

Book Review: The Conquered: Byzantium and America on the Cusp of Modernity by Eleni Kefala

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Eleni Kefala. *The Conquered: Byzantium and America on the Cusp of Modernity*. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, 2020. xiii+158. Hardcover \$25.00.

Serendipity and ambiguity are like bookends to this gem of a volume. It opens with Eleni Kefala's stay at Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection for Byzantine and Pre-Columbian America studies. Scholars in those specialties congregate there, interact, share their enthusiasms. It closes with the author's 2016 attempt in Mexico to locate a Spanish translation of *Cantares mexicanos*, a primary source for present-day readers and students to get to know the tragedy of the fall of Tenochtitlan (1512). The fruitlessness of her search shows how unreasonable it would be for the rest of us to independently trace the results of scholars like Kefala. Verification would depend on accessing rare collections such as Dumbarton Oaks and knowing how to use them. Comparatively, the tragedy of the siege and sack of Constantinople (1422, 1204) is kept alive today through *Anakalema* in Greek and Cypriot mass-market anthologies and textbooks. Who would expect *The Conquered* to come to stay on a political scientist's book shelves? It has, and it belongs for the enigmas it poses.

The Conquered fits in among political and social sciences. It employs analytical tools and techniques with which we can check. Analogically, they authenticate Kefala's scholarship. "Cultural trauma and collective memory" processes are used to compare human lamentations, for inhabitants and later generations, over conquests of Constantinople and Tenochtitlan. Especially refreshing is use of Neil J. Smelser's work on *Collective Behavior*, a robust and elegant methodology for tracking shifts of generalizations from negative to positive, and of near victories to short-circuits. Kefala illuminates how short-circuiting trauma and memory tends to weaken collective movements, whereas poetry, song, and art can be seen to energize carrier groups.

Collective activity involves what Kefala depicts as "day to day" and "down to earth" songs and verses told and retold in private lives of citizens. These persons were not direct

sufferers of pillage and horror from being conquered and of seeing their civilization looted and wrecked. Nonetheless, they empathized and felt vicariously the agonies and losses of their forebearers who had been victims. The songs and poems communicated this retrospectively with idioms, standard speech, and dialects. Authors were anonymous, probably educated elites who adopted traditional formulas, folk legends, founding myths. Repetition evoked affect—negative and positive—in persons who “remember” the terrible events thus transmitted. The process and the aftermath are how Kefala explains inferiorization, meaning denigration or stigmatization. It is the obverse of self-aggrandizement, the crime of Sisyphus. Either short-circuits carrier groups.

Kefala sought out collective memories about both conquests—prophecy, mythoi, significant symbols, apparitions at holy shrines, fire striking from heaven, end-of-the-world forecasts, embodiment of gods. She emphasizes the similar images of the eagle and the snake as portrayed in ancient mosaics revered today in Constantinople and depicted in Mexico’s national flag. Likenesses appear in history, artefacts, sports. The Figures in the book are dramatic and evocative. All this is correct to do, according to Bertrand de Jouvenel, political scientist, power scholar, and futurist. De Jouvenel pedigrees it by quoting Thucydides quoting Archidamos addressing the Assembly of Lacedaemonians on the eve of the Peloponnesian War: "For we that must be thought the causers of all events, good or bad, have reason also to take some leisure in part to foresee them." De Jouvenel wrote that decision-making without forethought is levity for an individual but guilt for a magistrate or citizen participating in consequential public decisions affecting many. Foresight is a moral obligation. This converges on Tenochtitlan and Constantinople at Dumbarton Oaks and in *The Conquered*.

Kefala’s title presents America (Mexico) and Byzantium impaled *on the Cusp of Modernity* by the conquests of Tenochtitlan and Constantinople, respectively. Kefala

characterizes modernity as both “new” and “just now” constantly displacing itself by the merely “just newer.” Therein we see struggling Sisyphus, his burden compounded of arrogated superiority (AKA self-aggrandizement) and inferiorization. Byzantium and America—labeling non-European peoples and cultures with negative stereotypes and defining Europe’s own past as inferior—both succumbed to narcissistic modernity, and both represent “underside” coloniality, says Kefala. America and Byzantium were instrumental in the rise of the modern, but they failed to consolidate.

Kefala writes that, while the Romaioi and the Mexica immortalized the falls of their empires as cultural trauma in poetry, art, song, and collective memory, they incidentally laid bare habitual behaviors they took for granted—their inherited ancestral traditions and accumulated cultural preferences permeating carrier groups that practiced and perpetuated inferiorization. They have not recovered to date. This is due not to having been conquered, but due to the missing ethic. Folkways and mores of the carrier groups shackle them to their pasts. Kefala removes the veil in her book. On the chronological cusp of the twenty-first century, Bjorn Wittrock spelled out *modernity* in *Dædalus* (Winter 2000). His modernity called out Europe. So has Kefala’s work. So had Camus’s *Myth of Sisyphus*.

Modernity, instead of moving on, regularly treads back on itself. Wittrock provides the touchstone for Kefala’s narrative. Wittrock’s promissory notes depend on assumptions about human beings’ rights and agency, a range of achievements open to all persons, assurances they can be claimed in public places with institutions safeguarding them. Such points of achievement become ever more generalized points of departure toward modernity. Let us stay in the conversation now. If so, will we stand up amid back sliding and short circuits?

The outcome is ambiguous. If inferiorization and self-aggrandizement are endemic, Sisyphus's burden rolls back down, knocking any culture or civilization off the cusp of modernity. What then for us? Become history? Repeat history? Learn from history?

The Conquered is more than just a pretty book.

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