

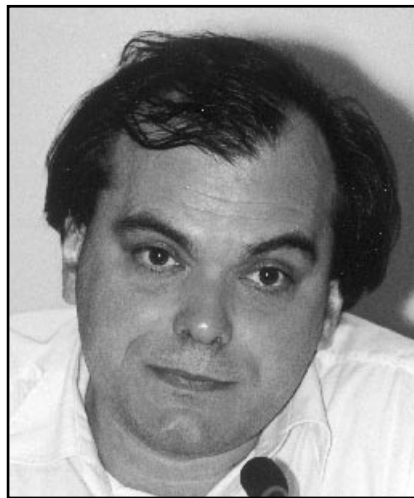
Avraam Benaroya and the Impossible Reform

Spyros Marketos

Introduction

I am going to speak about Avraam Benaroya, Socialist extraordinaire, lawyer *manque* and protagonist of the workers' movement in Greece. After a rapid sketch of the historical background and some biographical information, I am going to present the creation of the international Socialist movement of Salonika, its opinions on the national question, and Benaroya's activity - initially in the *Federacion* and in the Communist Party that he founded, and then in cooperation with Socialist reformers. I will also mention the law, imposed by the latter when they governed Greece in 1924, against national and religious discrimination, and finally I will trace the development, after their defeat, of the powerful authoritarian and anti-Semitic discourse that came to dominate public life.

Actually law and constitution, not to speak of constitutional law, were considered rather less sacred than one might wish in Greece early in our century. The central rump of the country, *i.e.* Old Greece, by the way one of the first European States to accord legal equality to Jews, boasted exemplary political stability and freedom since the 1860s, notwithstanding the impoverishment of the common people. Modernity encroached, however, and the constitutional reform of 1911, implemented



after a successful *pronunciamento* of the military, included both a redefinition of property rights that opened the way for the most embracing agrarian reform in Europe, and provisions for the substitution of the *droit d'exception*, of military law and the state of siege, for normal rights. From now on the State would actively intervene, by legal and not-so-legal means, both in the distribution of property and in the play of social and intellectual forces - a tradition proudly upheld to this day.

At that time, however, Avraam Benaroya was still a young misfit, living

in the European part of the vast, multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multinational Ottoman Empire that stretched from Istanbul, as the capital city was called by the dominant Turks, to the Adriatic. At the intellectual and commercial center of these provinces the flourishing port of Salonika was to be found, and at its lowest and poorest part, which extended then behind the quay, the Palia Paralia of today, one might encounter this lean figure: piercing eyes, mustachio, swarthy complexion and minuscule body - a prospective lawyer turned teacher turned printer but actually a professional revolutionary of the Bulgarian version of the Bolsheviks, the Tesniaki.

Avraam Benaroya and the Creation of the *Federacion*

Benaroya, born in this old center of the Balkans, Salonika, and speaking six languages fluently, soon came to know the peninsula from east to west and from north to south. Notwithstanding his special qualities, we may well see him as an archetypal

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Balkan revolutionary and as a representative figure of many Jews and Socialists in this part of the world. He grew up in Lundt, Bulgaria, in a *Sepharadic* family of small merchants; studied law in Belgrade but did not graduate; instead he became a teacher in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, where he published, in Bulgarian, *The Jewish Question and Social Democracy*. He then returned as a Socialist organizer to Salonika immediately after the Young Turk revolution of 1908.¹

Idealistic and pragmatic at the same time, in Salonika he played a leading role in the creation, in 1909, of the mainly Jewish *Federation Socialiste Ouvriere*, or simply, in Ladino, *Federacion*. The organization took this name because, built on the federal model of the Austrian Social Democratic Party, it was conceived as a federation of separate sections, each representing an ethnic element of Macedonia - Jewish, Bulgarian, Greek and Muslim. It initially published its propaganda in four languages: Ladino, Bulgarian, Greek and Turkish, but in practice the two latter sections were under-represented if not non-existent. The democratically organized *Federacion* soon became, under Benaroya's leadership, the strongest Socialist party in the Ottoman Empire, created combative trade unions, attracted important intellectuals and gained a solid base of support among Macedonian workers; it also cultivated strong links with the Socialist International.² In 1910-1911 Benaroya managed its influential newspaper, the *Solidaridad Obradera*, printed in Ladino. Following the war of 1912, however, Salonika was incorporated in Greece, and Socialists faced unexpected dilemmas. A new world was now being shaped by merciless struggles among competing political and economic powers. Nationalism and capitalism, inaugurating a century of incessant strife, created through blood and iron national States in the place of the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire. The material, human and moral cost was, of course, unimaginable.

The *Federacion* and the Labour Movement in Greece

Balkan military adventures started long before and finished long after the Great War. In September 1912 the conflagration between the Ottomans and the so called Christian Balkan Powers broke out. Some months later, after the Sultan's armies had abandoned the lands north and west of Adrianople, an even crueller *blitzkrieg* erupted in which Greece and Serbia took from Bulgaria most of her spoils. The Treaty of Bucharest, signed in the summer of 1913, did not bring peace to Greece. Tension

persisted, resulting in violent ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, in Macedonia, Thrace and Asia Minor. Atrocities against defenceless populations became common currency all over the Balkans,³ preparing vicious wars that separated ethnic units with rivers of blood, strengthened their economic, political and cultural dependence, gave to the military a prime role in the State and to the State unprecedented power upon society, and, finally, cemented the translation of social conflicts into national terms. Anti-militarism, a staple of social-democratic propaganda and always cherished by the *Federacion*, now became a priority for many, Socialists and others.

In Greece itself chaos reigned in the New Provinces, where central authority was either unable or unwilling to protect the so-called "foreigners" from spoliation and persecution. Salonika was more prominent in the eyes of the world, and also more controllable, but Benaroya and friends passed many difficult hours. Veniselos, the wily Liberal Prime Minister, opted for conciliation with its Jews; his enlightened ideals actually promised good prospects for capital and relative protection to labour. The policy of *divide et impera*, however, was an almost unavoidable option for the ruling elite, in view of the critical situation it faced in the New Provinces, extending from Mount Olympus to the present day northern borders of Greece, an area in which Hellenes faced strong national antagonists plus the anti-nationalist Socialism of the *Federacion*. Official treatment of "enemy races" as subhuman was even prepared by decades of obscurantist rhetoric, and it reflected racist doctrines long cultivated by prominent intellectuals with the support, among others, of the Court. Equally indebted, then, to the Panhellenism of the Megali Idea were the alternative policies between which the State was poised, of national purity on the one hand and of selective integration of "foreign elements" on the other.⁴

In the light of the new situation Socialist leaders, like Benaroya, had to address national oppression as well as economic exploitation, phenomena in some cases converging and in others divergent. As wars brought about huge replacements of power and property, official or unofficial expropriation of the "foreigners" became a clear way to defuse social tensions, to increase pressure on unwanted groups, and to create a cheap labour force. Jewish tobacco workers, for example, might be both exploited and oppressed as non-Greek elements, while Greek Orthodox poor of Salonika might refuse to pay rent to a Bulgarian proprietor, or even occupy houses of *Donmes* who had

found refuge in Constantinople. Jewish peddlers who were prohibited from plying their trade had few options except finding dependent and badly paid employment. Slav speaking peasants might side with the new regime, in which case they could easily divide Muslim estates where they had worked previously as little better than serfs, or support, for example, the Bulgarian cause and be expelled beyond the borders.⁵

In sum, together with the violent redistribution of roles and resources the Greek State, like all Balkan and most European States, assisted the nationalization of a multinational or non-national population. From now on it marginalized “foreigners” and at the same time it organized a cohesive “national body” by manipulating cultural symbols and by officially or unofficially extending to certain groups privileged access to education, work, justice, hygiene, dwelling, infrastructure, army service, *etc.* In short, it practically conjoined national with class differentiation; instead of erasing social distinctions inherited from the Ottoman era, it established inequality and polarization. Benaroya and the *Federacion* could not but voice their dissent, even though they soon accepted the new territorial *status quo*.

The Rupture between National and International Socialism

Old Greece Socialists, badly organized and in the main friendly to Veniselos, tried not to rock the boat and some even played the race card. They could not stomach that a non Hellenic and emphatically internationalist troupe, as they perceived *Federacion*, happened to be the strongest mass organization on Greek soil, and might even become the nucleus of the emergent Socialist party. Benaroya, however, achieved exactly that.

Through the incessant projection of Socialist critique, and the adroit handling of workers’ strikes the likes of which Greece had never seen,⁶ Benaroya broke the national barrier just after the normalization which came by the end of 1913. Internationalism and antimilitarism could well express the feelings and the experiences of many people who saw their families and their properties devastated by the war, while young and old, Greek and Muslim, Jew and Slav intellectuals, workingmen and working women, rallied to the concrete demands of the *Federacion* and gained important concessions and reforms. Benaroya himself though, together with another Jewish Socialist, was exiled for two and a half years at the island of Naxos, not exactly a tourist destination at that time. The Great War soon followed.

Initially Greece did not participate in it. The Court opted to give support to Kaiser Wilhelm, Queen Sophia’s brother, while the Prime Minister identified with the Entente, and gradually they polarized the body politic.⁷ The Socialists were equally divided. In Old Greece the most prominent of them followed Veniselos, while the *Federacion*, adhering to its internationalist ideals, mobilized for neutrality, which also happened to be favoured by King Contantine and his militaristic entourage. Many organizations of Southern Greece actually approached the *Federacion* over this issue, while it lost the support of certain Greek Socialists in Macedonia.

From 1915 onwards, *Federacion* was buoyed by the popular reaction to the war. Both monarchist and Veniselist policy actually assisted the emancipation and the radicalization of the left, and Benaroya, keeping equal distance from both, established political groups, was quick to turn the situation to advantage. In the 1915 general elections, *Federacion* sent two deputies representing Salonika to the Greek Parliament, while it lost for a few votes a third seat. It already had strong links with internationalist groups and organizations all over Greece and abroad; from them the Socialist Workers Party was to spring up in due time. An interventionist Socialist tendency, however, headed by the future Prime Minister Alexandre Papanastassiou, and siding with Veniselos in foreign affairs, also elected deputies at the time.

Actually the national question more than any other kept the Greek left divided until the German occupation of the country, in the 1940s. Papanastassiou and other reform-minded Socialists practically collided with Venizelos’ liberal brand of nationalism. Benaroya and the *Federacion*, on the other hand, were influenced by the Austro-Marxists who, sensitive to matters national, searched for ways to utilize Socialism as a cohesive force in the decrepit Habsburg Monarchy; they elaborated the principle of personal autonomy, according to which national consciousness should be depoliticized and become a personal matter. Modern States should be based on free association and allow self-definition and self-organization of ethnic groups in cultural affairs, while a mixed parliament, proportionally representing all nations of the realm, should decide on economic and political questions. The *Federacion* traced the origins of its federative position to Balkan authors of the Enlightenment like Rhigas Velestinlis, and stressed that the forthcoming peace should exclude any change of borders or transfer of populations. The Socialist Workers Party, that was created on Benaroya’s initiative towards the end of the European War, followed closely

Federacion's theses on national self-determination, and wanted to transform the Greek state into a federation of autonomous provinces that would safeguard the rights of the nationalities, and that would participate in its turn in a federal Republic of the Balkan peoples. This was an ideal which was not as farfetched as it might seem today, and its elaboration owed a lot to Benaroya's synthesis of moral and practical imperatives.

Benaroya Approaches the Democratic Union

Benaroya's tactical abilities which so amply contributed to the creation of the *Federacion* allowed, after an historic meeting with Veniselos, the building of the Socialist Workers Party and the General Confederation of Labour, which united the bulk of mobilized workers and Socialists of Greece and immediately became strong political players. His main achievement, however, lay beyond day to day tactics. He was much more than a simple translator of ideas: his hectic activity was guided by refined and original mental qualities that helped him analyze Balkan realities through the dominant Social Democratic codification of Marxism, and arrive at practical conclusions. Uncommon powers of mental abstraction helped him define, and when necessary redefine, strategic goals and orientations for the Socialist movement, while his also extremely effective persuasion imposed these strategic orientations on the left - that is, until 1923.

His choices proved so successful that the rise of the Socialist Workers Party and of the workers' movement disturbed the government. Persecution followed, leading to a general strike in 1919. Subsequently, social and political polarization, as well as the prestige of the newborn Soviet Union, strengthened the radicals, and before long the party was affiliated to the Leninist Third International. The Labour Center of Salonika, another creation of Benaroya's subtle vision, uniting more than twelve thousand workers of all nationalities, a good part of them Jews, became a focus of radical Socialism. The fall of Veniselos' Government and the war in Asia Minor fuelled even more dissent, leading to antiwar riots. In the wake of these developments Benaroya, thrown into prison again, as well as most of the leading lights of the party, were marginalized by the radicals. On the other hand, moderate Socialists under Papanastassiou started preparing their own revolution: their primary aim was now to overthrow the throne.

In 1922 the Greek army was defeated by the Kemalists and a military revolution ensued, which deposed King Constantine. It

undertook many reforms, notably the distribution of big estates to peasants, but after a general strike it bloodily suppressed the workers. A little later, in December 1923, Benaroya, who preferred Social Democratic organizational models and opposed Bolshevism, was expelled from the Communist Party and he was obliged to quit the management of its Salonika daily *Avanti*. Afterwards he focused his action on the Jewish community of Salonika, and participated in a splinter group that, with help from Papanastassiou, now Prime Minister, tried unsuccessfully to split the Communist Party. At that time he agreed with the new Prime Minister both on the need for reforms and not revolution, and on the priority of abolishing the monarchy. An equally urgent imperative, though, was combatting the racism and anti-Semitism which were often cultivated by the State authorities themselves.

Papanastassiou immediately passed the temporary Legislative Decree "On the Defence of the Republican Regime", which imposed penalties on press attacks against the Republic and the minorities. It provided for at least three months' imprisonment of anybody that "systematically distinguishes, through the press, for political objectives and disdainfully, the inhabitants of the country between natives and newcomers, Christian Orthodox or followers of other religions, speakers of Greek or of other languages, and the like, or ascribes to them scornfully any qualities or habits". Even praising such practices was punished with imprisonment.

Resisting discrimination, then, was an essential part of the Socialist programs of both Papanastassiou and Benaroya. Mainstream political forces, however, Conservatives and Liberals alike, were angered by this decree. The reactionary judiciary prevented its implementation, and the military dictator Pangalos soon abolished it. We should not surmise from this, though, that all these abhorred the restrictions on free expression envisaged by the Socialists; quite the contrary.

A pertinent analysis of inter war liberal political thought was made by Charles Roig.⁸ According to Roig, this thought assimilated the experience of the Great War by developing two complementary terminologies: one of them focused on the irrational and pathological face of the war, while the other rationalized it and presented it as a normal state of things. It created new political grammars called wartime right, *droit d'exception*, or exceptional right, necessarily based on a "superior right", on so called "principles", "fundamental laws" and the like, by definition different from right but so imperative

that they justified the abandonment of common legality. This process was completed in Europe before 1939, by which time “political-legal symbolism, as well as the current language of liberal democracies, had totally integrated verbal calculations of illegality, a transformation in which the notion of positive right contributed decisively. Fascism and Nazism constituted another process of transformation of political symbolism, while a third interrelated process was Bolshevism”.

The same phenomenon appeared in Greece during the wars of 1912-1922, was intensified in the *Entreguerre* and reached its apex in the 1940s, when the borders between liberal and fascist discourse were practically abolished. In fact, Greek politicians acted according to these “verbal calculations of illegality” even before they turned them into positive law, and perhaps even before they had organized them in a distinct discourse. Benaroya and the Democratic Socialists, on the other hand, were marginalized precisely because they would not follow any of these dominant transformations of political symbolism which led to authoritarianism.

After Papanastassiou’s fall, in the summer of 1924, the continuity between the oppression of “foreigners” and the persecution of Socialists became evident, and it crystallized in the development of republican varieties of fascism. The permanent eclipse of the rule of law in Northern Greece, or rather the State’s refusal to replace Ottoman oppression of these provinces with any form of *Rechtsstaat*, signified the convergence of the so called Liberals with totalitarianism. Simple fascist recipes, however, did not fare well and proved unable to crush the left. Soon a part of the ruling elite turned to the Nazi model, systematically cultivating anti-Semitism as a means to divide the subalterns. The Jewish origins of Bolshevism, as well as the spectre of internationalism, were among the preferred slogans of this powerful current. As democracy waned, and repression of the minorities and of the left was entrenched, Democratic Socialism, of the kind envisaged by Benaroya, became more and more an impossibility.⁹

Epilogue

The defeat of Democratic Socialism - and let us note in passing that, as Benaroya’s example itself shows, Democratic Socialism did not always contradict revolutionary Socialism - meant the marginalization of its protagonists. Benaroya remained politically active after 1924 but as he stayed outside the principal political formations of the left, the communists and

Papanastassiou’s Socialists, his capacity for action was increasingly restricted.¹⁰ In Salonika he had a difficult life, especially after the Liberals’ anti-Semitic turn, by the end of the 1920s, and the repeated *coups d’etat* of 1935 that destroyed the Republic as well as the hopes of the democratic left. In the 1940s he lost a son in the war against Mussolini, survived the German concentration camps, and led a small Socialist party after his return to Greece. Disgusted by the dominant obscurantism, he emigrated to the promising land of Israel in 1953; he was then installed in Holon where he died in 1979, aged ninety two, in utter poverty but indomitable in spirit.

Strolling around Salonika one comes across many streets named in honour of fascist dictators, anti-Semitic army and police officers, bigoted third rate politicians and many many well meaning but otherwise unexceptional doctors, teachers and priests. Avraam Benaroya, in contrast, an extraordinary child of this city, who championed social justice and contributed more than most in the democratization of the political system, is absent. One can only guess whether his bigger crime was being a Jew or a Socialist, but there can be no doubt that his memory has been systematically suppressed.

His ideals, however, have all but become irrelevant. Economic exploitation, state oppression and nationalist conflict still create, in South Eastern Europe and in the Middle East perhaps more than elsewhere in this unstable because unjust world, tensions whose resolution is not in sight. Economic and political democracy, as well as the depoliticization of religious, ethnic and national difference, in other words the goals in pursuit of which Avraam Benaroya spent his tumultuous life, seem today more imperative than ever. One has not to be an extreme pessimist to predict that the contempt into which they are currently being held may presage new catastrophes, of a scale comparable to the *Shoah*.

- 1 On Benaroya see my article - “*Federacion and the Roots of Greek Socialism*”.
- 2 On *Federacion* see my article cited above, as well as George B. Leon, *The Greek Socialist Movement in the First World War*, 1973; and Antonis Liakos, *The Socialist Workers Federation of Salonika and the Socialist Youth. Their Charters*. Salonika.
- 3 On ethnic cleansing, see Spyros Marchetos, *Alexandre Papanastassiou and his Time, Antimonies of Socialist Reform*, Athens 1981. On the atrocities of all sides, see Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment, 1914.

- 4 On the alternative policies towards the minorities open to the Greek State in 1912-1914, see Spyros Marchetos, *"The Integration of Sephardic Salonika in Greece and its Context, 1912-1914"*, Athens, 1981.
- 5 Public Record Office (Kew, London) PO 371. 1994/32-37, Morgan to Onslow, Salonika 14.2.1914/89490 PO 371. 1994/48-49, Morgan to Onslow, Salonika 16.10.1914/742390 PO 371. 1994/48-49, Morgan to Onslow, Salonika 16.10.1914/742390 PO 371. 1996/6, Morgan to Mallet, Salonika 21.3.1914/15048. See also the Report of the Red Crescent to Morgan, in PO 371.1994/46-53. On the transfers of Christians and Muslims, see also FO 371.1996/19, Mallet to Grey, 16.4.1914/16761. An entire tome covers (FO 371, 1996) covers the emigration of Bulgarians and Muslims from the port of Salonika.
- 6 Avdela, *"The Others"*, *Socialism: Class Struggles, Ethnic Conflicts and Sexual Identities in Post-Ottoman Salonika*, 1993.
- 7 See on this period in general, George B. Leontaritis, *Greece and the Great Powers, 1914-1917*, Institute for Balkan Studies 1974; George B. Leontaritis, *Greece and the First World War: From Neutrality to Intervention, 1917-1918*, Boulder 1990.
- 8 Charles Roig, *La Grammaire politique du Lenine*, Lausanne, *l'Age d'Homme* 1980.
- 9 On the period, see Spyros Marchetos, *Alexandre Papanastassiou and his Time, Antimonies of Socialist Reform*, Athens 1981, Ch. 10.
- 10 Certain articles of Benaroya have been published, e.g. *Hopes and Deceptions*, 1989. He also penned, in Greek, a history of the Greek workers' movement with interesting autobiographical elements - *The First Career of the Greek Proletariat*.



Leisure time at the Conference: (top) traditional Greek folk dances; (left) visit to the restored old Jewish synagogue at Veria.