

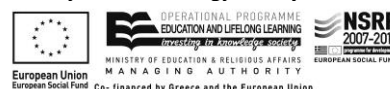
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**“The trade community and its transformation: Professional associations’
festivals in Greece 1880-1930”**

Professional associations were founded in the 1880s and 1890s in most trades in Athens, while tradesmen in other cities followed with some delay. The initiative usually came from shopkeepers and master artisans but their employees had the right to become members and many of them did. The aims usually declared in their statutes were mutual aid, collective representation of the trade and economic improvement of the members and of the trade in general (which was in many cases promoted by attempts to build cooperatives, collectively purchasing raw materials or providing small loans to the members).

These associations acquired a legal status, based on the liberal constitution of 1864 which recognized the right to associate. However, it seems that, in the years that followed the abolition of the guilds during the Greek Revolution in 1821, in specific trades there had been unofficial loci of collective identity and action. In the churches, we can still find 19th c. icons dedicated by trades as the tanners of Athens or the barbers of Nafplio (sometimes calling themselves ‘guilds’). It was mostly icons of the patron saint of each craft, whose holiday was often celebrated by the artisans. According to posterior testimonies the smiths of Athens, from 1848 until the foundation of their association, used to gather on the holiday of their patron saint and celebrate it in the church where they had dedicated an icon; in the same vein, the barbers of Athens from 1836 onwards celebrated their patron saint by attending the mass in a church near the old market and by collecting the previous day money which they distributed to their poorest colleagues.

This informal institution of trade sociality was fully adopted by the societies founded in the end of the 19th century. It was not anymore as central in the life of the trade as it probably used to be, while the practices of solidarity soon were detached from the holiday, and the distribution of small amounts of money to the needy colleagues gradually



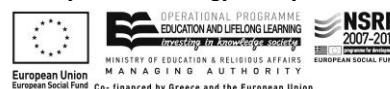
gave its place to more modern or even bureaucratized forms of relief. Still, the trade festivals remained an essential part of the activities of the associations.

The provisions in the associations' statutes, associations' archival material and newspapers' reports give us an adequate picture of what was happening during the festivities.

The trade festival was almost always related to the patron saint's day, or another religious holiday. The attending of the mass was a necessary part of the festivities, during which dead tradesmen were commemorated. Master artisans and shopkeepers used to close their shops for the whole day. After the mass, photographs were taken and a mass banquet was held, often outdoors in a place outside the city. This excursion sometimes took the form of a parade-like march of the tradesmen in a body, led by the associations' banner and even with folk music played by hired musicians. Employers, employees and apprentices were eating and dancing together, sometimes with their families, until the evening, when they returned by coaches or by foot. During the banquets, speeches were made, while the entertainment of the tradesmen was occasionally enriched by the recitation of poems by popular poets or *by* shooting competition.

Most of these practices constituted, broadly speaking, a legacy of the Ancient Regime corporations. There was a traditional guild folklore still alive in the artisans' culture. This folklore was specifically bound with collectivities formed on the basis of the common trade; it constituted, in other words, a particular feature of the (mixed, in terms of class) professional associations in retailing and crafts which distinguished them from both the middle class associations of merchants, lawyers etc. and the labour unions that were gradually formed in the large-scale industry and big firms.

The traditionality of these practices should not lead us to overlook the fact that in most professions direct continuities with the Ottoman age can not be traced. Some trades were new or were not populated enough to sustain a corporation before the cities of the Greek state grew substantially during the 19th century. Moreover, a significant turbulence took place during and after the revolution of 1821 in the cities of Southern Greece, in many of which the majority of population was previously constituted by Muslims (and Jews) who were killed or forced to leave. The artisan population was substantially



renewed after 1821, while Greeks began to practice crafts which were previously in the hands of Turks, according to the prevailing ethno-religious division of labour.

Therefore, I propose that we should not overestimate the role played by direct continuities regarding the adoption of traditional forms and practices by the associations founded in the end of the 19th century. In fact, instead of assuming that the presence of the old “guilds’ folklore” in the new professional associations was a natural expression of already existing informal organization, I argue we should problematize the adoption of these practices. Why did they become part and parcel of the associational sociality?

Patron saint’s holidays, as well as less traditional collective leisure activities of the associations (such as carnival balls and excursions in nearby seaside or countryside, novelties which were introduced by some associations in the beginnings of the 20th century), aimed at reinforcing a common identity and reproducing a community based on the bonds that developed in the workplace, irrespective of the place of each individual in the relations of production. These bonds were not invented out of nothing: there were strong age-old ties, forged in an everyday life that was characterized by long but not intensive working hours. In addition, small businesses formed the dominant pattern both in manufacture and retailing in the Greek state; this structure was favourable for the development of forms of solidarity between employers who worked by the side of their workers (instead of being directors detached from the workplace), and employees who could sensibly expect to start their own business in a later phase of their life-cycle.

The identities of the members of this community of “working people” (as they are often called in the sources) were of course multiple, as every individual’s are. Sometimes tensions between their trade identity and other identities (such as the local one) can be detected, as in the case of the particularisms of immigrant communities aiming to control certain labour markets. In general, though, these tensions were an issue not of fundamental rivalry but of asserting the priority in the loyalties of the individuals. Nevertheless, elements of a new community which was rival to the trade community made their appearance in the end of the 19th c. Class was bound to challenge the unity of the working people in the trades, by highlighting the opposing interests of employers and employees, while it promoted closer ties between people of different trades as well as people who did not refer to a specific profession at all, being unskilled wage labourers.

It seems that the will to hold back the advance of class provided an important stimulus for the building of associations on the basis of the trade. Surely this was the case for most of the middle-class politicians and wealthy entrepreneurs (such as the mayor of Athens T. Filimon or the millionaire A. Syngros) who got involved in the making of the trade societies, by encouraging and by financing the erection of a palace of the associations. They could evaluate the threatening news arriving from Western and Central Europe. Moreover, the proliferation of the poor just-arrived immigrants in the society of Athens in the 1880s had created fears about the public order, and the need to facilitate their integration must have seemed imperative for these provident bourgeois. As Filimon put it, “well-organized and moral trade associations contribute to the improvement of social and political order.”

More important factors were the motives of the shopkeepers and master artisans who had the initiative for the foundation of the associations and controlled them afterwards. What small businessmen clearly wished was to retain intact the trade communities and the social formation of the ‘working people’ that was based on them, consisting of all those who worked manually and did not form part of the economic, political and intellectual elite. In the context of the trade community they expected to keep their employees under their control, while at the same time they would appear as the natural leaders of the people. To an extent it actually worked like this, for some years.

The trade associations, thus, cultivated and promoted the common identity of the ‘people of the trade,’ and this contributed to the reproduction, at a higher level, of the social formation of ‘working people.’ The community of the trade was produced, of course, mainly in the workplace –but now it was also produced through the associations that offered relief to colleagues, represented and protected what was perceived as their common interest, opposed (to a certain extent) the competition developed between the small businessmen in each trade, and formed a kind of public sphere in which issues of the trade were discussed.

The trade festivals reinforced this community-making aspect of the public sociality developed in the associations. They did so by creating an environment of sociability, by extensively using symbols and symbolisms (from the banner and the procession to the commemoration of the dead masters), as well as with the articulation of a discourse about



the community in the speeches made by associations' executives in the banquets. In the few speeches of this kind I have detected, the emphasis is clearly put on the cultivation of a common identity and solidarity. The president of the shoemakers' association in 1891 praised the values of brotherhood and solidarity which were the reason for their gathering and unified the 'working classes;' the president of printers in 1870 stressed the brotherly love and the familial ties built through relief and 'protection' provided by the association, while a speech at the carpenters' festival in 1905 highlighted 'love and concord' as the message conveyed by the occasion. Here it must be added that in many statutes the associations were defined as 'centers of cooperation in brotherhood,' while common was the use in their seals and banners of symbols of cooperation and solidarity, such as hands that shake each other.

A second major topic of the speeches of the kind mentioned above was the concern about the skill and the mastery in the craft. The fellows were encouraged to improve their skills and contribute to the promotion of their 'wonderful trade,' being sometimes reminded that they were descendants of the 'great artisans' of Ancient Greece. Craft and craft community emerged as a crucial point of reference for both master artisans and wage workers, around which a common identity was articulated on the base of their skilled labour. The importance of the skill regarding community-making is also apparent in the image depicted in the membership card of the association of carpenters. Athena, goddess of wisdom as well as of crafts ('Athena Ergane'), instructs and guides the young craftsman. The meanings of the picture, as explained by the person who ordered it, besides notions of national identity, include the necessity of being industrious and studious, a prompt for a 'renaissance of the craft' as well as an emphasis on the intellectual labour involved in the craft.

Not unexpectedly, it was more in small manufacture than retailing that the importance of skilled labour for the definition of the trade community arose. What was shared by all tradesmen, however, was a vertical conception of the society consisting of different trades. The trade was still widely thought of as the main social group to which the working people belonged and, consequently, as one of the basic units of the society. The power of this conception of the society accounts for the eventual prevalence at the end of the 19th c. of the term *syntechnies*, that is corporations, both for the professional

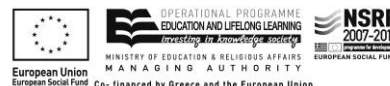
associations and for the trades they represented. The adoption of this term can be seen, as well, as indicative of the success with which were met the efforts to slow down the breakup of the social formation of the working people in the trades.

However, this success was only temporary. The rise of class in the first decades of the 20th c. came to undermine the unity of ‘the world of the crafts.’ The motive force behind this development was the rise of the labour movement. The tendency towards concentration of capital, however limited, reduced the possibilities of the workers to ascend at the status of the small business owner; class awareness grew, while strikes proliferated. Class conflict appeared now as a self-evident fact, and the working-class militants succeeded in forming a working-class pole, firstly founding the Labour Center of Athens in 1910 and then the General Confederation of Greek Workers in 1918. Petite bourgeoisie followed by establishing the Confederation of the Greek Tradesmen in 1919.

Of course profession did not cease to constitute a basic point of reference for people’s identities. The rise of class, though, could only reduce the relational significance of craft identities in favor of class identities and solidarities. Moreover, the breakup of the trade associations and the segregation of workers from small business owners, which was imposed by law in 1914, destroyed the institution that supported the reproduction of the social formation of working people and its basic units, the trade communities.

The decline of the trade holiday was a natural consequence of these developments. Labour unions did not immediately relinquish the practice of celebrating in church and with a banquet the holiday of the profession, as becomes clear from the statutes of the decades of the 1900 and 1910s I’ve managed to find; it should not be missed, however, that the patron saint in these cases was different from the employers’ association, or, more commonly, the religious holiday was related to Christ or the Virgin Mary or to the patron saint of the city and not to a patron saint of the trade; moreover, sometimes church was not mentioned in the provisions of the statutes: only a banquet was, often on the day after Easter. After 1918 unions in general shed the old guilds’ folklore and established Mayday as their holiday: a common holiday for the workers all over the world that stressed their own interests and identity.

Yet, the story of the trade festivals does not end here. A part of the guilds’ folklore survived in the small employers’ associations, which carried on celebrating the patron



saint, albeit in a less extended form. In the interwar years we still find evidence about small parades, excursions and speeches on the occasion of the patron saint's holiday, while in some cases it is until the end of the 20th century that shopkeepers and small manufacturers would attend the mass and eat afterwards in a tavern. Of course it has been almost everywhere replaced, during the second half of the 20th century, by the gathering for the cutting of the New Year cake, which is today the dominant form of annual gathering in most associations of all kinds.

To what should we attribute this survival of patron saint's holiday in the petite bourgeoisie associations? Firstly, they had no reason to stress the modernity of their organizational practices, as did the workers. Actually, in some cases using guilds' folklore must have served as a manifestation of conservatism and loyalty to the social and political regime. Secondly, they had also been subjected less than the workers to the influence of leftist ideas, which included the questioning of expressions of popular religiosity such as celebrating the patron saint. The third and most important factor is that the breakup of the social formation of the 'working people' was not their choice, and the notion of the trade community remained strong among them –and among many workers as well. Small businessmen could still hope that they would integrate some of their workers into the broader community of the trade, as they probably did. In other words, despite the unionization fever of the tradesmen in the 1920s, their class identity (as part of the lower middle class) remained weak in comparison to the workers'.

This is not to say that their identity as a particular social group was weak: It has been argued (for instance by Ernesto Laclau) that for the petite bourgeoisie its identity as people is more important than its class identity. We would add: its identity as a leading group of the people in general and of the working people in each trade, in particular. Trade festivals fit well into this profile.