary experience both in content and in structure.



Do you see possibilities with public scholarship in Greek America on the contemporary working class? Or beyond the working class?

It is evident that in the post-2008 setting there is a significant flow of people from Greece to the US, but we lack any systematic approach or documentation of this phenomenon. I think we are confronted with a new episode in the long history of migration, but we lack the awareness of understanding this as such. In addition, there is a wide spectrum of interesting, provocative transnational cultural and political manifestations and interactions that require attention—not because they offer topics for academic talks and careers, but because they demonstrate the ever-changing nature of political and cultural imagination and require our participation and contribution.

In 1987 Neni Panourgíá, based at the time in Boulder, Colorado, wrote a NEH grant to conduct research with the objective to produce a museum exhibit on the Greek American experience in the Intermountain West. The research would focus on labor and inter-community relations and would showcase the Ludlow Massacre and the Greek Town Riot in Nebraska. However, none of the Greek American cultural organizations or churches in any of the intermountain states agreed to co-sponsor the research. What do you think has changed in the three decades since then that has allowed for a documentary such as *Greek American Radicals* to become possible as a public narrative?

It seems that 1987 was not the best time for Greek American projects devoted to questions of class and radicalism. I think your question highlights the interrelation of two issues: first, the prevailing neoconservative atmosphere of the 1980s and the parallel crisis of public and

historiographical projects highlighting the working class experience; second, the dominance of the struggle and success narrative within the Greek American communities, with the emphasis given to *success*, given Michael Dukakis's presidential bid in 1988. The importance though of pioneering efforts and dissenting voices—of Dan Georgakas's, Helen Papanikolas's and Zeese Papanikolas's writings or Neni Panourgia's project—should not be underestimated: these efforts contributed greatly to the preservation of sources and more importantly to the creation of an alternative sphere within the Greek American dominant narrative.

We are currently witnessing, on account of the global financial crisis, a renewed interest in debates relating to the social question, and it is within this context that a documentary such as *Greek American Radicals* became possible. It is not a coincidence that a second Greek documentary on a Greek American labor story followed: *Palikari: Louis Tikas and the Ludlow Massacre* (A Non-Organic Production, 2014) underlines further the reverse of a tide that in the 1980s and early 1990s seemed to be irreversible.

When all was said and done, as a historian (even as the social historian that you are), what merits did you find in reaching out of the archive, into this quasi-ethnographic setting? Is this documentary part of a new paradigm in doing history?

The exodus from the archive has been quite often advertised as the big leap forward for historiography, but it seems to me that we are (and not just historians) still in the archival realm. I think that if there is going to be a new paradigm in doing history this will not be the outcome of some great methodological break but of a subtle shift towards the question of whether and why history matters in the first place. This will allow historians to stop and think why they chose to research certain themes, to become self-critical and recognize the career motives behind their choices, and to confront the harsh realization that history is a conservative science—at the end of the day it narrates a continuous story of failed attempts for human emancipation. In this context, the quasi-ethnographic setting that you refer to can be extremely helpful: it reminds us that history is about humans with contradictions and not abstract images of the past.



Kostis Karpozilos is a historian, currently a Stanley Seeger Post-Doctoral Fellow at Princeton University. He has previously held a Stavros Niarchos Foundation Post-Doctoral Fellowship at Columbia University (2012-2014) and is the editor of the archive of the socialist intellectual Stavros Kallergis (Benaki Museum,

2013). He has taught at the University of the Peloponnese, at Sciences Po (Paris), and at Columbia University. His current research engages with the role of political imagination in times of crisis.