FOREWORD

The basic metaphors of anthropology are strongly grounded in space and building. Home is the fundamental unit through which human beings translate their sociability into material form and in which they invest an enduring significance, perpetuating their social existence either through the creation of lasting monuments or through the reproduction of what space and society share—structure.

Renée Hirschon has written one of the first ethnographic studies to recognise and exploit this relationship. Like myself a student of John Campbell—whose extraordinary talent it has been to nurture a diverse but enthusiastic and mutually appreciative crowd of historians and anthropologists—but also a trained student of the built environment, she has pursued an approach that is no less significant for social anthropology for being so modestly framed. Hers is one of the first ethnographies of any society to be radically attentive to the importance of space.

Greeks, like many others, are attentive to questions of spatial division. Their intense focus on the distinction between exterior appearances and interior intimacies, a cultural theme intensified by the country’s all too painfully ambivalent relationship with a “Europe” that alternately shuns it and tries to co-opt it, would make any study of the Greek uses of domestic space interesting. Hirschon’s book is much more than that, however, for it brings this central issue together with issues of memory and history, refugee experience, and gender—all of which have played central roles in subsequent anthropological debates. In a sense it was a book before its time, and one that appeared relatively early in the recent explosion of interest in Europeanist anthropology. Its publication now in a paperback edition is ridiculously overdue.

Hirschon was one of the first anthropologists working in an urban setting to question the wisdom of constituting a distinctive category of “urban anthropology.” She has been steadfast in her belief that this division of labour within the discipline creates artificial discontinuities. Again, I would argue that she had pre-sciently identified something that has become far more apparent now that anthropologists no longer view “their” communities as
cultural and social isolates or confine their fieldwork to single, dehistoricized localities: the persistence of cultural values that are shared by urban and rural dwellers (and that may actually become intensified in an urban context). Her analysis of the relationship between space and religion is particularly significant here, especially given the fact that many of her informants were communists and therefore unlikely to have been warmly disposed to the formal representatives of established religion. Yet, just as one cannot understand the imagery of left-wing European literature without knowing something of the varieties of liturgy and doctrine, it is clear from Hirschon's work that any study of predominantly leftist Greeks would be nonsensical without regard to the deeply ingrained religiosity that others have reported from the rural hinterlands—where, indeed, deep strains of anti-clericalism, albeit in a rather different form, are couched in an idiom clearly shaped by religious values.

But perhaps the greatest achievement of this book is its portrayal of human resilience in the aftermath of catastrophic events. The people of Kokkinia came there as refugees from Asia Minor. They fled hideous cruelties and arrived to a grimly indifferent or even downright hostile reception at the hands of local Greeks they themselves despised as provincial and uncultured. This is a dynamic that we find repeated in many parts of the world where large and violent displacements of population have taken place. Hirschon's study is an extraordinary portrait of social and cultural endurance, of adaptation, of compromise, and of a dignified adherence to deeply treasured identities and convictions. In the decade of Bosnia and Rwanda, of Palestinian resurgence and Albanian hopelessness, and in the face of the nearby and related tragedy of a divided Cyprus, this study provides a perspective of unique chronological depth on the persistence of refugee identity as well as the adaptations that this entails.

In 1989 this book represented a significant departure in method and focus. In the decade since then it has remained unique, and some of its strengths have become more obvious, or perhaps more important. True, others have written about urban Greece, myself included. But that urban focus is, for Hirschon, not a legitimate basis for claiming originality (although this work was indeed the first full ethnography of an urban setting in Greece). Rather, the real
originality of the book lies in its transference to a European con-
text of the kind of symbolic analysis of spatial use and meaning
that one might have expected to find applied (for example) to the
dwellings of the Kabyle or the Purum.

It is thus an important contribution, not to the more self-indul-
gent variety of reflexive ethnography, but to a kind of cultural
reflexivity. The ethnographer’s own assumptions about the social
uses of space are always in question. As we read, we are drawn
into the same kind of self-examination as that which she pract-
tises—again, not narcissistically, but in the sense of questioning
how our unspoken assumptions about our built environment may
too blindly determine our understanding of what on the face of it
is an extremely familiar-looking society.

If Hirschon rejects the category of “urban anthropology,” she is
no happier with the facile reduction of socially organised space to
the domains of public and private. Rather, she argues, we should
see the ideals of gender complementarity that are to be found
throughout Greek society as underlying the uses of space in this
community. Some may feel today that this is too redolent of struc-
turalist theories about complementary opposition. But Hirschon is
no hostage to an outmoded (or even a currently fashionable) the-
oretical paradigm. Rather, she identifies the patterns that emerge
most readily from what her informants have themselves taught
her. And if this happens to suggest that Greeks are structuralist at
heart, that is a question for others—political historians, perhaps—
to try to explain. What she has produced is important in its own
right, as a clear demonstration that people translate their socially
grounded cosmologies into arrangements and uses of domestic
space even when they would disclaim any supernatural founda-
tion for the world they inhabit.

Finally, this is one of the first ethnographies to situate material
objects and memory in a common framework. Much has since
been written about both memory and material culture. In this
ethnography both are present—furniture and icons play an espe-
cially dramatic role—in an unobtrusively profound synthesis.
Here, perhaps more than in any other respect, Hirschon’s sensi-
tivity to the material conditions of everyday life sets a standard of
observation and interpretation for contemporary research.
Heirs of the Greek Catastrophe suffered, in its original publication, both from being ahead of its time and for seeming (as it no longer does) to be simply another ethnography of an ethnographically unfashionable place. We can now read it with the distinct advantage of hindsight and can appreciate both its author's remarkable anticipation of intellectual concerns centred on refugee studies and its practical relevance to an understanding of our presently conflict-ridden times. As a few lone voices in the Balkans, in particular, begin to make themselves heard against the stridency of competing chauvinisms, this book will encourage them to persevere. It is a moving but scholarly testament to the capacity of human beings to create, quite literally, a space for hope amidst the hopelessness into which others have tried to cast them. And it is an exemplary demonstration of the powerful and often underappreciated insight that ethnography can bring to bear on the immediate consequences of historical events and global politics.

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