

PROLOGUE

When I visited the region of the Greek minority of Albania for the first time, immediately after the collapse of the communist regime, in the beginning of 1991, it dawned on me that an immense research challenge was opening ahead. So I immediately started thinking about what I could do on a systematic basis.

The first opportunity appeared only in 1994, when a research partnership was proposed to me by the University of Patras. This concerned a small research project titled "The wider dimensions of the demographic problem of the Greek minority of Albania", which we carried out together with colleague C. Kassimis and which resulted, among other things, in a publication with the characteristic title "The Greek minority of Albania: transition or catastrophe?"

During the period that followed, I participated in a research mission whose object was the recording of folk songs in the same area. In the meantime, I had had other opportunities to visit South Albania and become directly or indirectly preoccupied with it and reflect on all I would observe there.

A few years later, in 2000, one more opportunity was offered to me, to participate in a rather large research project assigned to the Universities of Ioannina and Patras by the ministry of agriculture. The project was titled "The effects on the Greek country-side, of the settlement and employment there of foreign labour", and lasted two years. My personal charge was to investigate how immigration was experienced by the immigrants themselves, so I took hundreds of interviews, mainly from Albanians. Thirteen of those interviews were published in my book, *Testimonies of Albanian Immigrants*, in 2003.

My acquaintance with all those people incited an interest in discovering their places of origin. Questions of collective identities, ethnic relationships and the management of symbolic boundaries by the people were emerging all the more as interesting objects of study. So we submitted, in the framework of the project "Pythagoras II", a proposal for a research project titled "Immigration, borders, cultural identities and ethnic groups in the Greek-Albanian frontier", which was approved in 2005. This project, in the context of which an ethnographic documentary film titled "The Border" was also produced, gave me the opportunity to carry out field research on the other side of the border as well, during which I conceived the idea of writing the present book. My research continued, therefore, even after the completion of the specific project and lasted effectively until the completion of the writing of the book, in November 2008.

The book is based on my research diary, which I composed in a more detailed and analytical manner than usual, because my desire was that the ensuing book would follow the structure and writing of the diary, in terms of both style and organisation. What I did, therefore, was copy out my diary, elaborating fur-

ther on my initial commentary and reflections, analysing further those points where I thought it was necessary to do so, involving theoretical issues and documenting the final ethnographic text with the necessary notes and bibliographical references. In the book, I make use of a small number of itineraries, which function rather as stimuli for bringing up issues and presenting views that had developed throughout the previous period. It goes without saying that the scientific research on which all this depends is in no way confined to the time limits of the particular project, that is, the dates recorded in the diary, which latter, nevertheless, effectively provided the starting point of the whole venture. Moreover, references to other research projects and previous ethnographic endeavours are frequent. I should also mention that I was so very interested in conveying the atmosphere of the diary and the vitality of spontaneous writing, that I mostly kept the chronological order of the ethnographic missions and to a large degree the style of the first writing.

Even though the stylistic features of the writing are rather self-evident, I still believe it is worth accounting for them further. First, the diary mode explains the presence of dimensions such as the oral idiom and spontaneity, elements that encourage references to emotional responses. During the second writing, I reduced or modified such references in a few cases, where I felt that the discourse tended to be inappropriately personal for the genre of ethnographic narrative. Second, self-reflexivity constitutes part of the writing; the subjectivity of response to many of the phenomena I describe is expressed both explicitly and implicitly. Third, the balance, between, on the one hand, the subjectivity of experience and, on the other hand, the desire for the final product of the writing and its assertions over particular

matters of scientific interest to be effectively coherent and documented, was a basic concern of the venture. Fourth, one of the basic strategic choices of the writing was to render myself a narrator who, in parallel with my own perspective, would display other views, as well; apart, that is, from those expressed by the groups or individuals under study. So, I tried to include in my approaches other voices, too, keeping for myself a role similar to a coordinator of a choir, which I wanted to be polyphonic. This effort explains the frequent presence of large passages from other writers' texts that belong to different kinds of writing. Finally, the inclusion of some of my own, previous texts was decided, for the purpose of displaying the genealogy of several of my views and ideas and this also fits the frame of self-reflexivity, to some degree.

This book owes a lot to many people. Above all, it owes its existence to its protagonists. To all those people who found themselves close to the particular border and were subjected to its effects. The text may contain certain references to particular cases, but the book is about the whole of the frontier populations, which, despite their differentiations, share something in common: the border itself. Regarding references to persons, I did not follow the usual ethnographic practice of using pseudonyms, except in very few cases where I thought it ethically necessary. Apart from my own preference for this practice (for reasons of convincing documentation and historical reference), my informants or interlocutors themselves assured me they have no problem whatsoever with being personally named. I am grateful to all these people and anxious to know their views on what I have written, the responsibility of which, of course, is all mine.

From among my colleagues, I owe more than a simple “thank you” to my collaborator Kostas Mantzos, whom I frequently mention in the book anyway. Kostas shared with me not only part of the field research experience but virtually the whole of my thoughts on the issues I raise. Our endless discussions, either on location or outside it, helped me a lot in my understanding of things and his always apt remarks have always been a source of inspiration for me. Kostas also drew the maps and offered a meticulous commentary on my manuscript.

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