

Book Presentation

Something is up with the family: Nation, Desire, and Kinship in the times of Crisis

[Kati trechei me tin oikogeneia: Ethnos, Pothos kai Syggeneia tin epochi tis krisis] - (only in Greek)

*Dimitris Papanikolaou*¹



Pages: 448

Price: 16.92 euros

Publisher: PATAKI

Athens, 2018

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Reparative Readings on the Family:

When, in the summer of 2018, this book by Dimitris Papanikolaou appeared at the bookstalls, it immediately caught my attention. Its title, "Something is up with the Family," along with the subtitle "Nation, Desire and Kinship at a time of Crisis", seemed to me like a calling, an argument made to address the various doubts and misgivings I had with the contemporary Greek family theory. "Something was up", evading our analytic eyes. When perusing it in the bookstore, I found out that the author was not discussing clinical vignettes or

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the literature on the family, but modern 'cultural texts', books, movies, etc. I was familiar with some of those texts; they had affected me in various ways when I had come across them.

The author does not address us from the field of psy-disciplines but from cultural studies and the Modern Greek Literature perspective.

From my disciplinary perspective, in this book presentation, I will try to show the reasons why this book is worth the attention of mental health professionals and family therapists. I start with a discussion of the main concepts and arguments the author advances, followed by a presentation of the structure of the chapters and the texts the author uses as his case studies. In the end, a reference list of those cultural texts is provided, in the order they appear in the book. A small note here: both the book reviewed here, as well as most of the cultural texts discussed by the author, are in Greek. The reason we decided to publish this book review in Greek and English is to promote the ideas the author discusses to the broader, international family therapy debates. We believe that the themes and concepts of "archive trouble", "short-circuit-in-family", families we choose, as well as the analytical problematic as "parrhesia vs. confession" can inform and inspire our professionals' practices.

D. Papanikolaou claims programmatically that his book attempts to articulate a critique, in dialogue with the cultural texts he is working on. He aims to deconstruct and de-normalize the Modern Greek sexual and racial "normativity" and "familiarity". As he says, these two are considered by many in Greece to be almost synonymous. Thus, this book is positioned as "part of a much wider project aiming to draw on novel theoretical tools from gender and feminist studies and queer theory, in an analytic quest to map and historicize the Greek culture of sexuality in the 20th and the 21st century". As he further notes, "the cultural texts on the family, analysed in these pages, take part in a much more broad cultural and political theoretical movement that wants to address the grammatical time of the present. That is, the intensity of the emotion and its potential to be used as a resistance to neoliberal normality and its economic projects; the potential to create novel networks of relationships and to review the dynamics of human relationships more generally; the quest for novel identity narratives coming to replace the narratives of familial, class and national normativity, history, genealogy and prosperity" (p. 91-92).

The term '(cultural) texts' is used in a broad understanding to include the author's discussion of movies, theatrical plays, and sometimes media discourses. The methodological position and the epistemological horizon of the book become thus evident. The cultural analysis proposed here tends to read as a (cultural) text any system of signs that acquires, underscores, and creates cultural meaning, i.e., any system of signs that becomes significant in a given cultural moment. This methodological horizon, as mentioned on page 41 of the book, is "framed by developments in recent years in the cultural studies, gender studies and new-historicism. It is inspired by the belief that the creative readings of cultural texts may be purposeful acts with(in) a history, but at the same time, they also create histories, providing the impetus for novel historical readings." For Papanikolaou, this version of cultural studies can also become a creative strategy to recognize and review radical political action (p.316).

What offerings, however, could such a book have for family/systemic therapy? Setting aside the joy of reading the playful and imaginative prose of such a

book, I argue that three useful points are developed throughout. The first point revolves around the (political) challenge that Papanikolaou articulates by introducing the phrase 'the short-circuit-in-family' (in Greek: οικογένεια βραχυκύκλωμα). The second point, which I will address shortly, revolves around the (queer) perspective on identity and the family; it is a perspective that transverses the book sideways and in a reparative way, drawing mainly on queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. The third point concerns the introduction of the concept of 'archive trouble,' which I will discuss later in this review.

A significant concept the author draws on to articulate a queer analysis on (Greek) identity and sexuality, is the concept of 'reparative reading' as proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Kosofsky Sedgwick reacted to binary thinking (e.g., good/bad, self/other, nature/nurture). She advanced the idea that critics of cultural texts tend to allow themselves only two ways of reacting and responding to a cultural text, i.e., accepting a text or rejecting it (Sedgwick, 1997, 2003). She highlighted that a large part of critical theory thus works through adopting a paranoid position (echoing here Melanie Klein's ideas). Kosofsky Sedgwick counter-proposed that critics (as Papanikolaou, effectively does), need to engage with the texts by searching for "their empowering, productive, as well as renewing potential to promote semantic innovation, personal healing and social change", according to Röder (2014, pp. 88-89). All this constitutes the notion of 'reparative reading,' which Kosofsky Sedgwick counterpointed to that of a paranoid reading, that focuses on the problematic aspects of a text.

Reparative practices reassemble good and bad part-objects, and re-think the causes of negative effects, enabling a shift from the anticipatory practices of paranoia (Martinussen & Wetherell, 2019). Rita Felsky argues that reparative reading can be defined as "a stance that looks to a work of art for solace and replenishment rather than viewing it as something to be interrogated and indicted" (2015, pp. 151).

Another queer concept we meet throughout the book is the lateral position that Papanikolaou adopts towards the family. The lateral position facilitates the potentiality to see, from a different point of view, family, and kinship networks. It often emphasizes "the lateral lines that connect uncles with nephews, or between distant relatives; contrary, that is, to the entrapping patrilineal genealogy. New grids of contact can be potentially proposed, much less genealogically prescribed relationships and sexual identities, while being much more radical and culturally productive" (p. 84).

Adopting such a position, for instance, Papanikolaou analyses the new queer film *Strella*, in a reparative way, indexing the ways that the film undermines the "grand narrative that we recognize as "the deep self". Instead of the depth, in this film, there is the surface. Instead of the unconscious, there are the conscious choices to re-narrate and keep re-narrating one's self. Instead of the permissible and the normally and politically necessary, this film proposes novel ethics of the self and one's relations with others" (p. 349). Herein lies the main intersection of this queer reparative reading with family/systemic therapy.

In those cultural texts that Papanikolaou analyses, he recognizes a "relativization and historicization of ideologies of psychic depth, of the unconscious and the patriarchal self". It is not true that the subjects in these films, for instance, "don't understand the impasse they find themselves in or

the(ir) tragedy: they just see both tragedy and impasse, though, as a system of relationships; and they suspect that those relationships could be rearranged" (p.351). In those texts, it becomes evident that there are other ways one to consider the articulation of the ego differently, one's relation as a subject with one's self and others – and thus to overcome the past and the violence of the others.

[...] The family are precisely those we opt to bind our feelings with, and this is the only way to overcome the oppressive memory of the past, of 'nature' and of 'origin'" (p. 351). I would argue that this phrase is indicative of a broader political strategy that puts agency and the syntax of subjectivity at its centre. It constitutes, the author says, on the one hand, the transition, from the 'short-circuit-in-family' to 'families we choose'; on the other hand, it underlines the intersection with contemporary perspectives and practices of family therapy, which position people as agents. These agents feel and change their lives within systems of relationships that can be set otherwise, not trapped in a destiny.

The (political) challenge against the 'short-circuit-in-family', that Papanikolaou observes in most of his case studies, also emerges through a more general feeling about non-normative family arrangements that springs up all over Greece in the last decade (p. 80-81). What is this political aspect of the family? The author reminds us that: "the family and its internal and external power structures are always already political, constantly constitutive of a sense of identity, biopsychology and socioeconomic status" (p 17-18). The family may start as the place where dissident sexuality is disavowed. Yet, at the same time, it is also presented as an endless container of the dissonant discourses of sexuality, even in its very structures of kinship. The dissident and to some ears "dissonant" discourse of sexuality and sexual identity can become an instant of undermining familial 'heteronormativity' (a usual blind spot of family therapy), i.e., the "constitutive and normative condition according to which the ideal model of common and political living is the one defined by reproduction, heterosexuality, and nuclear family", as the author defines it in p. 269. His analysis, instead, opts to focus on "the past/present of the family and the nation, as it is highlighted and deconstructed in the present moments of a body feeling, objecting and wanting, no matter how much this may prove insufficient, to at least be able to say, look, I'm getting away" (as mentioned in p. 87).

Hence, this analysis of the 'short-circuit-in-family' is derived from a Foucauldian genealogy, which is "an analysis that traces the intertwinement of the body with history. Its task is to expose a body on which history has fully left its print, as well as the process through which history has claimed this body" (Foucault, 1971, pp. 145-172).

A genealogical gesture can, therefore, only take into account all these discourses that classify, restrict, and silence the bodies. While simultaneously trying to suspect their sudden manifestations, their potential sightings, the flashes of desire, the unexpected emergence, in the archive of the past, of a voice that says 'however, I' (in pages 406-407).

So, Papanikolaou's objective, he tells us, is to analyse Greek cultural texts on the family from the 20th and the 21st century, and reassess, especially as they balance between realism and allegory, their quest for a radical genealogy (p. 410).

I will briefly outline this methodology as it enters into dialogue with the cultural texts taken as case studies in the book, following the three steps that the author himself describes when he discusses his understanding of a genealogical critique. "To begin with, you start with the present to highlight how it was constituted by discourses and repressed potentials of the past. In the second step, you demonstrate how power not only silences or excluding also produces unexpected resistances (counter-memories), usually as nuances, subcultures, and archival residues left to affect future developments. Thirdly, you leave open the possibility that this same genealogy also contains discontinuities; ironies; aporias – hence the potential of what it may not appear political or liberating, to become as such at a different time much later" (p. 408-409). Through discussing his case studies, Papanikolaou demonstrates that the older hegemonic representation of the Greek family, often encapsulated in the popular coinage "the holy Greek family", had supported a very closed and static History for the familial (and the national) past. This has now changed, he tells us.

"The short-circuit-in-family" that suddenly emerged [in the last few years], put forward a request for genealogical critique; an archive trouble willing to reconsider elements and artefacts from the past, to discern and redraft possibilities and links, and to do so in an embodied praxis that would lay bare power's control. As well as all those moments that could potentially evade it: the desires, the failures, the errors, all those movements that perhaps, at a different moment, can be retrieved as possibilities".

Even if you track the repetition of the word 'archive' up to this point, you might realize the importance that this concept of the archive takes for the book. In the following paragraph, I will endeavour to argue, by drawing on the book and other publications it is in dialogue with, why such an understanding of the concept of the archive can be theoretically productive for family/systemic therapy too.

When we reflect on the concept of the archive, we associate it with our tax records, the archives of our notes from the therapy clients, the army records, our medical files, or even the files that we have in our computers. Thus, one of the first aspects of a new theoretical reorientation towards the archive involves its relation to materiality: recordings, papers, envelopes, silicon, offices, library drawers, personal computers, but human bodies as well. The bodies, where the atrocities of wars are indelibly written, the bodies that are speaking their story with their tattoos, the bodies with circumcisions, with genital mutilations and other wounds of violence...

The concept of the archive, thus, evades the immaterial and the subjective aspect of the (personal or collective) memory. It is disconnected from the orality and the immaterial side of memory. It is associated with the 'imprinting' and the 'power of consignation' that Jacques Derrida has theorized in his seminal essay on the archive. There, Derrida (p. 11-12 of the Greek text), defines the condition of the archive: "it would be the externality of a place, the topographic activation of a technique of consignation, it would be the constitution of a step and of a dominating sign (the master, the archive, i.e., most usually of the State, more so of a patriarchal or Patriarchic State)". So, in etymology and theory, the 'archive' is connected with 'arkhe', (in Greek, Αρχή), with power. "But who could possess the authority to institute an archive?" Derrida would ask in the same essay. This is the second reason that the concept of the archive matters for family/systemic

therapy: it demonstrates the importance of power in human lives. In this rationale, Elpida Karamba (2011, p. 26), mentions that the "archives, in modernity, become the undisputed protagonist of the bureaucratic and biopolitical organization, as the guarantors of the (national, state and supra-state) history and its memory, its juridical power. Within this context, the archives assume the role of the normative tools of this discrete way of life".

Nevertheless, both in their modern as well as in their post-modern aspect, archives have unfolded within an ambivalent relationship with power, a relationship that is both productive and destructive". This is the third reason that the concept of the archive matters, as it entails the clash of definitions, the possibility of novel readings, of new interpretations of the past, through the dual, destructive and productive, embodied relation with power that it presupposes. Charis Kanellopoulou, in a publication on archival art (2015, p. 22), claims, "Archives are traces to which we respond. Since conditions of extremity and risk in the past years lead us to return to novel readings, [they present] a great opportunity to redefine and activate the archives' institutions, as they are also invited in an open process of dialogue with society." Dimitris Papanikolaou, in p. 98-99 of his book, does, of course, agree: "the archive as it is conceptualized here, is no more a passive repository of information, but an active field of conflict. It is not a given material, but an experiment of epistemology and knowledge. It is not, to put it otherwise, space where knowledge is retrieved, but it becomes instead a complex of multiple spaces, where knowledge, always and already entangled with power, is produced".

A final definition of the archive, by Kanellopoulou (2015, p. 17), could be as follows: "the archive (ought to) occupy a main spot as a concept, as a place, and as an institution that points out, preserves, and shields the remembering of historical data. Not as a hermetically shut and 'neutral' repository of memory, but as an open space of their negotiation, which can lead to a deeper understanding of the present and the shaping of the future".

In outlining these points, I was influenced by a bibliography on the archive from which Papanikolaou draws. I was also taking into account his further step, a concept he is advancing, and that has already provoked discussion in Greek cultural studies, the concept of "archive trouble:" "the intense but also iconoclastic will to return to the material trace of the past, which would start from the embodied present. That is, the body as an experience and temporality, the body as a limit and an infliction, but also, in fact, as their overcoming, often insisting on the image of a body in crisis, in trouble" (p. 178). He further notes, linking this concept with the 'process of a psychoanalysis': "archive trouble is a peculiar quest in historical time and archival trace, combined with a return to the body and its constitutional precarity. A mode of expression that I think characterized both the public discussion and much of the cultural production in Greece in recent years. The archive trouble, mostly in the narrative context of the family, with which I dealt, in this book, may feel somewhat similar; it is true, to a type of psychoanalysis that insists not on the result, but on the process. Where, what the analysand is asked to retrieve from the past, no matter how incomplete, fragmentary, or incoherent, is still painful, unbearable, heart breaking and disturbing, while at the same time, full of potential, and anarchically powerful. That's why, besides stories of aporia, demand, and protest, usually at the same time, archive trouble brings forth also stories of emotion, affect, desire, conduct and contact" (in p. 422-423). To recuperate the

arguments made so far, the concept of the 'archive' thus revised, can offer to family/systemic therapeutic practice a perspective that energetically reconsiders materiality, rethinks the impact of (institutional) power, and theorizes on the constitutive/critical potential of the body.

Having described, by drawing on my archive of references, those concepts that the author deals with, I will now give a brief account of the book's chapters and case studies.

In the prologue, starting with two theatre plays, the *Different choices* Petros (Diafores Epilogos Petros) and the *Stella Sleep* (Stella Koimisou), Papanikolaou introduces the concept of the "short-circuit-in-family", that will become crucial for the whole book. He argues that this concept has been the major characteristic of Greek cultural production in recent years. Papanikolaou shows (p. 25) that in the recent wave of Greek cinema, esp. what is called "the weird wave", with films like *Dogtooth* (Kynodontas) by G. Lanthimos (as well as others cited below), the family is shown as a biopolitical organism, which is short-circuiting at three interconnected levels: the symbolic, the disciplinary and the level of the management of the bodies of its members. On the opposite side of the spectrum from this 'short-circuit-in-family', lie those others, those 'families we choose', as the author explains in a part of the prologue, where he explains the autobiographical origins of this book.

In the first chapter, the author starts by drawing on two contemporary Greek texts by the psy-disciplines on the family, the books by M. Yossafat *Growing up in the Greek Family* and by Ch. Katakis *The three identities of the Greek family*, in order to discuss that "something is up with the holy Greek family," in this time of crisis. In this chapter, a number of lengthy footnotes provide a parallel review of the three traditions analysing the family: the psychoanalytic, the sociological, and the anthropological. Evidently, here, what is missing from this book review is the psychological - psychotherapeutic perspective on the family. The chapter closes with a discussion of the book/film *Loaded/Head On* by Christos Tsiolkas; here, Papanikolaou advances the concept of archive trouble, which will form the mainstay of the second chapter.

In this chapter, starting with an extensive analysis of the film *Homeland* (Hora Proeleysis) by S. Tzoumerkas, the author dissects the narrative strategies that 'short-circuit-in-family' has taken since 2004 in Greek literature, cinema and theatre. Following that, through the analysis of the plays by L. Anagnostaki *Victory* (Niki) and *To you listening to me* (Se sas pou me akoute), he introduces the French philosopher Rancière's idea of the emancipated spectator (2008/2015). According to the author, Anagnostaki asks her audience to: "regard the dynamic of the images and forget whether they are consistent, coherent or whether they have a political future; combine, rewrite, realize the dynamics heaped in the images of resistance, consider [their] own position to all that is happening". Just as the members of the 'short-circuit-in-families' break the circle and demand to speak, to scream, to expose themselves, so do the spectators as Rancière sees them: they emancipate themselves, and start to encounter the cultural texts as parts of an archive that they can use at their will" (p. 147). This is accomplished, performatively, through a parallel action combining realism, symbolism, metonymy and allegory. Papanikolaou demonstrates it well by focusing on the films of G. Oikonomidis *Matchbox* (Spirtokouto), *Knifer* (Macherovgaltis), *Soul Kicking* (Psychi Sto Stoma) and the

play *Demonstration (Parelasi)* directed by E. Fezollari in a text by L. Anagnostaki.

So, this chapter, by drawing on an array of cultural texts, establishes archive trouble as a cultural strategy characteristic of Greece during the time of crisis and memoranda. Archive trouble, he says, is the "shuffling and the reordering, the will to find novel paths within the material trace of the past and the present, new ways not just of preference but also of genealogical critique" (p. 188).

In the third chapter, Papanikolaou focuses on the historical emergence of the sexual identity movement in Greece, and the subsequent erasure of AIDS in the public sphere of the Greek 1980s, by discussing A. Corteau's novel *The Extinction of Nikos* (*O Afanismos tou Nikou*), with its ironic, camp-style and its allegorical crisscrossing between the past and the present. Following on from the previous chapter, the discussion here revolves around the sexual dynamics of the years after the military Junta in Greece (1974-1981), as well as around the sexual identities, which emerged in the public, sphere post-dictatorship, via struggles and collective action.

By discussing texts by Alan Hollinghurst, Didier Eribon and Loukas Theodorakopoulos, and retelling the history of the Greek Homosexual Liberatory Front (*Apeleutherotiko Kinima Omofilofilon Elladas – AKOE*), Papanikolaou highlights how those years underlined the crucial interrelation of the private and of sexual orientation, with the public, the political sphere.

As he reminds, for certain social groups, such as for homosexual people, the private "ends up being a much more private affair," the public sphere contains divisions and is not shared in the same way by all people. Certain counter-publics are then constructed, in the margins, which would claim their visibility through struggle. In this chapter, in an effort to do something for a history not told, neither in terms of the AIDS victims nor in terms of their sexual identities, Papanikolaou traces what he calls its socio-political mnemonics. Sometimes, this is the only way to speak for the people left out of the archive, side-lined by the public sphere, unregistered, for the people who "even silently, showed that they did not condone that disappearance. For the people who did not sign the extinction assigned to them" (p.265).

The fourth chapter returns to the issues of counter-publics, identity, and identification, biography, and family, focusing this time on the making public of a (lesbian) identity. It opens with the discussion of A. Dimitrakaki's novel *Inside a Girl like You* (*Mesa se ena koritsi san ki esena*). The assemblage of various fragments of discourse (diaries, emails, letters) that constitute the narration in Dimitrakaki's novel, become an analogy for the composition of identity, through the failures, the losses, the fragments: "identity thus showing itself as constantly a field of battle, of identification, of dis-identification, of failure, but mostly of a desire for history" (p. 287). Through his parallel discussion of texts such as A. Bechdel's *Fun Home* or the alternative archive created for Dora Rozetti, the author of the (first Greek) lesbian novel *Her mistress*, Papanikolaou develops further how the concept of the counter-public could work in a specific context. In this chapter, a return to the archive is performed. Here, "one can see how the archive can historically determine what is allowed and what is not; which bodies matter and which don't; [also how the archive] can render groups of people, as political subjects now, able to demand their right to speak and to overturn the very frames that have marginalized them" (p. 319).

Such an alternative archive of the counter-public would incorporate narratives of affect, attachment, friendships, as well as traumas. Papanikolaou suggests that "the emotion, the imprint of trauma and pain, the desire to identify, in such cases become the process through one constitutes the archive. This is what the American critic Ann Cvetkovich (2003) eloquently names an archive of feelings (p. 330). It is within an archive of feelings that one can see moments of dissent, of voices that say "however, I...", of a consistent antithesis to heteronormativity, and a performative insistence on creating history.

Papanikolaou finds an iconic moment of such an antithetical "however, I..." in the film *Strella* (directed by P. Koutras), which becomes the centre of the next chapter. In *Strella*'s walkout in public, in the last scenes of the film, Papanikolaou reads a metaphor for the exodus of what is seen as private, dissident sexuality, towards a becoming public, a full manifestation in the public sphere. The potential for alternative family structures are highlighted in this chapter, through the focus on the alternative queer family in the final scene of *Strella*; the chapter concludes with the emblematic phrase "family is all those that we opt to bind our feelings with" (p. 353).

A significant theoretical point, this chapter develops, is the political distinction between parrhesia (truth-telling) and confession. Drawing on *Strella*, as well as the autobiography of B. Vakalidou, the (video)texts of Paola, and her zine *Kraximo*, all within the milieu of trans activism, Papanikolaou writes: "I consider as a moment of parrhesia the moment when one speaks, under the given conditions one faces. And at the same time, disrupts them, by telling what one thinks that represents truth telling. Also, he/she is asking for a change in the limitations of what is considered true or false, representable or not, thinkable or unthinkable, sayable, or unsayable. I consider a moment of parrhesia the moment one asks to speak, claiming one's right to citizenship, and exposing the reason why this right may be limited in their case, demanding to be heard as a subject of truth. It is a deeply political moment. And it lies at exactly the opposite of what, in modern vocabulary, is called confession. With the term confession, I mean here, a process that became so defined by the controlling mechanisms of faith, ideology, and the body, as well as their combined power. In this sense, confession is what gives subjects a mild (often non-political) recognition, what often results in a diminution of the political instead of its radical rearrangement" (p. 370-371).

I want to conclude this book review by underlining, on the one hand, how moments of parrhesia are performed by subjects wishing to achieve their visibility in the public sphere; on the other hand, how moments of confession somewhat resemble therapeutic practices. Let us not overlook the fact that the subjects of the cultural texts Papanikolaou analyses, would until recently (or even today), form the object of the gaze and scrutiny by the psy-disciplines, through pathologizing diagnoses, through the use of ECT and conversion therapies, through similar practices not extinct in the so-called civilized world. We should not underestimate how much our ability today to read about formerly disavowed and closeted subjects has come about as a result of pain, persecutions, political struggles, and movements. This book is noteworthy as it underlines how gestures of parrhesia end up redrawing our sexual, in fact, political identities, provoking an implosion of becoming and shaking the very foundations and structures of the family.

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