Self-doubting intellectuals and primitive alter-egos – The life and times of Zorba and Rodakis in the island of Aegina, Greece

Nikos Magouliotis

It would be better for man / to be a cold stone / than to have thought / and reason and measure. I learned to live. αχ-1891-βαχ. [1]

To hell with the papers and pens! To hell with the good and useful. [2]

Fascination about the absence of the trained professional or the intellectual has been a recurring symptom of certain branches of theory, within and beyond architecture. It manifests itself in historical instances where radical changes in cultural, financial and technical conditions force architects and other professions to redefine their place in society and production. Usually, it emerges as a self-critical dialectic opposite of the intellectual discourse, a counter-weight to its excessive dogmatism and rationality through 'common sense' or 'primitive wisdom'. The two most famous examples of this in the early 20th century Greek context are the 'noble savage' figures of Rodakis and Zorba. Although the former overshadowed the latter, they were both "born" around the same time and within the same geographical region, the island of Aegina, in the Saronic gulf, only a few miles from Athens. Rodakis and Zorba constitute seminal examples of folk heroes, because their successive portrayals by different authors embodied two sets of antithetical notions that were crucial to the discourse on the vernacular and the primitive: Firstly, they were both real (actual people whose lives and works were documented in partial accuracy) and fictional (idealized and mythologized for the use of artistic production). Secondly, they were simultaneously typical (indicative examples of an entire people) and exceptional (unique enough to formulate individual cases).

1 A poem inscribed by Rodakis on one of the walls of his house in Aegina.

2 Zorba's exclamation to author Nikos Kazantzakis, as the latter finally dances at the finale of the homonymous novel.

I

Alexandros Rodakis, a farmer who had built his own house in the village of Mesagros was initially discovered in the early 1900s by German archaeologist Adolf Furtwängler, who was excavating the nearby ancient temple of Aphaia. But he was later popularized in the Greek intellectual milieu by architect Dimitris Pikionis, one of the main advocates of the importance of the vernacular in the inter-war period. Pikionis visited Rodakis in the early 1910s, made drawings of the house and its intricate details and decorations and encouraged his students to visit and study it. Eventually, in 1934 two of his disciples, Julio Kaimi and Klaus Vrieslander published a book titled "The house of Rodakis in Aegina", which was the cornerstone to the myth of this noble savage. In the text, Rodakis was presented as the absolute "other" of modernist architects: He possessed an empirical wisdom, a

poetic attitude towards the ordinary and an individualist spirit of expression; his house was considered to achieve an ideal balance between rational and irrational or typical and peculiar and it was juxtaposed with and favored over the numerous urban modern buildings that trained professionals were designing at the time.

The house was described as an object infested with meaning: Every detail was seen as the crystallization of empirical wisdom, meticulous design and also personal expression. And yet the purely architectural description of the house occupies a rather limited part of the text. What seems to matter more for the authors is the persona of Rodakis, as it expressed through his work. But despite the mystifying praise and the references to his name, Rodakis appears to be somewhat absent from the text. In fact his authors had never met him, as he had died several years before they visited the house and they were merely interpreting an abandoned ruin. The hidden protagonist of the book is not the noble savage persona that lent its name to its title, but its authors; the modern intellectuals who encounter the work of a peasant and are lead through a process of rigid self-critique and re-evaluation of their theories.

A few years later and only a few kilometers from Rodakis, a similar persona was born in Aegina: In 1935, author and folk-enthusiast Nikos Kazantzakis moved to the island, seeking refuge from the political turbulences of Athens. The house that he built, designed by the prominent Athens-based Vasileios Douras, could be seen as an answer to the problems posed by Kaimi and Vrieslander in the aforementioned book: The small seaside residence made an effective combination of traditional and modern materials and forms, resulting in a hybrid of a typical vernacular house of Aegina and a modernist holiday retreat. Inside this particular house, around the late 1930s Kazantzakis would write his famous novel "The life and times of Alexis Zorbas", a semi-autobiographical recount of his encounter with the mythical figure of Zorba.

Although the book was written in and possibly influenced by a seminal piece of architecture, it is not particularly architectural. But it has several similarities to the previously mentioned book on Rodakis and, in fact, it makes the dialectic between the intellectual and the primitive man far more explicit: Although the plot includes the adventurous efforts of its two protagonists to set up a coal mine, together with several other tragicomic incidents, a large part of it is devoted to intense dialogues between Zorba and the narrator (who was a semi-autobiographical persona of Kazantzakis himself). In these long discussions, much like Rodakis, Zorba exhibits a fervent poetic and philosophical attitude about life that astonishes the author. Kazantzakis is gradually led to realize the irrelevance of his education and his intellectual work, and eventually looks to Zorba as an ideally opposite and almost unreachable model.

Again it is clear that, despite Zorba's name on the title, the disguised protagonist is the author who encounters him. The focus of the book on these dialogues (and not just the admirable works of a primitive man) makes another hidden aspect of this dialectic more apparent: The hidden drama seeking redemption is not the perishing tradition or the folkloric personas at the threshold of a modern era, but the emerging modern individuals that are realizing their inefficiency and are seeking a new place in society and a new matter-of-factness on which to reformulate their theoretical tools. The novel ends with a spectacular failure of the modernist project of the coal mine and the absurdity peaks with the redemption of the intellectual from his rationalism and his temporary transformation into his primitive alter-ego through dancing. Zorba's vindication is expressed by praises and simultaneous curses against "the papers and the pens" (as quoted at the start of the article), the symbols of Kazantzakis' intellectual status.

II

Over the years following the publication of the book,

the house of Rodakis, despite its ruinous state, became a place of pilgrimage for both local and international architects. Among the many that visited it was the then young student Georges Candilis, who later on published a fictionalized encounter with Rodakis himself (even though the former was already deceased). The dialogue between Candilis and Rodakis adopts a similar dialectic motif as the ones of Kazantzakis and Zorba: The young and curious intellectual asks questions to the old and wise peasant and the unexpectedly philosophical and poetic answers he receives make him re-assess his own values. This encounter is crucially placed in the beginning of the architect's autobiography and is described as a formative experience. Again, the balance between rational and irrational, and the surprising discovery of the latter as a balancing force to his formal education, are dominant features of the narrative.

Shortly after Candilis, Aldo Van Eyck was also charmed by Rodakis and his house: The cover of an exhibition of the architect's works, which took place in Athens in 1983 was adorned with the exclamation "αχ βαχ" (pronounced "ach vach", a popular expression of pain and anguish in the Greek language), which was taken from a poem that Rodakis had carved on one of the walls of his house. The poem (reproduced at the start of this article) is quoted in full in one of the pages of the book and Van Eyck declares that this is a tribute to both Rodakis and Pikionis who discovered him, but he also quotes Candilis' aforementioned recount. The architecture of the house (already blurry in Kaimi and Vrieslander's, but also Candilis' texts) is further dissolved and the building is eventually almost entirely replaced by the poem. The mythical persona of Rodakis is still present, but it is now diluted in its multiple readings by its intellectual admirers. Eventually, the peasant from Aegina had surpassed the local buzz generated by the Greek inter-war vernacular-enthusiasts and earned a place in the primitivist pantheon of Team X, beside the African tribe of the Dogons, who were similarly discovered and praised by Van Eyck about two decades before.

Zorba enjoyed far broader fame than Rodakis, through the numerous translations of the book and its eventual adaptation in a film: "Zorba the Greek" (1964) was a movie produced in Greece and distributed worldwide by 20th Century Fox, which featured a cast of both local and international movies stars. The strong performance of Anthony Quinn gave a new dimension to the emblematic Zorba and the filming locations in picturesque villages around Chania in Crete (together with the numerous locals that were hired as extras) gave a stronger folkloristic texture to the story. But the elimination of the narrator's voice (and his numerous internal monologues expressing the intellectual's self-critical transformation) shifted the balance of the film on Zorba. The indulgent and mischievous peasant, in this case not as balanced by his skeptical opposite, dominates the film and gives it a far more comical overtone than the original book.

This change was perfectly fitting to the radically different conditions of the post-war era: Greece was recovering from about ten years of international and civil warfare and was gradually witnessing a tourism boom. The restructuring of the National Tourism Organization generated a campaign that aimed to promote Greece as a travel destination not only for its famous antiquities, but also for its bucolic, unspoiled landscapes and charming peasants. The admiration of primitivist and vernacularist intellectuals for the Greek countryside in the interwar years has paved the way for a mainstream touristic exoticism. Evidently, Zorba's new cinematic version, separated from its original context, was very suitable for this new situation and was gradually elevated to a national stereotype of the indulgent and passionate Greek.

III

Despite their successive mutations, the intertwined myths of Rodakis and Zorba maintained the dialectic of the intellectual and the primitive, usually in praise

of the latter and as a critical tool for the former. The extensive discourse on the vernacular and the primitive, within and beyond architecture, has favored and occasionally fetishized the "absence" of the intellectual (be it an architect, a writer or a philosopher). But were Pikionis, Kaimi, Kazantzakis, Candilis, et.al. working fervently for their own annihilation? The answer is perhaps more complicated than a simple "no": All the aforementioned were certainly realizing the limits of their intellectual capacity and theories; they were unsatisfied with their bourgeois origins and they were searching for (or inventing) a new, more primitive ancestry. In essence, they were struggling for the redefinition of their role within society and hoping for their eventual dissolution in life and actuality.

Neither of the two books from which we started our analysis (or the numerous subsequent reprises of their stories and protagonists) could qualify as ethnographic documents, no matter how much they try to appear as such. They can mostly be understood as psychoanalytic or existential self-examinations of their authors: In both cases, the hidden protagonist is the intellectual in crisis (i.e. the author himself) and not the noble savage who dominates the plot and lends his name to the book. The emergence or invention of such unique hero-figures out of the great anonymous mass of the common folk is a theoretical device that allows the dialectic of the primitive and the intellectual to acquire the form of a literary and instructive dialogue. Moreover, none of the books expresses the nostalgia and lament for the loss of tradition that are common to folkloristic essays. In fact, they are essentially modernist texts: The issue at stake is not (or not solely) the extinction of wise primitives; the traditional past is not a long gone world or a distant object treated with historical detachment; it is modernity's ever-present and critically dialectic "other" and its way to understand and re-assess the future.

What we tried to describe here, through the examples of Rodakis and Zorba and their persisting presence in the cultural debates of the 20th century, is the peculiar relation between the "silent folk hero" and the "ventriloquist intellectual": the latter makes the former "say" what he dare not utter himself or the things that require some sort of external confirmation to be convincing. A common deception that stems from such theoretical constructs is that, through a supposed return to "real life" and "real people", subjective views and mystifying exaggerations are occasionally presented as matters of fact. This is often more intense within the architectural discourse on the vernacular and the primitive (in relation, for example, to similar discourses in more language-based disciplines): Vernacular buildings don't "speak" like the ones made by professional architects. Neither do their anonymous makers have any interest in explaining or writing about them. Consequently, the intellectuals who are fascinated with such buildings feel obliged to write these manifestos of the vernacular on behalf of the "ordinary people" that made them.

* The article is an extract from an ongoing research by the author on the late 19th and early 20th century architectural discourse on the Greek vernacular, dealing with Rodakis and Zorba, together with other case studies.

**The metaphor for the "silent folk hero" and the "ventriloquist intellectual" was borrowed and adapted from "The silent architect and the ventriloquist historians" (Ο σιωπηλός αρχιτέκτων και οι εγγαστρίμυθοι ιστορικοί), a lecture by architectural historian Stylianos Giamarelos (Athens, 19/12/2015).

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Nikos Magouliotis studied architecture and architectural history & theory in Athens and Oslo. He has worked as a teaching assistant at the Athens School of Architecture and is currently an assistant and PhD candidate at the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta) at ETH. He has published several texts on the various incarnations and theorizations of the primitive and the vernacular and his research is currently focused on the historiography of the vernacular in late 19th and early 20th century Greece.