

# I NTRODUCTION

## The Wretched: Between “The New Colossus” and “The Internationale”

This book’s protagonists are marginal characters: Greek immigrants whose experiences in the United States were intertwined with the socialist and especially the communist movement. Focusing on their history from the beginning of the twentieth century to the Cold War, my aim is to see how the foreigner, the immigrant, the hyphenated American turned to the Left in search of an escape from the constraints of their present. This quest for a radical alternative did not take the form merely of entry into an existing social and political universe. They remade that world. *Red America* argues that the thoughts, desires, and activism of immigrants were themselves crucial in shaping the labor, socialist, and communist movements in the United States.

In my view there is a thread that links transatlantic immigration and political radicalism. Both immigration and revolutionary ideas seemed to raise the prospect of salvation from a dreary present, beckoning those willing and daring enough to claim it. The United States stood for new beginnings, free from totalitarian oppression, sectarian persecution, class discrimination, and the grueling and constant battle for survival that marked rural poverty in central, eastern, and southern Europe. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” Emma Lazarus’s verses called out to European societies from the base of the Statue of Liberty. Between 1892 and 1924, nearly twenty million people heeded that call and reached Ellis Island. Mobility demonstrated the magnetic force of the American summons. The seemingly limitless expanse of American land, the absence of sovereign lords, the guarantee of religious freedom, and especially the promise of individual prosperity captivated the imagination of millions, who projected onto the United States the limitless potential of the

future. There, everything was possible; the United States was an emblem of the future. It was, after all, the New World.

The prospect of a “new world” formed the ideological world for nineteenth- and twentieth-century revolutionaries. Regardless of their internal differences and ideological divergences, socialists, communists, anarchists, and others shared a foundational tenet: all believed they stood at the threshold of a new historical epoch of social equality and political freedom. The new world—this new social order—was the common vision of those who aspired to end, in Marx’s phrase, the “prehistory” of man: the age of war, exploitation, and class inequality. The United States held a singular place in this imaginary, for American history was marching inexorably toward crises and confrontations. From strikes to world wars, mounting conflicts would bring world capitalism ever closer to the breaking point, presenting an exhilarating opportunity to usher in a new social order. It may seem strange today, but many of the revolutionaries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were convinced that their own new world would emerge in the place where anything could—the New World of the United States of America.

A single, surprising resemblance encapsulates the interweaving of histories of migration and revolutionary movements. Compare the American translation of “The Internationale” and Emma Lazarus’s sonnet, “The New Colossus,” written in 1883 and etched into the base of the Statue of Liberty in 1903. Earlier, I referred to a few verses to illustrate the invitation the United States extended to “those who long to breathe free.” In the following verse, the invitation becomes more specific: “Give me your wretched refuse.” The New World stood poised to receive the “wretched” downtrodden of the Old, offering to them the certainty that the future could be theirs. In 1902, a Chicago-based socialist publishing house circulated a collection of workers’ and revolutionary songs from Western Europe. “We American Socialists are only beginning to sing,” the publisher explained.<sup>1</sup> Its aim was to adapt European verses to American conditions. There, between “The Red Flag” and the “Marseillaise,” the American version of “The Internationale” made its first appearance. Charles H. Kerr, the volume’s publisher and editor, chose to base his translation on the French prototype, disregarding the existing British version (even though he followed “our English comrades” in numerous cases). In the first verse, “The Internationale” calls on the workers of the world to rise up, conjuring the eternal realm of equality and freedom as their prize. Kerr chose his words carefully: “Arise ye wretched of the Earth.”<sup>2</sup>

“The wretched,” the silent victims of the past, feature in both poems as historical subjects uniquely endowed with the vital power to transform not only the terms of their own lives but the entire social universe that sur-

rounds them. In other words, what the United States held in common with the ideas of social equality was the invitation it extended to the “wretched” and its faith in them as the saplings of a new social order—a future to be reaped from the boundless possibilities expressed by the New World as opposed to the stultifying constraints of the Old. This, then, is the starting point of *Red America*: the threads—real or imagined—that bound the vision of a new socialist world to the social, political, and economic realities the United States had to offer the “wretched.”

## Becoming a Radical: Ethnicity and Class

Migrants of all nations formed the backbone of much of the American Left from the nineteenth to the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Print culture was crucial to migrant workers’ radicalism. The era saw a proliferation of communist and socialist books, pamphlets, newspapers, and journals written and distributed by immigrant organizations affiliated with political bodies of the American Left. The duration of the phenomenon is worth stressing: from 1918 to 1956, successive newspapers (*Ē Phonē tou Ergatou* [Voice of the worker], 1918–24; *Empros* [Forward], 1924–39; *Eleutheria* [Freedom], 1939–41; *Ellēnoamerikanikon Vēma* [Greek American tribune], 1941–56) expressed, in Greek, the intellectual, social, and political mission of the Left. Of course, this was not solely a Greek phenomenon. It is only by understanding their shared experience of migration that we can begin to appreciate the ways in which radical ideas were recast within each community.

For immigrants who reached the United States from Greece or from the Ottoman Empire, socialist or union activism was a novel universe. In this sense, they differed, for instance, from Jewish immigrants, who frequently hailed from eastern European socialist heartlands, or from Italian workers of the industrialized North, who imported an established tradition of collective organization and bargaining. The case of Greek migrant radicalism thus presents politicization on the Left as a distinct version of radical Americanization, as migrants turned to the Left in their efforts to interpret their position in a novel landscape of industrial labor, the exploitation of labor power, and the social marginalization of the worker. That is not to claim that the rupture with the Old World was absolute. Despite the radicals’ assertions of a definitive break between their past and the future, events in Greece continued to move them, and their turn to the Left in the United States often reflected their attitudes toward the world they had left behind. Developments in Greece helped shape the Greek American Left. These migrant revolutionaries thus offer a representative instance of the uneven

and contradictory nature of radicalization, where identifying with the global constituency of the oppressed was, paradoxically, one manifestation of an itinerant national identity.

Not all Greek immigrants were active in the communist movement. Indeed, the majority had no contact with it at all, seeking instead to structure their subsistence, social life, and political concerns around various national bodies and Greek American institutions, including the Orthodox Church. Even in such instances, however, the influence of the Left in its varying degrees offers insights into the histories of migrants' relations to their own Greek and American identities. Dominant narratives concerning the ideological allegiances of Greek migrants typically hinge on the zealous anti-communism and disdain for the "un-American" that took hold of Greek American communities in post-WWII America. While such narratives do, to a great extent, hold true, what they elide, and what the present study seeks to retrieve, are the ways in which Greek American anti-communism was shaped in opposition to a previous militant tradition: the Greek American communist movement.

The study of the Greek American Left allows us to explore the broader conflicts and transformations that informed the Greek presence in the United States. My focus on issues of migrant wage labor and class conflict attempts to foreground the contradictions between employers and workers that frequently lay at the heart of migrant communities but which the primacy of ethnic loyalty helped obscure or render invisible. Workers' resistance, bred in Greek restaurants, in furriers' workshops run by merchants from Ottoman Kastoria, in small-scale industries built on the cheap labor of "compatriots," has much to reveal about the rhythms, conditions, and cultures that formed the uncharted landscape of migrant entrepreneurship. Similarly, close study of the development of strong trade unions in the Great Depression unearths the national networks embedded within large industrial units, the complex relations between ethnic and class identity, and the impact the crisis itself had on the perceptions and cultures of first- and second-generation immigrants. In brief, my wish is not to propose the social history of the migrant presence in the United States as the history of the Left. What I do mean to suggest is that the history of the Left has much to contribute to the social history of immigration.

An important tension conditions this relationship. The multiethnic composition of the American working class brought radicals of all stripes to grapple with a fundamental problem: how could the ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity of the workforce be reconciled with notions of the unity of wage labor? The American Left's response rested on the certainty that the immigrants' awakening into class consciousness would be the crucial enabler for their integration into the most ethnically diverse nation of mod-

ern history. To this end, parties of the Left permitted and, in fact, encouraged the formation of migrant organizations that could address workers' communities in their own language, with the strategic aim of awakening and radicalizing their audience. The American Left's proposition was one of labor Americanization: the migrant worker was called upon to recognize his or her material interests and to join fellow workers in the American present, irrespective of ethnic differences. In other words, Americanization amounted to a shift from nation to class as the primary site of identity. But this process itself required the worker to be addressed in a familiar language—one that moved him. This was the strategic function of migrant radical organizations and publications.

Indeed, for many, radicalization into the communist movement or into trade unions (the two were not always synonymous) was an experience of Americanization to the degree that it involved daily contact with people of different origins bound by a common vision; recasting America's ethos of multicultural assimilation, people from all over the world subscribed to the same publications, attended meetings in English, and shared a preoccupation with American politics and social life. However, while radicals remained firm in their belief that such commitments would overshadow and, eventually, nullify migrants' attachments to their origins, research reveals a far more complex reality: even as their radicalization was indeed a process of Americanization, migrants never relinquished those bonds, continuing to communicate with those they had left behind and to remain invested in political developments at home. As such, the case of the Greek American Left exposes the limitations of teleological narratives of integration and homogenization. What it reveals most is the dynamic relation between the migrants themselves and their American reality. We sometimes treat the United States as a well-defined grid where migrants needed only find their place. This book offers an alternative viewpoint: it was the migrants themselves who perpetually transformed the American social and political landscape.

When I began this research ten years ago, my primary aim was to reckon with dominant representations of the Greek migrant experience in the United States. Chief among these is the narrative of entrepreneurial success—a linear and unhindered progression of social development unfolding within insular, conservative circles. My aim then was to propose an alternative narrative of Greek American history and to recover the thread of a story that had been lost. Connecting fragments of a forgotten past, I hoped to weave a single, coherent narrative. The search for information in archival collections scattered across the US, Greece, and elsewhere brought me to focus on disparate sources and to learn the art of discovering what most people believed never to have existed. In short, my research followed one of

the basic principles of social history: the attempt to give voice to those who had left but a few traces of their presence in time.

This was the context that determined the writing of my dissertation in the Department of History and Archaeology at the University of Crete (2010). Almost immediately following its completion, I was offered a unique opportunity to adapt my dry academic text into a screenplay. *Taxisyneidēsia* (a specifically Greek American adaptation of the phrase “working-class consciousness”) is an hour-long documentary on the untold story of Greek American radicalism.<sup>4</sup> It was first screened in 2013, at the fifteenth Documentary Film Festival of Thessaloniki. As usual, chance and circumstance acquired a power far greater than authorial intentions. I could not have known it when I began my research, but the deepening of the economic crisis and the new age of mass population movements both contributed definitively to the success of *Taxisyneidēsia*, which was screened in dozens of film theaters, cultural centers, and lecture halls in Greece, the United States, the UK, France, Germany, and elsewhere. Along with other contributors to the documentary, I often had the good fortune of participating in discussions with the audience at the end of the screenings. The relationship between interwar and contemporary economic crises was a constant theme, difficult to overlook. In one scene from the Great Depression, an elderly New Yorker rummages through the garbage in search of food; the image bore similarities to the struggle for survival facing contemporary Greeks for the first time in many years, and it inspired questions about how the study of the past might aid us in the present.

The reaction is reasonable, of course, but it also attests to our tendency to narrow the horizon of our imaginations by way of a reflexive turn to the past. Our resort to the past for guidance—the instrumental mining of the past for “lessons” to be gleaned for the future—highlights a certain collective sense of disorientation, even desperation. The harsh truth is that the past rarely has much to offer by way of example or guidance; it discloses no blueprint of the next stages of historical development. What it can provide is insight into the ways in which contemporary realities have been conditioned by the cycle of hope and disappointment that framed the course of the twentieth century. Historical research can nuance our understanding of what those expectations were, the ways in which societies envisioned their future at specific historic conjunctures, the role of a vanguard of thinkers and activists in mapping it, and the ways in which their visions helped transform political imaginaries. In other words, the unforeseeable ways in which the expectations or certainties of the past were thwarted suggests that what the past has to teach us is precisely the *unpredictability* of historical development.

American history offers an exemplary case study in the instability of notions of historical certainty. At the height of the political transformations that marked 1917, the interwar crisis of 1929, and the end of the Second World War, the Left—and not only the American Left—saw the collapse of capitalism as imminent; they predicted that these transformations would accelerate the passage of history and produce a definitive rupture with the capitalist system. American communists’ efforts to reconcile that certainty with (what turned out to be) the relative stability of existing economic and political systems offers insights into the power as well as the limitations of the twentieth century political imaginary of the Left. It was this series of contradictions that brought me to revisit my research on migrant radicalism in the United States and to produce this book.

Chapter 1 (“Radicals of Two Worlds”) traces the workings of the socialist diaspora in the United States. Beginning with the massive strikes on the eve of World War I, it discusses the dynamism of the socialist movement and the militant trades unions that proliferated among immigrant workers. Publications appeared with titles like *Organōsis* [Organization] and *Ē Phonē tou Ergatou* [Voice of the worker], translations of socialist texts spiked; the threads that connected Greek immigrants with socialist organizations in Greece all serve to highlight the diasporic and transnational flow of socialist ideas. The central moment of the chapter refers to the expectation of imminent revolutionary change in the United States in the wake of World War I and the European revolutions: migrants emerged as the potential subjects of great social change.

Chapter 2 (“Americanizing Communism”) carries the story forward, concentrating on the 1920s, a decade marked by the ebb of revolutionary prospects and the efforts of the communist movement to adapt to the novel realities of capitalist stabilization. Specifically, it analyzes the attempts of the migrant Left to interpret the thwarted expectations of the previous decades through the prism of *taxisyneidēsia* (working-class consciousness). The term attests to the Americanization of the radical experience. These processes are intertwined with the reimagining of political activism in a period of economic prosperity. The chapter analyzes the transformations in radical thought, as the American Dream became a more realistic, more potent ideological force.

The following two chapters explore the period of the Great Depression, the American 1930s. Chapter 3 (“Crisis and Revolution”) highlights the corrosive effects of the 1929 market crash and emphasizes its impact on the social and economic peace on both sides of the Atlantic. The chapter examines the revival of revolutionary aspirations amid the crisis, the collapse of proto-welfarist structures of communal support, and the emergence of new

solidarities. My central concern here is the link between two crises. The catastrophe wrought by economic chaos tested hegemonic certainties about politics and identity—these were years when immigrant identities changed dramatically and fueled new forms of political action. This change was felt in the workplace of course, but much more broadly too. The experience of capitalist modernity was deeply shaken and reworked during these years, in fields ranging from consumption to popular culture. Chapter 3 analyzes the activities of the Greek American Left against that backdrop, exploring its efforts to rebuild the labor movement amid novel social and political divisions within immigrant communities.

Chapter 4 (“Turmoil and Compromise”) sheds light on the transnational dimension of political and social divisions in the United States, focusing on their relationship to emerging fascist and anti-fascist movements in Europe, and especially in Greece. The chapter examines the attempts by the regime of Ioannis Metaxas to propagandize within the United States and the anti-fascist activities of the Greek American Left in response. Migrants in America took on a key role in coordinating the main centers of the Greek diasporic and migrant presence (Britain, Egypt, France, the USA) and forming a front against the Metaxas regime. These developments, nominally concentrated on a distant homeland, in fact took place in conversation with social and political tensions within the United States amid the reorientation of the New Deal after 1935. The transformations in immigrant communities thus highlight a meeting of Greek and American histories.

This encounter is further stressed in chapter 5 (“Planning the Future”) and chapter 6 (“Cold War Nation”), which make up the last part of the book. These two chapters examine the activities of the Greek American committees formed to support national liberation movements in Europe and then to design the postwar world through a hoped-for convergence between the New Deal and the socialist planned economy. American and European experiences were fused, together informing the bid to imagine a better future. The study of that forgotten expectation highlights the role played by Greek Americans in Greece’s 1940s, the impact of the December 1944 events in the United States, and the role of immigrant communities as dual ambassadors of Americanism in Europe and of European anti-fascism in America. The transformation of this role in the Cold War period is the subject of the final chapter of this book. The new global role of the United States along with postwar upward social mobility shifted the political orientation of immigrant communities and enabled the emergence of a new transnational framework for Greek American identity in which the Left was still central but in a very different guise: this was an identity premised on the ideas and practices of anti-communism.



## The Power of the Unpredictable

The belief that the United States would sit at the epicenter of an overwhelming and electrifying transition toward a new—and, naturally for the Left, a better and planned—social order might seem to us a naive fantasy, perhaps even a dangerous one. Today, notwithstanding our own global economic crisis and the preponderance of critiques of neoliberalism and economic inequality, we are far from the emergence of a radical political project capable of mobilizing people with anything like the passion, perseverance, and dedication common to nineteenth and twentieth century radicals. What is most notably absent is the *certainty*—a basic building block for these revolutionary movements of the past—that capitalist crisis will lead to a new social order. Such confidence is absent today not only on a theoretical level, but on an experiential one as well; that is, we lack the invigorating sense of participation within a global movement possessed of a clearly worked out strategic roadmap to engineer radical social change. This absence in our lived experiences and in our imaginations enforces strict limits on the political imaginary of the twenty-first century. In envisioning the future, we flit between apocalyptic scenarios and resignation in the face of the grinding continuation of a familiar present.

It is difficult, then, to remember and to reconstruct a period in which radicals took the “wretched” of the earth to constitute a real revolutionary subject. The experience of the nineteenth and twentieth century American Left highlights the primacy of immigrants, African Americans, and others among the oppressed in the theory and practice of revolutionaries. This primacy did not, of course, always ensure an unproblematic relationship between the Left and the marginalized. But the fact remains that the Left formed a political and a social landscape in which the demand for equality was often transformed from rhetorical proclamation into everyday practice. In the trenches of the Spanish Civil War, the multiethnic Abraham Lincoln Brigade provided American history’s first ever example of white soldiers serving under the command of an African American officer. Such episodes should not erase our awareness of the tensions and prejudices among nominal comrades, but they do remind us that the Left has historically been an internationalist undertaking based on the belief that social change was primarily the concern of all those who had a material interest in its success.

Today, the outlook of the Western Left has changed. It often stresses sensitivity and compassion but rarely assigns a leading role in delivering political change to the modern oppressed, such as refugees, migrants, and youths of migrant origin inhabiting the margins of capitalist metropolises. This change is, surely, the result of a grand shift in Western radical move-

ments to match the conditions of political stability and economic prosperity that the post-WWII social contract secured. The moment of crisis and breakdown did not last. That developing capitalist stability was, this book argues, the insurmountable limit with which the American Left could not successfully reckon. The 1950s marked the decline of old radical organizations and the absorption of militant interwar unions into more mainstream industrial politics. In the end, American capitalism emerged triumphant from its successive crises, thwarting the expectations of all those who had been certain of its inevitable collapse. The triumphant trajectory of American grandeur reconstructed in retrospect relied to a great degree on the postwar world's ability to erase the memories of the interwar crisis, and so to forget the many who had sought through agitation and protest to resolve the crisis in socialist directions, an effort that ultimately failed.

Against that backdrop, this book could be read as the history of a failure. But to map the hopes, expectations, disappointments, and disillusionments of past revolutionary projects is also to insist on the unpredictability of history. That uncertainty is with us still, and it gives us reason to hope as well as to fear.

## Notes

1. Kerr, *Socialist Songs*, 1.
2. Kerr, *Socialist Songs*, 3.
3. The bibliography is extensive, while the relatively recent transnational turn in historiography has generated a renewed interest in political and social radicalism among exilic, diasporic and immigrant groups. I finished writing this book in 2015 (the Greek edition came out two years later) and my outlook was influenced by works that addressed different migrant communities and diverse expressions of ethnic radicalism. For instance, Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution*; Bencivenni, *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture*; Hoffman and Srebrnik (eds), *A Vanished Ideology*; Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*. In the years that have passed, I have obviously reconsidered aspects of my work. I resisted though the temptation of updating the bibliography (and been drawn to an overall rewriting of the original manuscript) for obvious reasons. The enemy of the good, is—in all languages—the perfect.
4. *Taxisyneidēsia: Ē agnōstē istoria tou ellēnoamerikanikou rizospastismou*. The documentary was bilingual. The English version was titled: *Greek American Radicals: The Untold Story* (director: Kostas Vakkas, script: Kostis Karpozilos, production: Non-profit organization “Apostolis Berdebes,” 2013).