

## Kazantzakis and America

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*This article traces Kazantzakis' attitudes towards America in works from the pre- and post-war periods. In doing so, it reveals his growing interest in visiting the country or even settling there for an extended period. The pretexts for such a journey were diverse and variously described by the writer as a means to 'renew his vision', to find a secure place to work, and to launch endeavours intended to 'save' Greece from afar. Though Kazantzakis' antipathy to 'Americanization' remained, he was more prepared over time to tolerate these defects, while becoming increasingly sensible to the pull of other demands and attractions.*

**Keywords:** Nikos Kazantzakis; America; modern Greece; globalization; travel writing

'Constantly my mind comes back to America – to see the place and to escape', Kazantzakis wrote to Pantelis Prevelakis on 7 July 1947.<sup>1</sup> These words may come as a surprise, given the contempt for America expressed by the author in early works such as *Toda Raba* and in travel writings on China, Japan, and Egypt: 'I fearfully detest (Σιχάινομαι φοβερά) America,' he had written to his first wife, Galateia, in 1923.<sup>2</sup> America was equated in his mind, or so one gathers from these sources, with the ultimate triumph of bourgeois civilization, a victory of matter over spirit, and with it the extinction of all those higher aims and longings that ennoble human life.<sup>3</sup> This catastrophic turn in history did not originate in America, Kazantzakis conceded, but it

1 P. Prevelakis (ed.), *Τετρακόσια γράμματα του Καζαντζάκη στον Πρεβελάκη* (Athens 1966) 574–5. (Hereafter abbreviated as 400, followed by page number.) Where not otherwise specified, translations from the Greek originals are my own.

2 N. Kazantzakis, *Επιστολές προς την Γαλάτεια* (Athens 1984) 191.

3 By 'America' (and thus 'Americanization') Kazantzakis generally means the United States (his employment of this latter term is comparatively rare). When speaking of other parts of the hemisphere, he typically added a modifier, e.g. 'South America.'

had acquired there a powerful new impetus.<sup>4</sup> Still worse were his visions of what lay ahead: a spreading blight of ‘Americanization’, consuming all in its path. Whether through the relentless quest of its capitalists for still greater power and riches, or the example it set before others, America was inexorably recreating the world in its own appalling image.

And yet a closer investigation of published and unpublished sources brings to light a considerably more varied assortment of perspectives and attitudes. As my opening quotation indicates, the prospect of travelling to and even living for a lengthy period of time in America was expressed often and ardently in Kazantzakis’ correspondence of the post-war years. These sources provide some basis for a periodization of his thought; though it must be said that even in his later years expressions of distaste for the banality of American life, and the spectre of a world dominated by such a superpower, continued to surface.

The present discussion attempts to provide some basis for understanding Kazantzakis’ increased and less polemical expressions of interest in gaining a first-hand knowledge of America as the years passed. In addition to several plans involving periods of travel and residence, Kazantzakis took a leading place in ambitious projects that would have entailed close engagement with a country often and unambiguously portrayed in his earlier works as the scourge of modern civilization.

Kazantzakis was an avid traveller, and it might be expected that his desire to visit the ‘New World’ related to this facet of his personality. He had seen much else, and America remained one of those places yet to be explored and written about – if only, or so he occasionally implied, out of an urge to satisfy a morbid curiosity. ‘Probably for three months I will fly to New York, to see the most modern and imposing Hell’, he wrote Ioannis Kakridis in October 1947.<sup>5</sup> At other times, his letters express a more palpable sense of anticipation. He appears, in fact, to have rehearsed the itinerary of an American journey over and over in his mind, reflecting on the places he would like to visit or constructing various scenarios regarding where and how he might settle down to resume his work.<sup>6</sup> ‘I’ve been told a lot about a village of fishermen, all Greek, in Florida,’ he reported for example to Rae Dalven on 17 November 1947. ‘Also, how beautiful it is in Louisiana and in New Mexico. Please look into where we could stay – an inexpensive place where we could find quiet and a good climate, so that we’ll know

4 As Kazantzakis wrote of Japan: ‘What Europe started, America has exaggerated to its ultimate consequences.’ N. Kazantzakis, *Ταξιδεύοντας. Ιαπωνία-Κίνα* (Athens 1964) 48.

5 N. Kazantzakis, ‘84 γράμματα του Καζαντζάκη στον Κακριδή’, *Νέα Εστία* 102 (1977) 257–300 (283).

6 ‘I continually think about how we might be able to work together for six months in order to finish the *Odyssey*,’ he wrote to Rae Dalven on 17 November 1947. ‘I’ll do what I can to come to America. Not, however, to live in New York; no one can concentrate there.’ And yet, ‘We are preparing for New York!’ he exclaimed to Kakridis on 9 September of the following year. P. Bien (ed.), *The Selected Letters of Nikos Kazantzakis* (Princeton 2012) 655; Kazantzakis, ‘84 γράμματα’, 284.

where we're headed when springtime comes.'<sup>7</sup> At other times he fantasized about setting off for California.<sup>8</sup>

The sources investigated below document this alteration in Kazantzakis' attitude toward America, as well as developments in his life and thought which may have been contributing factors. These include shifts in his ideological attachments – the product perhaps of successive experiences of disillusionment – which allowed for a more nuanced perspective on the country or at least rendered him less prone to reject the prospect of such a journey out of hand. 'I never want to come to America,' he had once declared to Emmanuel Papastephanou in 1922, avowing in the process his commitment to 'communism' and 'the overthrow of bourgeois regimes'.<sup>9</sup> But such sentiments waned over time, or so one gathers from a 1936 letter to Prevelakis in which Kazantzakis recounted how he had earlier passed 'all emotion and flame' through the phases of nationalism and leftism before arriving finally at a state of 'freedom'.<sup>10</sup> The tempering of such convictions and corresponding aversions may thus have enabled him to more liberally indulge the penchant for visiting foreign lands – and Kazantzakis' many expressions of hostility toward America may nevertheless disclose a kind of fascination with the subject – that was so prominent a feature of his life.

Another factor to consider in connection with Kazantzakis' changing relationship with America was the positive response to his work from American readers and publishers. This was especially significant given his economic concerns and the growing apprehension that he might spend the rest of his life abroad, with all the financial insecurities that entailed. As Peter Bien once observed, Kazantzakis' correspondence from the post-war years provides a vivid picture of his 'naked struggle to survive economically outside of Greece. This meant finding a means whereby he could devote himself full-time to his only possible vocation: writing.'<sup>11</sup> As he brooded to Kakridis in January of 1947, 'My head is full of seeds. I'm well in body, mind and soul, but the economic uncertainty is consuming me. How can I work? Where?'<sup>12</sup> The American market loomed more and more in his mind as a way out of such difficulties. In a letter to Prevelakis on 18 December 1952, he writes of the European sales to date of *The Last Temptation of Christ* before adding: 'But the great hope is America.'<sup>13</sup> He was particularly impressed, even elated, by the business and personal relationship he developed with Max Schuster. This connection, from 1953, brought a stream of

7 Bien, *Selected Letters*, 655. Rae Dalven was a Greek-born translator and playwright with whom Kazantzakis intended to collaborate on a translation of the *Odyssey*. See now A.J. Goldwyn, *Rae Dalven: the life of a Greek Jewish American* (Ioannina 2002).

8 See his letter to Prevelakis, 7 July 1947: 400, 575.

9 Bien, *Selected Letters*, 109.

10 *Ibid.*, 464–5.

11 P. Bien, *Kazantzakis: politics of the spirit II* (Princeton 2007) 273.

12 Kazantzakis, '84 γράμματα', 278.

13 400, 650. 'Since my books are having so much success,' he writes in the next sentence, 'imagine what the others would.'

Kazantzakis' works to American readers, culminating in a translation of his *Odyssey* in 1958, the year following his death.

One of the most striking episodes involving Kazantzakis and America in the post-war years concerns his choice of that country as the site for an effort to 'save' Greece from afar. This was to be undertaken through the establishment in America of an 'Institute of Modern Greek Culture', the nature and aims of which remain unclear. At times, Kazantzakis spoke of a desire to create a refuge where the intellectual and artistic pursuits of 'pure Greeks' could be safeguarded and cultivated. In addition to providing Kazantzakis a means to realize his long-standing wish to see the New World, the location of the enterprise in America may perhaps reflect his appreciation for the country's resources, especially its universities, and its importance in post-war Greek affairs. Still other sources suggest that the project grew out of Kazantzakis' interest in shaping the national consciousness of Greek émigrés and their children.

Bien has written that Kazantzakis' 'importance lies in fortitude'.<sup>14</sup> This aspect of his life is amply conveyed in the sources surrounding his changing engagement with America. One gains a fuller picture of his struggles to expand his field of vision, advance his work, and indeed make a living. As in the case of his active self-advocacy in pursuit of the Nobel Prize and other worldly laurels, the sources explored here provide glimpses of the author in a guise somewhat removed from the image of the disinterested artist; and it may even appear ironic that the economic power so often vilified in his critiques of Americanism came to be seen as a means out of his material predicaments, even essential to his hopes of establishing a legacy. And yet these turns are not depicted with the intent to tarnish Kazantzakis' image, but rather to gain a closer view of his struggle to find a secure and lasting fit for himself in the post-war world.

### Facets of antipathy

A survey of Kazantzakis' works from the inter-war years provides many illustrations of his hostility toward America and of the sources of that hostility. Evoked frequently throughout this body of texts is the picture of a society utterly consumed by materialism.<sup>15</sup> The basest impulses in human beings were in this unfortunate 'New World' given free rein; and the very use of the term 'Americanism' served as shorthand in his writings to signify a degeneration in the condition of humanity.

These sentiments recur frequently in Kazantzakis' correspondence as well as his published works from the period, including the novel *Toda Raba*, which appeared, in French, in 1929. In the opening passages of this work, Kazantzakis introduces the character and material circumstances of Sou-ki, a Chinese immigrant in 'one of the frightful big cities of California.' He proceeds to construct a scene of utter

14 Bien, *Selected Letters*, x.

15 'America,' he wrote in the Japanese account, 'with her worship of machines, quantity, speed... Time has become money there, and the mind is at the service of matter.': Kazantzakis, *Ταξιδεύοντας. Ιαπωνία-Κίνα*, 52.

degradation: ‘heavy, sticky air, harsh grinding of machines, a sickening odor of sweat and rancid grease, howling of scrawny children squalling and wiggling like starving little monkeys. The yellow ghetto, Chinatown.’<sup>16</sup> The work also includes the character Geranos, a Marxist acolyte from Greece, who at one point declares: ‘What is the inexorable necessity of our time? The Machine. Let us drive the world to a furor of Americanization! There is no other way to liberate ourselves from the Machine.’<sup>17</sup>

Similar views are conveyed in Kazantzakis’ travel writings from the period. His observations on Egypt, based on a journey there in 1926–7, are filled with bitter reflections on the challenges posed to all peoples by the encroaching forces of Americanization. All faced the prospect of cultural extinction or as indicated above in the passage from *Toda Raba*, an acceptance of the fact that they must take on much of the new to salvage something of the old.<sup>18</sup> The space for independent action was limited: adapt in kind, affording yourself some measure of agency, or let the process unfold on its own. Although not strictly part of the colonized world, Greece too, he believed, faced the same pressure. The colossus of American economic power drew all into its orbit. ‘Day by day,’ he wrote, in an ‘apology’ from 1924, ‘the advanced capitalistic countries are misleading us, in their own economic interests. And the virtually colonial exploitation they are imposing on us is becoming increasingly burdensome. Whether we like it or not, we are harnessed to the capitalistic chariot of Europe and America, and all their economic problems have immediate, heavy repercussions upon us.’<sup>19</sup>

Kazantzakis’ travel writings from these years also include occasional depictions of interactions with American tourists. Unsurprisingly, these encounters called forth similar feelings of revulsion. A pilgrimage to the holy ground of Assisi was thus marred by the sporadic outbursts of uncouth Americans (and English) who ‘disturbed the tranquillity’.<sup>20</sup> More damning still is an episode from his visit to the Pyramids. Here too the experience was ruined by the presence of a ‘crowd of Americans with glazed eyes and gold teeth’ who ‘wandered about like crows on the summits.’ On reaching their destination they ‘quickly make the classic round, fuss about a little, photograph themselves and then quickly return to Chicago’.<sup>21</sup> But before doing so, one group found an opportunity to amuse themselves at the expense of a *fellah* who

16 N. Kazantzakis, *Toda Raba*, tr. A. Mims (New York 1964) 7.

17 *Ibid.*, 181.

18 ‘Today an Eastern civilization does not exist. Whatever is clearly Eastern, is unadaptable to contemporary life, is provincial and backward. The East must, in order to create once again its own civilization, serve an apprenticeship to the West. It must first complete its term of service of Western civilization.’ N. Kazantzakis, *Ταξιδεύοντας: Ιταλία – Αίγυπτος – Σινά – Ιερουσαλήμ – Κύπρος – Ο Μοριάς* (Athens 1969) 76.

19 H. Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis: a biography based on his letters* (Berkeley 1983) 568. For the original Greek text, see the letter of 9 May 1930 in 400, 221–31.

20 Kazantzakis, *Ταξιδεύοντας: Ιταλία*, 15.

21 *Ibid.*, 48.

was offered a half lira in winnings should he run to the top of the Great Pyramid and back in six minutes. Kazantzakis describes his rage and ‘agony’ as he watched the poor Egyptian struggle against such odds only to suffer the laughter of the Americans on losing the wager. ‘He should crack them on the head with a rock,’ he fumed in disgust to another traveller.<sup>22</sup>

In 1935, after several trips to Russia and Europe, Kazantzakis set off on a long journey to Japan and China. The accounts of these travels are similarly endowed with many gloomy reflections on the evil done to those countries by their contact with America and their adoption of its ways. A visit to the Ginza district, ‘the hellish American heart of Tokyo,’ conjures a scene of cultural self-sacrifice and desolation.<sup>23</sup> ‘In vain,’ he writes, ‘the old Japanese soul fights to save whatever it can – lanterns, kimono, samisen – but the American earthquake tears them down and raises up to the surprised Japanese sky its hideous banality’.<sup>24</sup> He imagines the coming of a day, not far in the future, ‘when the old Japanese soul will put on her most expensive kimono, raise up her hair in the most artful tower, put on powder and makeup, and one night, at the hour when the radios begin to scream and the modern girls begin to drink cocktails, she will sit on the sidewalk of Ginza and commit hara-kiri.’<sup>25</sup>

In the passages cited, Kazantzakis describes how the rising economic power of America served to extend its cultural reach and influence. The peoples of the world were thus becoming Americanized on the level of mentality, dress, and mores. Of these new mores, few appeared to cause him more distress than those which undermined the traditions of sexual propriety, as witnessed in the scandalous behaviour of American females. He was appalled, for example, by the brazenness of the women who revealed too generous a sight (‘high above the knees’) of their ‘silk stockings’ as they made their way up to the pyramids on camel back.<sup>26</sup> There is also the pitiful spectacle of another American female, the dancer on the ship to Japan, vainly attempting to attract the attention of her fellow passengers.<sup>27</sup> The ‘modern girls drinking cocktails’ in Ginza represented another instance of the spreading malaise, although Kazantzakis’ expressions of disfavour for such a state of affairs drew an angry rebuke from his female guide.<sup>28</sup>

22 Ibid., 49. The American-as-philistine motif recurs in a letter from 9 May 1930 in which Kazantzakis describes the performance of a Japanese play in Paris, lamenting that the depth of the work was lost on the French, few of whom were present. ‘There were only Russians there,’ he added, ‘because they have soul, and Americans, because they have dollars.’ Prevelakis, *Τετρακόσια γράμματα*, 197.

23 Kazantzakis, *Ταξιδεύοντας. Ιαπωνία-Κίνα*, 120.

24 Ibid. For additional context, see A. Vougiouka ‘Ο Νίκος Καζαντζάκης και ο “Τρίτος Κόσμος” in I. Spiliopoulou and N. Chrysos (eds.), *Ο Νίκος Καζαντζάκης και η πολιτική* (Athens 2019), 27–52.

25 See also his observations on Shanghai (‘accursed city’), Ibid., 39.

26 Kazantzakis, *Ταξιδεύοντας: Ιταλία*, 48.

27 Ibid., 41.

28 The exchange began with Kazantzakis reciting the haiku he had composed concerning the act of hara-kiri described above (‘If you open my heart, you will find the three strings of the samisen, broken’). Proud of his

The same dread of a creeping Americanization pervades Kazantzakis' accounts, finally, of Russia and the Caucasus. In a letter from 1929 he writes of his remorse when visiting Bukhara and neighboring lands. Here again, the signs of the scourge were inescapable. 'They are beginning to become civilized, that is, they're losing their soul and have begun aping Moscow, which apes Europe, which apes America.'<sup>29</sup> This epidemic of materialism ultimately, for Kazantzakis, compromised the Bolshevik experiment. 'What are the chief characteristics of this faith?' he asked rhetorically of Prevelakis in 1929. 'Two: 1) materialism 2) Worship of the machine. The ideal of Soviet Russia is America – and this is natural... Communism is not something entirely new... it is the logical consequence of bourgeois civilization.'<sup>30</sup> He observed again in a letter of 1930 that 'communism is not the beginning of a new civilization, but the end of an old one and indeed takes it to the pinnacle of its aims – materialism, the machine, Americanism.'<sup>31</sup>

Contempt for these facets of American life resurfaced throughout Kazantzakis' writings during the post-war years, as did expressions of concern over the prospect of a world, and in particular Greece, governed under the auspices of such a power.<sup>32</sup> And although the war and its troubled aftermath exposed the 'primitive' nature of human beings, 'the Americans,' as leading actors in this sorry spectacle, were at times singled out for special notice. In a letter to Ioannis Kakridis from September 1946 Kazantzakis expressed his 'great anguish for the fate of humanity as a whole... Yesterday, the Americans proudly announced the discovery of a poison so horrendous that with 9 grams of it they can in one fell swoop kill all the inhabitants of the United States and Canada (i.e., Russia). The gorilla, you see, without taking the time to become a human being, has discovered fire and is going to burn the world.'<sup>33</sup> At other times, he reflected gloomily on the banality of American culture. In a letter to Elli Lambridi on 26 October 1946, he lamented the decision of the Greek actor Alexis Minotis 'who could have been the first of Greece' but who in his obsession for 'material goods entered the rich American mud and was lost.'<sup>34</sup>

little ode to traditional ways and perhaps thinking that it might strike a nationalist nerve, he suddenly found himself subject to attack and ridicule: 'The modern girl laughs and looks at me with irony: what are you sorry about? Let her commit hara-kiri, for us to escape!... Enough already! She shouted with anger... You don't know what we have endured for so many years!' (ibid., 121-2).

29 H. Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis*, 213.

30 Letter of 28 August 1929: 400, 154.

31 Letter of 27 February 1930 (400, 180). The 'new Russians' are indeed 'materialists' he griped on 12 September 1929. 'Their ideal is America, the dollar, and later they'll go to Paris and spend it in cabarets.' (162).

32 As he wrote to Börge Knös on 14 June 1947: 'Greece is plunging more and more into darkness. The Americans, in their turn, confusing the soul with the dollar, will commit huge mistakes in Greece. The Greek people clearly see the path to salvation and want to follow it, but are not allowed to.' Bien, *Selected Letters*, 646.

33 H. Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis*, 456.

34 N. Kazantzakis and E. Lambridi, *Αλληλογραφία με τη Μουντίτα* (Athens 2018) 397. Minotis, the Cretan-born actor and friend of Kazantzakis, appeared in several American films, among them *Notorious* (1946), *Siren of Atlantis* (1949), and *Land of the Pharaohs* (1955).

It was nevertheless during these same postwar years that Kazantzakis avidly pursued opportunities to travel, set up residence in, and in his own words ‘escape’ to America. These hopes took on forms as ambitious as establishing what he and his circle described as an Institute of Modern Greek Culture in America. When this failed to materialize, he considered the possibility of living in the country off his UNESCO income, the earnings from the American sales of his works, and – should it come to pass – the Nobel Prize.<sup>35</sup>

## Rapprochement

Although plans for visiting the United States feature most heavily in Kazantzakis’ post-war correspondence, the earliest notice of such an interest appeared in a series of letters to Prevelakis in the summer and fall of 1934 where he spoke of leaving for ‘China, Africa, America, India,’ and especially of seeing New York.<sup>36</sup> In several instances the journey was described as a means to ‘fill my eyes again’ or replenish his artistic imagination.<sup>37</sup> ‘The soul hungers,’ he groused in another letter from the same year, and craves new places ‘to graze,’ perhaps in ‘China, India, Africa, America’.<sup>38</sup>

There are signs, then, that, for all his previous expressions of hostility, Kazantzakis was becoming attracted to the idea of seeing America for himself and believed that it was the kind of experience that would nourish his art. It was also during the early 1930s that his letters indicate some sense of the potential of the American market.<sup>39</sup> That said, the sporadic and fleeting manner in which thoughts of travelling to America enter into Kazantzakis’ correspondence in the pre-war years may be contrasted with the more numerous and sustained expressions of interest later. The nature of the imagined experience also changed and broadened substantially.

New opportunities for travel arose with the end of the Occupation, which Kazantzakis and his wife had endured on Aegina. His name was in fact immediately brought up in connection with plans to dispatch several state-sponsored aid-seeking missions to America. Although it is not clear what role Kazantzakis played in instigating such initiatives, he enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity to participate in and indeed lead these ventures, as his correspondence attests. The first of these

35 In a letter to Kakridis from 8 June 1947 he expressed the hope that the ‘wise men of Stockholm will want to reward a life that has burned entirely for the spirit without turning to ash. My whole life, as you know, is one great pure fire.’: Kazantzakis, ‘84 γράμματα’, 280-1. Speaking again of the Prize on 10 August 1947 (281) he wrote: ‘That would be the great salvation.’

36 See especially the letter to Prevelakis of 25 October 1934 (400, 436).

37 Letter of 8 August 1934 (400, 429).

38 400, 431. Note that by ‘America’ Kazantzakis may also have been alluding here to an interest in visiting South America. This possibility is raised by an earlier letter to Prevelakis of 4 March 1931 (240) in which he had expressed a wish to ‘go far away’ perhaps to ‘India, the islands of the Pacific, South America’.

39 In a letter to Prevelakis on 5 April 1932 (400, 319), he reported on the possibility of producing an ‘American translation’ of *Toda Raba*.



missions was proposed under the government of George Papandreou (a close friend of Kazantzakis) in November 1944,<sup>40</sup> and was raised again in November 1945, by which time Kazantzakis had joined the coalition government of Themistocles Sophoulis as minister without portfolio.<sup>41</sup>

In January 1946, Kazantzakis' short stint as minister came to an end and, with it shortly thereafter, the possibility of leading an official mission to America. His disappointment with the cancellation of 'my mission' is amply conveyed in a letter to the Deputy Prime Minister Emmanouil Tsouderos from 8 March 1946:

[It was] reported to me yesterday that, 'although the government is under an ethically binding obligation to me,' my mission has been definitively canceled because the government is about to hold elections and does not wish to undertake any initiatives. After having worked for months, following the government's directive, to collect every indispensable element for the mission entrusted to me by the government, after I waited for weeks in the corridors of the Foreign Ministry, now the government has notified me that the mission will not take place! Is it necessary for me to tell you, Mr. President, how much this behavior by the government deeply wounds my human dignity? And worse: how much it damages our national interests? The Bulgarians dispatched 152 'intellectuals' to America seven months ago, and we do not want to send even the one person to whom we gave an express command... Forgive me for writing this to you, my dear Mr. President, but I wanted you to know how much I have been wounded.<sup>42</sup>

This setback notwithstanding, Kazantzakis directed his energies toward another initiative involving America of still greater scope and ambition: the founding of a Hellenic Institute in New York. In addition to information gained from Kazantzakis' correspondence and the reminiscences of Eleni Kazantzakis, the plans for this project are mentioned in the diary of Peter Topping, a well-known American scholar of Greek origin who was part of the Allied mission in Greece during the immediate post-war years. Of particular interest is an entry from April 1946 in which Topping records fragments from a conversation with Kazantzakis and Emmanuel Hourmouzius regarding 'a new plan to give impulse to the arts'.<sup>43</sup>

Kazantzakis explained the men involved must be good, optimistic—no one with misgivings or doubts should be part of the nucleus either in Greece or abroad.

40 One author suggests that the idea came from Papandreou: N. Psilakis 'Νίκος Καζαντζάκης: "Ζω κι εγώ τον καημό ολόκληρου του γένους..." Από την περιπέτεια της Κατοχής στην κυβέρνηση Σοφούλη', in *Ο Νίκος Καζαντζάκης και η πολιτική*, 232–54 (240).

41 For the background to Kazantzakis' brief entry into post-war Greek politics, see Bien, *Kazantzakis: politics of the spirit*, II, 250–1.

42 Bien, *Selected Letters*, 610.

43 Cited in Bien, *Kazantzakis: politics of the spirit*, II, 256.

Money needed—a substantial amount. Faith and brains not enough. “To chrima yinetai pnevma.” The men of the nucleus must have both *floga* and *myala*, a rare combination. There are plenty of people (Kaz. went on) with brains in Greece, good writers and artists. The enterprise must not fail; there is little time to lose. With money we can gain time. Greece is small, unimportant politically and economically. Her only contribution can be intellectual and spiritual. She must be tied with America. England’s moral prestige in Greece very low. Russia’s inspiration is political. America is the great spiritual hope. America is not simply materialism—she has great men of the spirit. Kazantzakis thinks Sikelianos should be brought in. Koun winced. Kaz.: “Ton timó poly ton Sikelianó.” Mrs. Sikelianou should lecture in the States on the enterprise. In Greece, lecturers must be sent out to Salonika, Volos, Crete, etc. That means money and transportation. (A little breathtaking to hear the group talking about a renaissance of the arts and the spirit.) Half a dozen outstanding men working together, Kaz. and Hourmouzios agree, can create a renaissance. But these men are realists, too. Kaz. has had much experience of undertakings of this sort which have failed, with much waste of time and energy.<sup>44</sup>

Topping describes in sum an endeavour of great scope, more remarkable perhaps still for the confidence Kazantzakis placed in America as a principal means, ‘the great spiritual hope’, for Greece’s salvation and rebirth. Questions nevertheless linger concerning how accurately the words of those present were recorded or whether Kazantzakis’ flattering depiction of America was not fashioned for the consumption of his American benefactor.

Another view of Kazantzakis’ aims for the Institute is conveyed in a letter to Börje Knös on 14 November 1946. The account begins with a description of Greece’s current plight:

Greece is groaning under a fascist yoke. Everything most pure, most remarkable from the intellectual or moral point of view, is relentlessly persecuted; many of my friends – university professors, high-ranking civil servants, writers, scholars – have been dismissed from their positions and are in dire straits. The purest flame of modern Greece is in danger. How can we save her?’

Kazantzakis turns next to his solution:

I have developed a project whose general outline I am enclosing for you herewith: the founding, outside of Greece, of an Institute of Modern Greek Culture, a hearth where the flame may be safeguarded. I have already established contact with American universities that could sponsor and realize this project... This institute will become a field of action for several extremely

44 Ibid., 257.

pure Greeks – writers, artists, scholars – who, on foreign soil, will fan the intellectual flame of today’s Greece.’<sup>45</sup>

Once again, the Institute is depicted as a means for Kazantzakis to continue his political engagement with Greece from abroad. No rationale is given for his choice of location, though America – in addition to ranking high on his list of travel priorities -- may have appealed by virtue of its power, its influence on Greek affairs, and the financial resources of its universities.

The challenge of attaining a full picture of the project is compounded by the fact that a different view of its founders’ preoccupations and aims is conveyed in the reminiscences of Eleni Kazantzakis, who portrayed the Institute as having been envisaged as a means to shape the national consciousness and sensibilities of Greek-Americans:

For some time now, he and Prevelakis had been pondering the problem of the Greek emigrants in the United States. Mainly illiterate villagers driven from home by endemic famine, they were catapulted onto the high tide of superproduction and superconvenience once they reached America. To teach their children the language of their Fathers, to recall their villages or talk about their own origins – what good would it do? They were almost ashamed of them. Their only thought was to gain time and assimilate themselves as quickly as possible to their environment.’<sup>46</sup>

Although questions linger concerning the extent to which the ‘project’ was conceived of as an act of ‘long-distance nationalism’ intended to shape the political views of Greek-Americans, this would not be the first time that the possibility of engaging that community appeared in sources connected with Kazantzakis.<sup>47</sup> The financial resources of Greek-Americans had been cited in an exchange of letters between Elli Lambridi and Kazantzakis back in 1927 regarding their hopes to establish a ‘monastery’ for writers in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>48</sup> The idea for the American Institute is characteristic of Kazantzakis’ thinking in the sense that it recalls previous dreams of

45 Bien, *Selected Letters*, 632.

46 H Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis*, 458. She continues: ‘Prevelakis and Kazantzakis drew up detailed plans for an Institute of Greek Culture in the United States. The Athens government, always blind wherever the future of the race was at stake, refused to renew Kazantzakis’ passport.’

47 This term was used by Benedict Anderson in reference to the populations of ‘migrants’ from the ‘Second and Third Worlds’ who, though uprooted by ‘capitalism’s remorseless, accelerating transformation of all human societies’, still seek to play a role in political affairs in their homelands: ‘Exodus’, *Critical Inquiry*, 20, 2 (1994) 314–27 (326). Such efforts, writes Nina Glick Schiller, encompass actions ‘designed to influence the political situation within a territory’ in which the actor no longer lives but may ‘still call home’. This may include attempts ‘to appeal to larger dispersed populations, urging them to identify with a homeland nation and take action on its behalf.’: ‘Long-Distance Nationalism’, in I. Skoggard, C. R. Ember, M. Ember (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: immigrant and refugee cultures around the world* (New York 2005) 570–80 (571, 574).

48 Kazantzakis and Lambridi, *Αλληλογραφία*, 120.

forming international intellectual condominiums, as well as acting upon Greek cultural and political life from abroad. One notes in this connection an earlier letter (1921) to Galateia in which, writing from Vienna, Kazantzakis imagined himself in the guise of a modern-day Anthimos Gazis.<sup>49</sup>

In June 1946, Kazantzakis left for Britain where, with the sponsorship of the British Council, he interviewed several famous intellectuals in advance of an ultimately unrealized plan to produce a work on the post-war perspectives of some of the country's leading thinkers.<sup>50</sup> In October, Kazantzakis went on to Paris. Although his hopes for the establishment of the Institute waned as time passed, he continued to investigate ways to accomplish what was now an ardent wish to travel to America.<sup>51</sup>

This did not come to pass, and desperate for a means to support himself, Kazantzakis sought Prevelakis' and Papandreou's help in obtaining a position with UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization).<sup>52</sup> Kazantzakis eventually succeeded in May of 1947 in becoming the Director of UNESCO's Department of the Translation of the Classics. Although relieved of some of his financial cares, he found the work tiresome and uninspiring: in letter after letter he lamented the loss of valuable time and energy required for his own works and contemplated some means of release.<sup>53</sup> 'I can't even raise my head,' he complained of his burdens to Prevelakis on 7 July 1947 before returning to his fantasy of departing for America.<sup>54</sup> Thoughts of the Institute or some similar venture recur: 'God grant our hopes take on flesh, because constantly my mind returns to America – to see that place and escape.'<sup>55</sup> He continued on in the same letter, 'Let's leave for California, to work and to have time and to create.'<sup>56</sup> In a subsequent letter from 19 September 1947, he spoke enthusiastically of a plan to attend an UNESCO meeting in the Americas while also

49 In a letter from Vienna in 1922, Kazantzakis spoke of publishing 'a communist journal, to send to Greece'. He likened the endeavour to the national consciousness raising efforts of Greek intellectuals in the years before the Revolution. 'Here in Vienna,' he continued, 'five or six years before 1821, *Ἐρμῆς ὁ Λόγιος* began to be published by Anthimos Gazis, and this periodical prepared the national uprising of Greece. How I wish that we could again, from here, start the next one, the human one!' [μακάρι να μπορούσαμε πάλι απ' ἐδὼ ν' ἀρχίσουμε το ἐπόμενο ζῦπνημα, το ἀνθρώπινο!]; Kazantzakis, *Ἐπιστολές πρὸς τὴν Γαλάτεια*, 33–4.

50 For additional background on the venture and the causes of its failure, see D. Holton, 'Kazantzakis in Cambridge', in P. Mackridge and D. Ricks (eds.) *The British Council and Anglo-Greek Literary Interactions, 1945–1955* (London 2018) 215–26.

51 Plans for travel to America are mentioned again in letters of October 15, 22 and 28, 1946 (400, 552–3). In another letter to Prevelakis from 27 November 1946 (555) he refers to their 'efforts to relocate to the New World'.

52 As he wrote to Prevelakis on 25 January 1947 of his aims, 'Thus, I will be saved, because I've stopped having great hopes for America.': Bien, *Selected Letters*, 635.

53 'I'm working terribly hard here,' he wrote to Prevelakis on 28 June 1947, 'trying to tolerate the bitterness of wasting my time in non-creative work'. (400, 648).

54 400, 575.

55 400, 574.

56 400, 575.

bringing up the possibility of creating an Institute of Modern Greek Literature at some university in the United States, perhaps with the assistance of the Harvard professor LeRoy Breunig.<sup>57</sup> On 12 December 1947 he wrote again of his weariness with the UNESCO post and his hopes of leaving in spring for America and living there on the money he had stored up in New York.<sup>58</sup> 'I will stay a few months, to see with my own eyes the new world and console myself. And if I find some quiet, to work.'<sup>59</sup> In March 1948, Kazantzakis resigned from UNESCO. His wife appears to have questioned the wisdom of this decision, but, as she writes in her memoirs, 'I left him in peace, recovered my confidence, and on an entirely new canvas we began embroidering together our future castles in America'.<sup>60</sup>

Kazantzakis' correspondence from these years also gives notice of his growing excitement over the prospect of introducing his work to American readers.<sup>61</sup> In letters from August 1947 to Kakridis and Prevelakis he eagerly shared the news of Pearl S. Buck's positive response to *Zorba*.<sup>62</sup> 'She (Buck) wrote me yesterday,' he tells Kakridis, 'that she liked it very much and asked for a one week option to decide to publish it at the house she directs (Pearl Buck, as you know, is a Nobel Prize winner).'<sup>63</sup> He wrote excitedly again to Prevelakis the following month of a plan to publish an English translation of his *Odyssey* with an American press, a matter of supreme importance for Kazantzakis.<sup>64</sup> The ensuing letters express enthusiasm for the project and for the opportunity to satisfy his longstanding wish to visit the country. As he wrote on 6 February 1948: 'I'm struggling to get a Greek Visa for America, to collaborate with someone who knows Greek and excellent English and is a poet, to translate together all of the *Odyssey*. It is a unique opportunity and I would not like to

57 400, 582–3.

58 The savings apparently came from the UNESCO position, as indicated in a letter to Prevelakis from 7 August 1947: 'Lots of work here. My salary has increased to six hundred dollars a month. Most of it I deposit in New York so that I'll have something to live on when I go – if the world is still alive.'; Bien, *Selected Letters*, 649.

59 400, 584.

60 H Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis*, 473.

61 See a letter to Prevelakis on 15 October 1946 in which he expressed the hope that his play *Melissa* would be performed in the United States (400, 551).

62 400, 579.

63 Kazantzakis, '84 γράμματα', 281.

64 Letter of 4 September 1947 (400, 581). The subject was also brought up often with Kakridis; see e.g. Kazantzakis, '84 γράμματα', 283–4. This translation involved a collaboration with Rae Dalven, which Kazantzakis planned to fund out of his own pocket. Correspondence relating to the project (covering the period February to April 1948), including the issues of remuneration, living, and even dining arrangements can be found in Bien, *Selected Letters*, 661–5. These hopes were frustrated by the refusal of the Greek government to issue him a passport. As he wrote in a letter to Knös in April 1948, 'Today's fascist government in Greece denied me the visa because, it seems, they're afraid that I might give political lectures.' (ibid., 665).

lose it, while I live... I have in New York enough money for one year.'<sup>65</sup> 'We are preparing for New York!' he gushed to Kakridis on 9 February 1948. 'I would not like to lose this chance before I die to translate the great beast... I have a need to renew my vision and find new causes for joy and bitterness.'<sup>66</sup>

This and similar opportunities continued to loom large in Kazantzakis' imagination as a means to secure his legacy. And although the popularity and sales of his works in Europe brightened his often gloomy letters to Prevelakis in these later years, 'the great hope', he wrote in a letter from 18 December 1952, 'is America'.<sup>67</sup> These hopes lit especially on the publisher Max Schuster, whom Kazantzakis first met earlier that year. Kazantzakis appears indeed to have been quite taken aback by Schuster's support. In the words of Eleni Kazantzakis: 'Ever since this initial meeting, Kazantzakis' work kept on appearing in America, book after book. On each new visit to Europe the Schusters used to come to see their friends. We had never hoped for such understanding.'<sup>68</sup>

Schuster editions of Kazantzakis' novels began in fact to appear in American bookstores in rapid succession, beginning with *Zorba* in 1953, and followed shortly thereafter by *The Greek Passion* and *Freedom or Death*. Their publication was widely reported in the media and typically received positive reviews. Even where critics expressed reservations over style or structure, the arrival of Kazantzakis' novels was hailed as a literary event which demanded the notice of American readers. This had less to do with the philosophical trappings of the works in question, the substance of which was lightly passed over. Here was an opportunity instead – or so one gathers from a sample of contemporary responses – to indulge the senses in the sights, smells and 'whole physical texture' of exotic lands and the ways of people who blazed, in the words of one reviewer, with a 'life force à la Grecque'.<sup>69</sup>

'Nothing quite comparable to *Zorba the Greek* has appeared on the literary scene for years,' observed the *New York Times*. This might be considered 'a point of merit or not,' the critic cautioned, but 'Zorba is a book with so much sweep and vitality and excitement that although many additional reactions are possible, few will read it without fascination.'<sup>70</sup> 'You should not miss this book,' he concluded. 'It is an unusual experience, for all its contradictions and defects.' *Zorba* was lauded still more highly in *Time* and appeared regularly in 'Recent and Readable' columns, where it was proclaimed 'a modern Greek masterpiece.'<sup>71</sup> 'The richest, most exuberant novel of the

65 400, 585.

66 Kazantzakis, '84 γράμματα', 284.

67 400, 650.

68 H. Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis*, 515.

69 'Life Force à la Grecque', *Time* 61, 16 (1953) 122–6 (122).

70 E. Fuller, 'The Wild and Wily Zorba', *New York Times* 19 April 1953, BR 4-5 (5).

71 *Zorba* was meanwhile a character who 'makes the heroes of most modern fiction seem like dyspeptic ghosts.': 'Life Force à la Grecque', 124; 'Recent and Readable', *Time* 61, 18 (1953) 118. For *The Atlantic*, likewise, *Zorba* was 'a truly epic creation.': 'Books: The Editors Like', *The Atlantic*, June 1953, 78.

year came from Greece,' began yet another review in *Time*'s 'The Year in Books', 'the work of 68-year-old Nikos Kazantzakis... His *Zorba the Greek* had a picaresque hero who, almost alone in the fiction of 1953, communicated the conviction that it is wonderful to be alive.'<sup>72</sup>

*Time* reviewers were equally enthusiastic about the novels that followed. *The Greek Passion* was thus celebrated as 'a striking demonstration of literary virtuosity' and 'a high mark for the rest of 1954's novelists to aim at.'<sup>73</sup> *Freedom or Death*, the author's 'third memorable novel to reach U.S. readers in as many years', received similar praise.<sup>74</sup> 'Kazantzakis was a unique literary alchemist,' observed the reviewer, 'if he holds his readers, it is because he gives his characters, even in the midst of death, a rage to live. Sky and sea, bread and honey, woman and song, all are celebrated on "the fields of praise."<sup>75</sup> This glowing account of the work was followed by an equally effusive portrait of the author (garnished by a photograph of Kazantzakis, deep in thought, at his desk) which, in addition to dwelling upon his austere, 'soldierly' bearing and tireless pursuit of artistic perfection, imagined him still more extravagantly as the modern embodiment of 'ancient Greek greatness'.<sup>76</sup> There were however signs of fatigue in other quarters with the 'larger than life' aspects of Kazantzakis' plots and characters: 'To this particular reader,' wrote another reviewer of *Freedom or Death*, 'Kazantzakis' work frequently seems inflated and unreal'.<sup>77</sup> The same critic went on nevertheless to concede that Kazantzakis 'occupies a niche of his own in contemporary fiction. Few authors alive can equal the tremendous vividness and the surging vitality of his novels.'<sup>78</sup>

With Schuster's support American readers were thus subject to a barrage of Kazantzakis' works. But of special importance to Kazantzakis was the enthusiasm which Schuster showed for the publication of an American edition of his *Odyssey*, a project which he had sought to finance himself, as we have seen, in 1948. These hopes were renewed in 1954 as the relationship with Schuster progressed. In a letter to Prevelakis on 4 July 1954 Kazantzakis describes how Schuster was 'waiting impatiently' to publish the translation of the work. 'It is the greatest good,' he declares, 'that ξενιτιά has given me.'<sup>79</sup> A letter to Alexis Minotis of 3 August of the same year,

72 'The Year in Books', *Time*, 62, 25 (1953) 94–6 (94).

73 'Lycovrissi Parable', *Time*, 63, 2 (1954) 84.

74 'Fate of a Hero' *Time*, 67, 3 (1956) 100.

75 Ibid.

76 'Under the harsh sun of Crete,' waxed the writer, 'neither brooding Teutonic mysticisms nor romantic self deceptions can survive. The pages of a Kazantzakis novel reveal the secret of ancient Greek greatness – a ruthless and abiding taste for reality.' (Ibid).

77 'Cretans and Turks', *The Atlantic* 197, 3 (1956) 88–89 (89). The novel was panned on similar grounds in L. A. Fiedler, 'Horse-Opera in Crete', *The New Republic*, 134, 9 (1956) 19–20.

78 'Cretans and Turks', 89.

79 400, 671. Schuster appeared at first to favour only an abridged translation of the work; see letters to Kimon Friar in Bien, *Selected Letters*, 759.

by which time Kazantzakis was busily at work with Kimon Friar on the translation, is particularly memorable:

At present I am submerged in a great difficulty; my publisher in New York sent Friar to me to help him translate into English all of the ... *Odyssey*! 33,333 lines! We work from daybreak and I dare say that the translation will be exceptional. But I am tired. It is however needful, before i die, that there be a translation into a global language [παγκόσμια γλώσσα] of this work on which depends the salvation of my soul.<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusions

Kazantzakis' post-war correspondence reveals the considerable interest he showed in visiting the United States and even settling in that country for a lengthy period of time. The pretexts for such a journey were diverse and variously described in the sources as a means to 'renew his vision,' find a secure place to work, and engage in some kind of cultural or educational endeavours intended to influence the course of Greek life from afar. It has been argued here that the tempering of Kazantzakis' ideological convictions played a facilitating role in this development.

Although references to Kazantzakis' engagement with America are few, the views and evidence presented above provide a context for assessing Elli Alexiou's somewhat polemical stance on Kazantzakis' attitude toward America and the motivations behind his 'dream' of seeing that part of the world. She appeared to be keen on disabusing readers of any notions they may have acquired (from where, we are not told) concerning the nature of Kazantzakis' imputed attraction to that country:

The dream of America was not realized. Probably he did not wish for it intensely. I imagine that the desire for such a trip, as it was combined with the translation of the *Odyssey*, from Rae Dalven, diminished as soon as a better and more capable translator appeared, Kimon Friar. He did not speak again of the trip. He was settled in Antibes and soon set to work on the translation. What in any case was a trip to America for him...[?] He could tear mountains in two when his soul thirsted intensely for something. But the New World did not suit him. On the contrary, the modernized world revolted him. All his life he fashioned dreams of travel. In these, much space was taken by Africa, the Indies, China, Japan... It is as if America did not exist. I personally heard him say many times : 'I would not go to America if I could for free.'<sup>81</sup>

There is certainly little room to argue that Kazantzakis' interest in seeing America reflected some significant change in his outlook toward American life or the 'modernized world'. Kazantzakis is heard to utter words of praise regarding the

80 A Minotis 'Πέντε ανέκδοτες επιστολές προς τον Αλέξη Μινωτή', *Η λέξη*, 42 (1985) 114–18 (118).

81 E. Alexiou *Για να γίνει μεγάλος* (Athens 1966), 254.



country's 'spiritual promise' in Topping's diary entry, yet such thoughts do not recur elsewhere within the public and private sources considered here. And if American writers were occasionally cited in his correspondence, they do not receive the level of attention and admiration shown toward European authors or the cultural contributions of China and Japan.<sup>82</sup> As we have seen, Kazantzakis took some satisfaction from the fact that someone like Pearl S. Buck praised his work, but the sources do not suggest that his desire to visit or take up residence in the United States stemmed from any great admiration of its cultural achievements or production.

That said, Elli Alexiou's words are at odds with the view obtained from Kazantzakis' post-war correspondence and the numerous expressions of interest in some form of engagement with America, many of which predate mention of the *Odyssey*. This is especially true of his enthusiasm for the Hellenic Institute. Although the reasons for his choice of America as a site for this venture remain unclear, it was nevertheless conceived in the years before the prospect arose of an American edition of the *Odyssey*. And although Friar was able to come to France for a short time to work on the translation, Kazantzakis continued to express interest in rejoining him in America up to the last years of his life. 'You and I must be regularly in touch in order to see how we can meet,' he wrote on 10 April 1956. 'I wish we were able to go to the USA for a month. Very difficult but not impossible.' 'Thank you for all that you are doing for me,' he added, 'the day when in my hands I hold the *Odyssey* printed in English, you and I will enter paradise together.'<sup>83</sup>

The wish to go to America expressed in these final letters echoes an aim repeated often, and at times with considerable enthusiasm, in the texts discussed above. This is not to suggest again that Kazantzakis had lost any of his distaste for the materialism and banality so often associated with American life in his writings. It is highly likely that considerable misgivings remained. However, he was apparently more willing over time to tolerate these defects while being increasingly sensible to the pull of other demands and attractions, among them, the quest for new experiences, security, and, above all, the opportunity to bolster his legacy by introducing his work to an ever larger, global, audience.

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82 See e.g. E. Alexiou, 'Ο Καζαντζάκης και η Γερμανία', *Νέα Εστία* 102 (1977) 58–64. A few references to American authors appear in his correspondence: a letter to Prevelakis from 19 October 1932 (400, 336) describes a conversation in Madrid with Jiménez in which they 'spoke continuously about poetry, about two great American poets, Frost and Masters'. 336. Elsewhere, he expressed interest in various works of Poe and Washington Irving (280–1). In 1929, he requested that Prevelakis contact another acquaintance and ask that she return his copy of a work by Whitman, adding 'I need it very much.' (113–14). He also displayed interest in the writings of William James and translated parts of his *Principles of Psychology*. (520).

83 Bien, *Selected Letters*, 816. He wrote again on 5 June 1957, 'We think of you always and wonder when we will see you again. We, too, might come to America. I must not leave this world before seeing you again – before seeing and enjoying the work you have in mind.' (ibid., 850).