Cosmopolitanism, City Identity, and Disconcerted Displacement: The Rum Orthodox Community of Istanbul and Athens (İlay Romain Örs)

What are the effects of displacement on the processes of identity building? How does a community chose to define itself at times of drastic social transformation? In which ways do conceptualizations of identity and history change in the aftermath of major events? How does the mode of migration shape the nature of the diasporic experience of a displaced people; how is this related to the ways in which they reconstruct the social memory of their past and of the homeland they left behind? Do migrants and non-migrants within the same community relate to collective experiences of displacement differently, and if so, how?

I propose to address these questions from the looking glass of the Rum Orthodox of Istanbul. Being one of the oldest and most eminent resident communities of the multicultural city, the Rum experienced the most drastic demographic change throughout the 20th century. Unlike other communities undergoing rapid migration, such as the Rum of Asia Minor, the processes of displacement for the Rum Orthodox community of Istanbul have been disconcerted: they were forced to leave their city in different periods, for various reasons, and under dissimilar conditions. Some of them fled violent attacks overnight; some of them were deported in a fortnight; others left their homes gradually and voluntarily with the anticipation of a better life abroad. The Istanbul Rum are not just another community of migrants, immigrants, refugees, deportees, exchangees, minorities or members of a diaspora. Given the longevity of their history in the city and the complexity of their experiences, they are none or all of these at the same time. While this makes any attempt at their generalization problematic, it makes their study all the more valuable for purposes of comparison.

The proposed original research will focus on the Rum who continue to live in Istanbul, which will update, further, and complement my dissertation fieldwork on the diasporic Istanbulite Rum community residing in Athens (2000-2004). Using a variety of ethnographic and oral historical methods, including network analyses, comparative event narratives, life stories, genealogy charts, and semi-structured encounter interviews, as well as statistical data analysis, I will reevaluate my previous findings in the light of new information towards reaching ratified conclusions regarding: (1) the differences in the recollection of a particular event of displacement with age, gender, social status, ideological position, and place of residence, (2) the effect of changing political environment in Greece and Turkey on the conceptualization of displacement by Rum migrants and non-migrants, (3) the impact of specific personal experiences of displacement on the perceptions of self, Greeks, and Turks by the Rum community.

While their numbers dropped from a peak around 300,000 to a mere 5,000 in the course of a century, which rendered their presence within the ever-increasing urban population almost invisible, the Rum of Istanbul never lost their immediate relevance in the social and political landscape. Today, in the post-earthquake phase of Greek-Turkish relations, the Rum assume a central position, both in popular and in official discourses. Whether as anonymous faces in the photographs that are vandalized in an exhibition on the 1955 events, or as actors starring in a TV series, they make the headlines on both sides of the Aegean. The Rum further constitute one of the most debated topics within the framework of Turkey’s candidacy to the EU. Torn between the clashing foreign policies and national affairs of Greece and Turkey, the pressing issue of displacement of the Rum awaits to be studied with an analytical, extensive, and interdisciplinary approach, which is both highly urgent and long overdue.