

Peasants and Workers in Tobacco Production in Greece, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Social and Cultural Lives

Alexandros Dagkas

Tobacco played a major role in the socio-economic development of Greece starting from the period of Ottoman rule. A related cultural history was written by those who took part in economic activities associated with the product. During the nineteenth century, the farmers who were involved in tobacco production, and tobacco-related urban professions, contributed to the formulation of social and cultural identities that had a distinct presence within the spectrum of the stratification of Greek society. During the twentieth century, a broad popular mass of two million local people and refugees helped to shape the various profiles of the social strata linked to tobacco. Customs, habits, traditions, behaviours, mentalities, psychologies, attitudes, life models, all merged with the willingness of people to influence the course of social developments in the country and participate in social movements. The aim of this paper is to examine issues related to various aspects of the relevant social and cultural identities.

The importance of the product

During the Ottoman Empire, after the introduction of tobacco to the regions of Macedonia and Thrace around 1600, the favourable geographic-climatological conditions and the experience accumulated after centuries of cultivating and processing the tobacco plant resulted in the creation of what became traditional Oriental tobacco. The tobacco leaves of this famous variety became a classical commodity, essential for the preparation of high quality blends. Oriental tobacco, with its incomparable aroma and other intense sensory characteristics, was used, according to narratives, in the sultan's narghile, ground in small quantities over the rest of the tobacco — like pepper when added to food.

Oriental tobacco was consumed in various forms: pipe tobacco, “toubeki” (for chewing), tobacco snuff for sniffing into the nose, cigarettes (handmade). A whole world of material culture was created surrounding the product: factories were built according to the latest architectural designs, products were sold in deluxe packaging, various objects were invented to complement tobacco use (pipes, narghile, tobacco cases) that constituted valuable works of art.

In Ottoman Greece, a mountainous country with limited fertile land, the product yield in relation to the cultivated area presented the advantage that, for the same surface area, tobacco provided a much higher income compared to that of cereals and other crops. However, the appropriate attention was paid to its cultivation only during the nineteenth century. Later, in the free Greek state, the acquisition of Thessaly in 1881 signified the period of increasing the area of cultivation and volume of Greek production. After 1912, the quantities of Oriental tobacco produced were multiplied with the annexation of southern Macedonia and western Thrace. Tobacco was one of the main agricultural products in the import-export trade of Greece that was a source of foreign currency for the state.

On a worldwide scale, the product was exported to the markets of the West, functioning as one of the parameters that defined the role of the periphery as complementary to the network exploiting the raw materials in the metropolitan centres of capitalism.

Tobacco and social stratification

Farmers and the agrarian movement

All aspects of the farmer’s economic activities corresponded to a stage of early capitalism and reflected the general delay of the Balkans regarding the international distribution of labour and production, according to which the region had been assigned the role of producer of raw materials to be exported to the industrialised countries of the West. The psychological outlook and intentions of the agricultural world precisely corresponded to these conditions. Even later on, under a bourgeois regime during the inter-war period there was limited interest in creating a cooperative framework for agricultural production and joining together to form agricultural unions. Solidarity with the workers on common points of concern was repeatedly tested; the results were however disappointing. When the situation in the marketplace changed radically, through the imposition of products (cheap cigarettes) that satisfied the modern needs of consumers, the farmers, after a brief period of uncertainty in 1925, took a stand against the workers, aligning themselves with the capital holders.

A turning point for the production of Greek tobacco was the Asia Minor disaster in 1922 and the subsequent population exchange. The agricultural movement, in general, had to deal with problems of a different kind, given the fact that the issues related to the struggle against the large land owners in Old Greece were de



Ottoman Salonica, centre of tobacco processing and commerce.

Painting by A. P. Dagkas, 1898.

facto resolved, to a great extent, in Greek Macedonia–Thrace. Agricultural reform, although planned for 1917, did not take place until after 1922 (*L'Opinion*, 24 October 1921; DS, M 443, No 5:273–77, Leland Morris to State Dept.–Washington, Salonica 28 October 1921:5), when its implementation was accelerated after the failed attempts of Greek expansionism, the rise of the middle classes and the settlement of refugees. The capitalist development of Greece in the inter-war period was combined with agricultural reform, which was essential, since it signified an enlargement of the domestic market as a precondition for the expansion of the country's productive base, through the transition of farmers into the marketplace. The number of expropriations was particularly high in the New Provinces, where 85% of the cultivators settled (Vergopoulos, 1978:46–47). In Greek Macedonia–Thrace, in 1917, 50% of the cultivated areas belonged to estates. More than half of these were expropriated by 1938 (Vergopoulos, 1975:174–75, 178). The fight for the expropriation of the estates was supported, to the extent that subjective factors were allowed to intervene, by the ruined native farmers, the refugees, the labour movement that influenced the farmers, and the Associations of War Veterans. Within such an economic and social framework, the only way out for the agricultural population was to cultivate tobacco of a lower quality. In 1924, agriculture faced a critical situation, due to the departure of the Muslim population

for Asia Minor. They abandoned the fields that they had been expertly cultivating for centuries, taking their experience and tools with them. By contrast, the majority of refugees had limited farming knowledge and wished to practise the urban professions that they had left behind in Asia Minor. And while the concentration of refugees in cities created serious problems related to accommodation and labour, fertile land remained uncultivated and whole agricultural regions were deserted (PRO, FO 286–898, Crow to Chamberlain, Salonica 18 February 1924:6; DS, M 443, No 6: 205–12, Sidney O’Donoghue to State Dept.–Washington, Salonica 18 February 1924:8). From that point onwards, tobacco production followed an ever-increasing trend. The harvest for 1936 was 82,074 tonnes for the whole of Greece, six times that of 1913 which amounted to 13,551 tonnes (Lambrou and Tzanidis, 1939:18). The major share of the Greek production (66%) came from the Macedonia–Thrace region, as well as the largest amounts to be exported (Labrianidis, 1982: 68–69). In western Thrace, tobacco production increased from 2,418 tonnes in 1932 to 6,530 in 1937, and in eastern Macedonia from 9,047 to 25,976.¹ Northern Greece witnessed a significant financial gain from the production and processing of tobacco. The average earnings per family during the period 1928–1937 were 19,146 drachmas, which was 59.8% more than the national average (11,449 drachmas) (Lambrou and Tzanidis, 1939:69). In the tobacco-producing areas of Xanthi, Chrysoupolis, Drama and Serres, 116,570 producers had average earnings of 36,955 drachmas per family in 1939. In the Xanthi region, during the same year, 39,613 producers working with tobacco reached a level of income of up to 41,111 drachmas per family (Skandalis, 1960:73, 80). The situation in the tobacco production sector, on the eve of World War II, can be considered as a fatalistic compliance to market demands and as an increase in quantity at the expense of quality. After the war, the same rationale continued to exist among tobacco farmers, while a new negative parameter that entered the market was consumer awareness concerning the detrimental effects of smoking on people’s health.

Workers and the labour movement

Tobacco workers played an active part in the social history of Greece, the most important period being the 1920s and 1930s.

Working in a tobacco warehouse involved activities of the secondary sector regarding the industrial (if we may borrow the term) treatment of the product, with the curing of the tobacco leaves during the fermentation period of their components (after February, when the temperature grew warmer). After the initial (agricultural) processing, the bale was transformed into the classically-processed tobacco bale, which was then destined for the tertiary sector — sale to the market.

¹ Cf. Lambrou and Tzanidis, 1939:46–49. The increase in other agricultural products in Macedonia–Thrace was also great, 70% during the period 1933–1937 compared to 1928–1932, with an increased yield of 35% (Mazower, 1991:240, 307).

It is speculated that the mechanism of creating a relative overpopulation in agricultural areas, to strengthen the workforce in the cities, did not function amongst farmers in tobacco-producing regions. The solution was to combine farming and labour activities. During the period of Ottoman rule, the majority of tobacco workers were located in Macedonia–Thrace. In 1910, there were 16,000 tobacco workers in Kavala, 6,000 in Xanthi (2,500 of whom were Muslims — 2,000 Turks and 500 Pomaks), 5,000 in Drama, 2,500 in Serres, 4,000 in Thessaloniki (*Ergatis*, 22 August 1910; *Rabotniceska Iskra*, 15 July 1909). In the inter-war period, the total number of Greek tobacco workers amounted to about 40,000, of whom 35,000 lived in northern Greece (approximately 9,000 in central Macedonia, 18,000 in eastern Macedonia, 1,000 in western Macedonia, and 7,000 in Thrace).²

Tobacco workers were subject to the same adverse conditions related to the disadvantaged position of the working class within the social structure (pay, working hours, social welfare, finding work), but enjoyed better wages in comparison to other labourers. Their movement focused on two points connected to the tobacco network: who benefits from the product and who controls it. The first question referred to the existing social system (the profit belonged to the capitalist). What remained was the circulation of the product in the secondary and tertiary sectors, which the workers controlled through the techniques required for the classical processing of high-quality tobacco leaves. Specialised workers were irreplaceable (which is why strikes were usually declared during the May–June period, a risky time for the curing of tobacco leaves, which made the employers more vulnerable). By protecting the quality of Greek tobacco, tobacco workers also safeguarded their own social power. Unionism had achieved a high level of mass participation and operated, apart from its use in supporting economic claims, as a lever for promoting institutional demands, such as acknowledgment of the tobacco workers' competence, signifying a request for participation in labour-related decision-making processes.

Nevertheless, the advantage of producing a luxury commodity was distorted by the conditions under which capitalism developed after World War I. The global market, through its rapid adjustment to the way of life and the ideology of consumption that was being recommended to the people, was looking for a cheap mass-produced product. Cigarettes offered the solution. The invention of machinery allowed for an unlimited increase in the volume of cigarettes produced, thus lowering the relevant costs. One example from Greece is the mass production of cigarettes in 1919 at an accessible price and the launch of a particular brand, whose manufacturer provided an expense plan for consumer-workers (8 hours of work — 0.80 drachmas per 24 hours). This make was named “8” and the packet of 24 cigarettes was priced at 0.80 drachmas (*Foni tou Laou*, 4, 11 August 1919).

² Data processed by the *Office Bulletin for the Protection of Greek Tobacco in Kavala* and by Lambrou and Tzanidis, 1939:92.

Only one factor remained to be addressed in formulating product price, the cost of the raw material — tobacco leaves. Within the circles of the international tobacco industry, a new powerful force emerged that was used to supersede the advantage of quality in Oriental tobacco: advertising. Advertising shaped people's psychology and consciousness, created certainties, moulded life models. The consumer, under the influence of the advertising message, showed himself or herself willing to swap preferences, regardless of product quality, and turn to products that did not correspond to his or her previous choices. Aromatic tobacco leaves in blends were replaced by others of a lower quality, but this had no impact on the consumption of tobacco.

The effect of international developments on a small country like Greece was the elimination of the old economic structures that corresponded to the provision of a traditional luxury commodity, and the fact that the local tobacco merchants and farmers joined forces with the international tobacco monopolies in order to cover the new market requirements by offering a downgraded product. From the early twentieth century, there had been an attempt to subvert traditional market terms, by exporting unprocessed tobacco, in other words a product of low standard. At the time, the decisive reaction of the workforce and state intervention put an end to any such attempt at its outset. At the end of the 1920s, the new state of affairs led to exploitation of the progress made on a technique for the normal evolution of the fermentation of tobacco leaves' components that did not require them to be subjected to the classical processing treatment. Therefore, classical processing was ousted from the labour market, along with the negotiating power of tobacco workers (Pelt, 1998:112–14, 214–22; Dagkas, 2003:765–71). After World War II, the majority of men were replaced by women workers (95% of the total tobacco workforce).

Mentalities, culture, impact on society and the surrounding environment

The history of Greek tobacco can be used for the composition of other histories of Greece regarding mentalities and cultural identities, women and the women's movement, children and child labour, the social status quo, the *raison d'Etat*. From such a perspective, the role of the tobacco workers acquires particular significance.

Statistical processing of the data on tobacco workers (men and women) during the 1920s and 1930s, found in specific historical sources, leads to the identification of certain aspects of social conduct that characterised the vast majority of workers in this field. Notable among these were their pride in their profession and art, the high degree of class and trade union consciousness, the organised promotion of their demands, their fighting spirit, political involvement, and participation in the revolutionary movement. A study of the facts concerning the way in which their

fighting spirit was expressed is of additional interest from a researcher's perspective. Amongst such a voluminous population of 40,000 tobacco workers (120,000 including their families), it is natural for any historical researcher to encounter various occasions that were characterised by the use of violence, when dynamic mobilisations were in progress. A detailed investigation leads us to identify statistically significant characteristics of their everyday life. Many were accustomed to carrying weapons: pointed and sharp utensils, such as a penknife, paring knife, razor and needle, and more rarely a revolver. Some actually used handguns and there is occasional mention of injuries caused, albeit unintended. The cultural element of violence, in the daily life of this part of the tobacco workers' population that we have discussed, naturally found an outlet in the workers' movement also (in party and trade union activities). That was when the above-mentioned armoury was utilised, along with other objects that were transformed into weapons of attack.

The cultural impact of the tobacco workers' movement on society was extensive. The latter was forced to review moral stereotypes and proceed with a more updated consideration of pending issues. In reference to the women's situation, sexual discrimination, until the entry of women into tobacco production (they are estimated at 12–13,000 during the inter-war period, i.e. 30% of the total tobacco workforce), was a criterion for behaviour differentiation, consolidating perceptions and creating strict spatial boundaries. These were eliminated within the tobacco processing warehouses and manufacturing plants. Although, historically, all things unconventional were viewed as a threat to society and the state, women, in the conditions dictated by the rise of capitalism, broke through the barrier of conservatism, satisfied their need to earn a living, entered the labour market as workers and mixed with the men in the tobacco processing warehouses, where they rejected all conventions of social interaction that hindered the production process.³ This was not a linear development, since each region had its own particular characteristics. In the tobacco villages, the women's moral code remained conservative. Elsewhere, far from the supervision of the family, women workers were now liberated. In Kavala, the women from Thassos (most of whom were named "Maria", the most common name on their island) lived in squalid rooms, 15–20 women at a time (a month's rent in 1927 was 200–225 drachmas, which meant that their share was 10–15 drachmas each), undernourished — eating olives and lettuce dipped in vinegar — and saving money to use during the winter months of unemployment. They gradually became more modern, did away with their long dresses from Thassos and thick white stockings, and cut off their plaits (*Makedonika Nea*, 5 September 1927). In Thessaloniki, the environment of the big city speeded up cultural developments. At the Atlas tobacco plant, 240 women workers were employed, of whom 200 were refugees, specialised in cigarette manufacturing, and

³ Cf. Dagkas Archive — Thessaloniki, 87 taped interviews with tobacco workers taken by A. Dagkas from 1989 to 1994.

paid a minimal wage. They also became more progressive and by 1919 were dressed in see-through blouses, silk stockings, patent court shoes and silken bows (*Foni tou Laou*, 4, 11 August 1919). Some women workers even took the initiative in their interactions with the opposite sex. There is also mention of their lack of dependency on social-national institutions within the framework of the city, and the fact that the relationships between the sexes refuted the stereotypes involving the different nationalities.

The changes in the economy, social structure, organisation, and customs, in the Balkans and in Greece, were accompanied by changes in the environment. The violent social changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the transition to a bourgeois regime, the wars and their financial and social implications, created a need for town planning alterations to be made to the city. In Balkan towns, streets, still influenced by the Turkish way of life, existed in various shapes and sizes, but in general those in the city centre were quite narrow. This was a reality that focuses on the fact that Turkish towns did not have public spaces, like the cities of western Europe. The street, as a link between urban areas, certainly held the prospect of potentially acquiring social significance. Traditionally, however, it was not used for social interaction. No functional element imposed such social contact, neither was any particular service required of the street. The urban movement added a positive social dimension, with its agitation, demonstrations, strikes, leaflets. The topography of the urban movement presents various “popular sites” (centres for holding debates or exchanging views and meeting areas), points of assembly and mobilisation (squares and open areas where people gathered, demonstration routes), places to work, live, eat and be entertained. Furthermore, a decoding of the use of all these social places reveals tactical and strategic choices of the trade union and political movement, as well as information on the habits and culture of its members.

Memories from the past, lessons for the present

In Kavala, the Melachrinos group of tobacco warehouses, built during the period of Ottoman rule, still operates to this day. However, waves of workers no longer pass before it, neither can one hear the well-known song on its doorstep:

Outside Melachrinos' door (thrice)
the tobacco workers are taking a walk.

Half a century after the disappearance of most social parameters that were linked to the period when Greek tobacco knew its heyday, fragmented memories still remain. The tobacco factories and the tobacco merchants' mansions are proof of the history of the Greek bourgeoisie. The photographs of tobacco farmers and workers, the oral testimonies, all depict the mentality and desires of the popular classes at work and play. The 1 May celebrations in Thessaloniki mark the significance of

the events of May 1936 on the eve of the fascist dictatorship, when tobacco workers on strike joined with the military, paralysing the authorities for 48 hours, and requiring the army to be mobilised from Old Greece in order to deal with the uprising.

In view of this history of Greek tobacco, loaded with so many significant events, the main concern of historical science is to interpret the progressive message of the developments that took place during the process of Greece's transition to capitalism. The cultural elements associated with Greek tobacco have their place in the composition of the visions of the establishment of an ideal relationship between all members of society.

Bibliography

Dagkas, 2003

Alexandros Dagkas, *Recherches sur l'histoire sociale de la Grèce du Nord: Le mouvement des ouvriers du tabac, 1918–1928*. Paris: De Boccard.

Dagkas Archive

Author's private collection.

DS

National Archives of the United States, Records of the Department of State, Washington.

Ergatis

Εργάτης. Greek weekly newspaper published in Constantinople.

Foni tou Laou

Φωνή του Λαού. Greek daily newspaper published in Thessaloniki.

Labrianidis, 1982

Lois Labrianidis, *Industrial Location in Capitalist Social Formations: Tobacco Processing and Manufacturing in Greece*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, London School of Economics.

Lambrou and Tzanidis, 1939

Γεώργιος Λάμπρου – Μιλτιάδης Τζανίδης, *Τα ανατολικά καπνά*. Kavala: Πετρόπουλος.

L'Opinion

Jewish daily newspaper in French published in Thessaloniki.

Makedonika Nea

Μακεδονικά Νέα. Greek daily newspaper published in Thessaloniki.

Mazower, 1991

Mark Mazower, *Greece and the Inter-war Economic Crisis*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Pelt, 1998

Mogens Pelt, *Tobacco, Arms and Politics*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press – University of Copenhagen.

PRO, FO

Public Record Office, Foreign Office, London.

Rabotniceska Iskra

Работническа Искра. Bulgarian weekly newspaper published in Bitola.

Skandalis, 1960

Ελευθέριος Σκανδάλης, *Ο καπνός εν τω πλαισίου της γεωργικής οικονομίας της Βορείου Ελλάδος*. Athens: Εμπορική Τράπεζα.

Vergopoulos, 1975

Κώστας Βεργόπουλος, *Το αγροτικό ζήτημα στην Ελλάδα. Η κοινωνική ενσωμάτωση της γεωργίας*, Athens: Εξάντας.

Vergopoulos, 1978

Κώστας Βεργόπουλος, *Εθνισμός και οικονομική ανάπτυξη*. Athens: Εξάντας.