

Short Commentary: The Return of the *Horkatoi* (and of a Sociology of Class)

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It is Monday at 17:15 and the Rio cinema of Limassol, one of the major points of reference for the city's cultural life, has added an extra showing time for *Vourate Geitonoï*. Under-aged children rub shoulders with pensioned ladies, young couples and even lonesome semi-foreign viewers, such as me. Cypriot society gathers to enjoy an aspect of its mirror-image, according to one of its most famed and scholarly claimed sociologists, the late Caesar Mavratsas. It is only two years since his untimely death, and the series-turned-film that inspired Mavratsas' *Society of the Horkatoi* is living a second life, on the big screen this time.

His vision can be termed prophetic, but I would like, in this review essay, to poke it in a critical direction, in the hope that, in discussion with colleagues in this forum, we could collectively reach a reassessment of what was, ironically, a very popular and very anti-populist take on the current Greek Cypriot cosmosprecisely—, the *Society of the Horkatoi* book. I would like to underscore a certain attention to a critical political (and visual) economy that might enrich the cultural(ist) analytical approach Mavratsas has offered us and that, in my view, has not been dealt with in the book in ways that the sociological material could and would suggest. It is for this reason that I choose to use the *Vourate geitonoï*, Vol. 2, as the entry point in this discussion. The series and its unlikely Weberian ideal-type, Rikkos Mappouros' character are now (more than a decade and a half after his first appearance as an everyday reference on the TV screens of Greek Cypriots) enjoying a second coming. This is a phenomenon that denotes what could well be the most popular film in Cypriot cinematic history—a fact of high ethnographic interest by itself.

The film is relinquished in its visual economy. Its cinematic *artistic* value is debatable: this is not because of a global hierarchy of values one has to attach themselves to, as it might be suggested in many contemporary analyses, as the film does not pretend to pertain to an artistic milieu. It is, rather, due to precisely the

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televisual obsession of everything about it: the way it has been shot, the mise-en-scene, the formation of the characters. The continuity with the *Vourate* that we were used to is clear: rich, glowing colours; exuberance and flamboyance in each and every little thing the characters do or suggest on the screen. Everything has to be over-the-top, screaming out loud, a caricaturist version of Greek-Cypriot society. It is a kitschtopia that is often so finely done that one wonders about whether the director is trolling the audience with subtle cinematic history references. One odd example: the owners of the fantastical *Omorfos Ltd. group of companies*, the eponymous couple of poor, middle-aged travellers, engage in their opening scene, right by their RV camper, in some form of an energetic, almost bestial pseudo-erotic scene, hugging each other and their pink flamingo balloon trademark *pet*. The grotesque scene here has obvious class connotations—as the poor are showcased in what looks like the *freak-shows* of early modernity. The scene is reminiscent of the moral ambiguity and aesthetic precariousness of the liminal and extreme (then, and possibly, still) eroticism of the 1972 film *Pink Flamingos* of the consciously kitsch social satirist John Waters.

But the forbidden fruit in this discussion are the shiny commodities, laden in the film's cornucopia of Cypriot references. The screen is awash with a visual economy of globalised marketing tricks: these trends bifurcate with the localised—parochial even—representations of the material culture of consumer capitalism in the Republic of Cyprus. Lanitis drinks, Livadiotis nuts, and the Pralina posh café—the constant bombardment of product placement is relentless. At the same time, the whole storyline of the film is based on a form of indigenous (ad)venture capitalism, in the sense of seeking, excavating, and appropriating the money that Rikkos Mappouros, ever the *non-fully-modern* subject, kept outside the banking system in light of (as well as closely ahead of) the unique Cypriot/EU banking crisis of 2013. His choice to refuse financial inclusion in the banking system provokes both problems and a possible solution to a crisis of liquidity that we are presented with from the opening scene of the film.

These scaled-down and scaled-up constant references to the recent phenomenologies of the adventures of Cypriot capitalism are coupled with other fleeing remarks on the state of affairs of contemporary Cyprus and, crucially, its economy. For instance, Erik, the *Charlie*² subject, fresh from the UK, laments how

² The colloquial, emic term for Cypriot migrants to the UK.

Cypriots are *selling the island to Turks, Russians and Chinese*, referring to the RoC's *passport selling*.

Society of the Horkatoi is a unique social science *bestseller*, if not indeed some sort of an instant breakthrough or crossover analysis—from the oft lofty heights of academia to the educated public. It might be clear by now that I am coming to the *Horkatoi* debate from the vantage point of a much needed discussion of class, especially—but not only—in terms of consumption patterns, as well as, more generally, in terms of a critical political economy angle. That perspective is sidelined in the very enjoyable read of the *Society of the Horkatoi*. Note that I would refrain from translating the indigenous quasi-class concept (*horkatos*) that Mavratsas suggests—an emically rich notion, granted, but also one in need of comparison with what we know as *a peasant* and the sociological categories close to that. The author himself seems uncomfortable with identifying the peasant category, one sociological notion decidedly stemming from critical agrarian studies, with the idea of the *horkatos*. The former, 100 years ago, inspired one of the most influential debates in Marxist discussions—that between Lenin and Chayanov. It is an idea that endures in discussions in journals like the *Journal of Peasant Studies*.³ The latter is one more associated with the Weberian model that so inspired Mavratsas throughout his career (alongside his earlier social constructivist, and arguably more acute, reflections). The author undoubtedly remains true to the model throughout the book, indeed stretching it to its culturalist connotations, especially when coupled with another classic reference he bases much of his analysis on: Norbert Elias.⁴ There lies an expectation of a civilizing process that seems to have either been left behind or left unfinished in Cyprus' path towards modernisation, which Mavratsas laments, often with entertaining and witty passages. This understanding reflects a Weberian take on class where, stretched on the cultural domain, possibly lends itself to analyses that, while useful, see in the economic life of Cypriots no more than a domain of easy extraction and easier, even naïve, consumerist excitement. The subjects seem unprepared for such luxury and fall behind a lens of expectation.

The epistemological distance from the actual realities at play in the economic domain is absolutely respectable and, as noted, at times yields helpful insights. But in certain points they also seem to be leaning towards a normativity. The

³ See, for instance, H. Bernstein, V.I. Lenin and A.V. Chayanov, 'Looking back, Looking forward' (2009) 36(1) *Journal of Peasant Studies* 55–81.

⁴ N. Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (1939) (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000).

expectation horizon of a cultured or acculturated European subject, seemingly one that the Cypriot lurks behind and even disavows undeservedly, is not doing justice to the nuances that Mavratsas' analysis has given us in other circumstances—in domains where his attention to the cultural have yielded attentive critique (as per his classic work on Greek Cypriot nationalism as a form of political culture).

A key feature of Cypriot economic social life remains not yet fully analysed: the trader and merchant aspect of a certain Cypriot economic personhood, as well as the enormous capacities, historically proven time and again, for a sort of trickster identity, one that navigates domains of power, and oscillates between firm identities.⁵ That hybrid aspect can be possibly traced to the notion of the *horkatos* itself: someone who is savvy of certain merchant capitalist traits of modern life, but who might not be ticking the box of the vision a normative that modernity holds in store for the majority of the world. Lest we forget, the modern subject is an identity like many others and can be accommodated through the specifics of social conflict, of which the island has known many and of a varied nature.⁶ Cyprus is one of those places that formulate the many possible and actually existing modernities that compose an increasingly complex world in which the economic and the political are pregnant with the ever-evolving dynamics of a cultural domain that, far from being one-size-fits-all, is constantly expanding and variegating. In that respect, the notion of the *horkatos* can be reappropriated, possibly, in a more critical direction—salvaged from the inherent normative, even judgmental, lines that exist in Mavratsas' classic study. This is not simply a call to being attentive to an assumed social ontology that calls for that systematic interpretive process, which social anthropologists and indeed (Weberian) sociologists are engaging with—the *Verstehen* of the societies we live in. In his own way, Mavratsas did a version of that interpretive sociology in the book. Rather, it is a reminder of the ever-changing realm of acculturation and the fragilities of the politics of class within those dynamics.

In Limassol's Rio cinema, the audience engaged with the film in ways that could possibly be seen as a far cry from the civilising process that Norbert Elias' study suggest—there was lots of loud talk, genuine and even austere questioning and

⁵ It gives credence to the old Cypriot folk saying: «Για πράττε, για μετάπραττε, για που την Κύπρον φύε!» , that is 'Make or trade, or get out of Cyprus'!

⁶ See for instance, A. Panayiotou, 'Models of Compromise and *Power Sharing* in the Experience of the Cypriot Modernity' (2006) 18(2) *The Cyprus Review* 75–103.

countless forms of commentary, during the film. These reactions were not meant only for the partner of each spectator but were rather addressing the invisible co-viewers in the dark room. We share our society with *horkatoi* and we might well be *horkatoi* ourselves—the fleeing cultural sense of class employed here needs to be backed with a critical take on class in relation to the means of the economy as well as class on social status and historical stature. The model Mavratsas gave us is proving to be richer when interpreted, like any cultural material, in open ways. We produce social theory in and because of a social situation that calls for constant reinterpretation of what we do. Cases like this forum allow for that much needed space to expand on the legacy of scholars like the prematurely gone Mavratsas—the legacy of a critical sociology of understanding.

References

- H. Bernstein, V.I. Lenin and A.V. Chayanov, 'Looking back, Looking forward' (2009) 36(1) *Journal of Peasant Studies* 55–81.
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