

‘When I die, throw me into the sea’

Greek rebetiko as a political art form

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Introduction

The word ‘rebetiko’ is associated in my mind with many vivid, emotionally powerful memories. The most recent one was a gathering amongst some of my dearest friends, whom I am fortunate to have known since my formative years back in my native Thessaloniki, Greece’s “second capital.” I was visiting Berlin, a city that is quite popular among young Greek emigrants, and I had prompted my Berliner friends to embrace this opportunity for a reunion through a sumptuous, convivial dinner. After we had finished our hearty meal, we gathered around a small coffee table in the living room, each of us with their (third or fourth, at this point) glass of red wine. Prompted by my peers, I picked up my friend’s buzuki¹. It was missing a couple strings, while the rest were in need of replacement and had grown coarse; however, the resulting harsher sound did not seem to bother anyone, while one of us humorously suggested it rendered our jam session more ‘original’ – assuming that many rebétes² lacked the resources to maintain their instruments in good condition. After performing two songs requested by my friends, I instinctively began playing a song that I consider a classic, and that I knew the group would enjoy. Everyone recognized the tune immediately, after as much as one measure of its instrumental ‘refrain,’ and soon we were all singing in powerful unison:

‘These cops that came in now,
 What are they looking for at this hour?
 They came to arrest us
 And to take away our dice³’

It is such themes of contempt for the authorities that people usually associate with the ‘politics of rebetiko.’ Anti-police sentiment, as showcased by this song and dozens more, is likely a significant reason why rebetiko remains so popular amongst Greek youth, where such sentiment is widespread,

¹ The buzuki (gr. Μπουζούκι) is a long-necked, fretted, plucked string instrument closely related to the Arabic *buzuq* and the Turkish *saz*. It originally carried six strings, arranged in three courses of two strings each; a fourth course was later added, and the tuning was adapted to allow for greater melodic mobility and the playing of chords, accommodating for the more Westernized harmonic vocabulary that Greek popular music had acquired. Since the 1930s, the buzuki is considered the trademark rebetiko instrument.

² Rebétis, pl. rebétes (gr. ρεμπέτης, ρεμπέτες), fem. rebétissa (gr. ρεμπέτισσα), can refer to either a rebetiko musician, or a person “adhering to a specific,” and I would add ‘low-life’ or ‘marginal,’ “urban lifestyle in pre-1950s Greece” (Koglin 2016, 274).

³ Original lyrics: ‘Τούτ’ οι μπάτσοι που ‘ρθαν τώρα, βρε [x3] | τι γυρεύουν τέτοια ώρα; | ήρθανε να μας ‘ρεστάρουν [x3] | και τα ζάρια να μας πάρουν’ (as recorded in 1928 in New York, with singer Yannakis Ioannidis and buzuki player Manolis Karapiperis, both originally from the island of Samos)

and justifiably so. Given the current events unfolding back in our home country, the lines ‘what are [these cops] looking for at this hour?’ acquire a new sort of immediacy – I am thinking specifically of a recent police raid of a nightclub in Athens, which looked a lot more like a terrorist attack than a police operation, with “hundreds of club-goers [...] being forced on their knees, held at gunpoint by the special police squad for an hour” (Tsiliopoulos, 2019). This was only one incident among a long-running “pattern of violations” by the police, as outlined by Amnesty International in their 2012 essay on police brutality in Greece. Yet, the politics of rebetiko go way beyond the occasional anti-authoritarian lyrics, in the same way that Greek society is faced with much greater sociopolitical challenges than police brutality, which is but a mere symptom of its multifaceted problems. From the time of rebetiko’s inception to this very day, Greece has had to endure a multitude of social, economic, political, and humanitarian crises; at times, those were induced by severely traumatic events, namely two brutally repressive military dictatorships and three wars, the first of which brought about the end of Eastern Hellenism and the forced mass exodus of Anatolian Greeks, a crucial development in the history of modern Greece that we will soon revisit. Rebetiko, which began to flourish immediately after this horrific event, has accompanied Greeks throughout the tumultuous 20th century and continues to do so to this day. The current, seemingly unending debt crisis, which has significantly impoverished the Greek people, materially and spiritually, provides the context for this very investigation into the beloved genre.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore *how* rebetiko may provide a response to the suffering of the Greek people – more precisely, how it can be *politically valuable* for such a struggling society. Furthermore, this study addresses *whom* rebetiko can be valuable *for*, in an era of “aesthetic separation [...] [where] the works [of art] are torn away from their original destination, from any specific community,” as asserted by Jacques Rancière in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2011, 68). With regards to my first objective, it is important to clarify from the get-go what it is that I mean by ‘political value.’ My assessment of rebetiko will revolve around three ‘desired outcomes’ which I believe political art is generally expected to achieve, or at least attempt. My categorization is necessarily reductive, for the sake of clarity and organization of my argument. It is also inevitably subjective, although, upon formulating those ‘desired outcomes,’ and especially the first two, I was significantly influenced by

Rancière's aforementioned work and his own evaluation of various forms of political art. The three desired outcomes are the following:

- 1) an 'invitation,' implicit or explicit, to an active, *critical* consideration of one's social, economic, and political reality;
- 2) some sort of allusion to or simulation of an *alternative* to the current reality; and
- 3) a valuable contribution to the spectator's ability to *cope* with their reality; this extends beyond the socio-political realm into explicitly existential concerns, yet what are politics if not a means to navigate and organize our lives, in order to make sense and meaning out of our mysterious existence as intelligent, social beings?

In the following pages, I will argue that rebetiko has the potential to achieve all three of those outcomes, at least to a certain extent. By painting an honest, straightforward image of life on the margins of society, as well as by expressing, implicitly or explicitly, an opposition to the status quo and a disdain for authority, it can provoke a questioning of our rigid moral, social, and political configurations, as well as evoke a sense of solidarity and empathy for the least advantaged and the most deviant members of our society. While it by no means suggests an alternative model for the organization of our political economy, rebetiko provides *in itself* a temporary alternative reality, in the sense of Michel Foucault's *heterotopia*: it forms "a kind of effectively enacted utopia" (1986, 24), "from where people actively 'contest' [...] *part* of their reality [...] rather than avoiding or forgetting about it" (Koglin 2016, 194, original emphasis). Through this heterotopia and all that it entails, participants in a rebetiko *ghléndi*⁴ can be spiritually empowered and re-vitalized; their social bonds can be strengthened; their negative feelings and destructive 'drives' can be inverted and converted into positive feelings of joy and pride, and into creative energy, manifested through dance, group singing, and elated social interaction. These therapeutic and empowering effects can significantly aid individuals in dealing with their discontents in life, from material concerns and sociopolitical frustrations all the way to existential anguish.

In addition to the analysis of political value as derived from the immanent qualities of rebetiko, and in an attempt to further legitimize rebetiko as a political art form with wide-reaching potential, I

⁴ A *ghléndi* (gr. γλέντι) is an "occasion of reveling with Greek traditional or popular music, dancing, and other characteristic forms of behavior" (Koglin 2016, 268).

will employ a theoretical perspective drawn from Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator*, which Rodrigo Duarte (2018) effectively summarized as “the dialectic between aesthetic separation and aesthetic community.” In his assessment of political art, Rancière operates under the assumption of a “dissensual community, an aesthetic community [...] structured by disconnection” (59). The art addressed by Rancière often represents a top-down attempt “to overcome the ‘aesthetic separation’” and “to establish conditions for new forms of inclusive communities to arise” (Duarte 2018). In contrast, rebetiko's fascinating historical trajectory from the song of ‘sub-proletarian’ communities to what folk guitar virtuoso Dimitris Mystakidis termed a “trans-class genre” (Vafiadis 2018) showcases its ability to overcome this ‘aesthetic separation;’ it has managed to reach deep into the hearts and minds of all members of Greek society, regardless of socioeconomic conditions and aesthetic preferences, and even going beyond the boundaries of nationality. Therefore, rebetiko addresses a wide ‘aesthetic community’ (appropriating Rancière's term), which can then be affected by its immanent political functions.

While I have been referring to rebetiko as a ‘political art form’ throughout this introduction, I should clarify that its inherent political aspect, i.e. the extent to which its original performers had a political intent, is uncertain, as I shall illustrate shortly. Its nature as rebellious or anti-authoritarian, taken for granted by many Greeks, has been the matter of heated debate, along with many other questions on the genre's meaning and value. This debate was aptly overviewed by Daniel Koglin, in his monumental work, *Greek Rebetiko from a Psychocultural Perspective: Same Songs Changing Minds* (2016), for which he surveyed an impressive 143 articles “published between 1928 and 2002” (11). While he modestly claims this sample to be “just the tip of the iceberg” (12), his comprehensive overview of the discursive construction of rebetiko in the Greek press, television, and academia provides an unprecedented reference point for any English-speaking academic researching rebetiko. Additionally, through the ‘triangulation’ of his discourse analysis, his fieldwork in the rebetiko scenes of Athens and Istanbul, and his experimental mapping of rebetiko's ‘semantic space’ through semantic differentiation, a statistical method drawn from psychology, he has extracted insights into the significance and meaning of the genre that would surprise even native Greek, long-time rebetiko fans like myself. Therefore, I am deeply thankful for Koglin's meticulous, over-a-decade-long work, which

will serve as a core reference throughout this essay, especially for issues regarding the genre's history, reception, discursive construction, and significance in the popular imagination.

These core issues will be most relevant in my first section, which will focus on the idea of rebetiko as a marginal and 'nonconformist' music; I will address the contradictions between the genre's immanent reality and the popular 'myths' surrounding it, in order to assess how it comes to acquire a political significance, grounded on both myth and reality and the interaction between the two. Then, I will shift my focus to the practice of rebetiko, in the form of the *ghléndi*; as a complex heterotopia that provides an opportunity for empowering catharsis, it constitutes a site that is rich in political value. Finally, I will consider rebetiko's peculiar ability to address an ever-widening 'aesthetic community,' transcending the 'aesthetic separation' that significantly compromises the efficacy of many other forms of political art. This ability is strongly related to the genre's popular conceptualization as the expression of 'the Greek soul,' and it adds a whole other dimension to this music's political potential. I shall now begin with an overview of the genre's definition(s) and historical development, which shall aid in my assessment of the most commonly hypothesized kind of politics associated with rebetiko.

'Marginality' and 'nonconformity' in and through rebetiko: myths, realities, outcomes

Rebetiko is an elusive concept, like most musical genres or stylistic categorizations of art. A common definition is that of a 'Greek urban folk song,' which, however, is problematic in many ways, the main of which being that:

though numerous elements of the orally transmitted folk song of rural Greece do appear in many classic rebetiko songs as well, most of the latter were recorded for the mass market and did not generate variants. Consequently, they lack one of the most basic characteristics of oral poetry: its being created, accepted, selected, and modified *by the community* (Koglin 2016, 6, original emphasis)

Nevertheless, rebetiko does not fall strictly into the category of mass-produced popular music, either. Perhaps, it is best understood as "the product of a *transitional stage* in the development from a memory-based 'traditional' to a record-based 'industrial' mode of musical production" (ibid., 111). Additionally, a significant factor that renders it dissimilar to other forms of 'industrial' popular music is the shortness of its mass-scale production phase, compared to its total lifespan as a popular form of entertainment;

“in terms of production,” rebetiko “has been dead since 1955,” even if it “was revived as listening material twenty years later and [...] has still not lost its appeal” (Karabesi 26 VII 1998, as cited in Koglin 2016, 49). Finally, rebetiko was never purely commercial in the first place; rather, an “oral tradition of low-life songs” coexisted with “the mass media-based commercial branch,” and the former seems to even have outlived the latter, as evidenced by Elias Petropoulos’ and Kostas Tsingos’ accounts of ‘underground’ rebetiko scenes in 1967 and 1972 respectively (ibid., 41-42). This dual nature of rebetiko as both an industrial, commercial product and an orally transmitted art that lives on through performance makes it an interesting case study as an art form in what Walter Benjamin famously termed “the age of mechanical reproduction” (2005). Certainly, recording, reproduction, and radio technologies contributed significantly to genre’s ascent from the song of the urban poor to a song that is deeply appreciated and loved by all Greeks. For instance, partly due to technology, rebetiko’s reach extended way beyond the urban landscape where it was created, as Koglin explains: “commercial rebetiko songs very soon began to be heard in the provinces as well, both from gramophone horns and from the mouths of visiting and local musicians” (2016, 6). Nevertheless, this fact further problematizes the genre’s common description as an ‘urban folk song,’ adding to the nebulous nature of rebetiko as a concept.

Another reason for the genre’s resistance to a clear definition is the sheer variety of styles to be found within the long catalogue of songs that are labelled ‘rebetiko.’ Nevertheless, we can subdivide this vast catalogue into three major sub-styles, which, non-coincidentally, also correspond to the genre’s historical development. This categorization follows the most popular model of subdividing the genre’s history, as posited by folklorist Elias Petropoulos (1991, 16f.) in his anthology *Rebetiko Songs*; it only categorizes what Petropoulos deems to be ‘rebetiko proper,’ which is songs recorded between 1922 and 1952, and it consists of three stylistic periods: (1) the ‘Smyrna’ style (1922-32), characterized by its more ‘oriental’ sound and the dominance of the female voice; (2) the ‘classical’ or ‘Piraeus’ style (1932-40), created by male singer-songwriters in Piraeus, the port city adjacent to Athens, who were predominantly from a lower-class background, and who were the first to use the buzuki on commercial recordings, and (3) the ‘popular’ style (1940-52), characterized by a stronger influence from Western music, especially in terms of harmony, a more refined lyricism, and a tendency towards a division of labor between composers/songwriters and singers/performers. With regards to this latter style, it will

suffice for now to say that it is attributed to the work of Vassilis Tsitsanis, who “almost single-handedly transformed [rebetiko] from a ‘subcultural’ into a ‘popular’ art form” (Koglin 2016, 41), a significant historical development that will be revisited later.

A more in-depth discussion of the history of the first two stylistic categories, often referred to collectively as ‘pre-war rebetiko’ (referring, of course, to WWII), will be useful in our understanding of the tropes of marginality and nonconformity in rebetiko. Koglin eloquently distinguishes the subdivisions of the ‘pre-war’ category, by addressing the different sociological backgrounds of the respective style’s leading musicians: “The Smyrna style was represented by professional [musicians who] were usually immigrants from urban centers in Western Anatolia such as Smyrna (Izmir), Bursa or Ayvalik, many of whom had undergone formal musical training.” On the other hand, the Piraeus style was represented by “local amateurs, autodidactic musicians from an underprivileged social milieu” (51). Nevertheless, this does not necessarily render the Smyrna style inherently less ‘marginal’ than the Piraeus style. As refugees fleeing the ‘Asia Minor Catastrophe,’⁵ the representatives of the Smyrna style had found themselves living in poverty upon their arrival on the Greek mainland, regardless of their socioeconomic status back in their native Anatolian cities. As many people of my generation have learned through the stories of our grandparents and great-grandparents, refugees from Anatolia faced severe discrimination from mainlanders. This discrimination may be attributed to the upheaval and chaos caused by their arrival,⁶ or to the Anatolian Greeks’ closer association with the Turkish people, a long-time ‘rival’ of Greeks, which granted them pejoratives such as ‘Turk seeds’ (τουρκόσποροι, τουρκομερίτες) and ‘yogurt-baptized’ (γιαουρτοβαπτισμένοι) (Salvanou 2018, 14). Therefore, I would argue that both pre-war styles were, in a sense, representing and voicing the concerns of marginalized communities.

Moreover, there was significant musical and lyrical exchange between the two sub-styles: the Piraeus style was greatly influenced by the musical knowledge imported by “famous exponents of the

⁵ Koglin (2016), drawing from Pallis’ “Greek Census of 1929,” defines the ‘Asia Minor Catastrophe’ as “the influx into Greece of about 1,100,00 Greek-Orthodox and 35,000 Armenian refugees from Asia Minor following the defeat of the Greek army by Turkish forces in 1922 and the subsequent compulsory population exchange between the two countries” (51).

⁶ After the ‘Catastrophe,’ the population of urban centers like Athens and Thessaloniki nearly doubled in size (cf. Pallis 1929, 547), naturally leading to a reconfiguration of urban space to accommodate for the refugees.

musical tradition of Eastern Hellenism” (Koglin 2016, 51) while the latter, some of whom “achieved important positions in the record industry” (ibid.) would end up drawing significantly from the lyrical content of the Piraeus style, as we shall see shortly. Therefore, despite the observable differences that allow for subdivision, there was significant continuity, cohesion, and even overlap between the two sub-styles of ‘pre-war rebetiko.’ Hence, one may be curious about the origin of 1932 threshold, set by Pertopoulos as marking the beginning of the Pireaus stylistic period. Far from arbitrary, it is “the year when the first buzuki-based low-life songs typical of ‘classical’ rebetiko were recorded in Greece” (ibid.), one by Yorgos Batis and two by Markos Vamvakaris; both artists are closely identified with the Piraeus style, while the latter considered a modern Greek culture hero. As Koglin explains, “all three songs narrate adventures of hashish smokers in rhyming couplets, were accompanied on the buzuki by [Vamvakaris], are in lively 9/4 *zeybékiko* time (a rhythmic as well as choreographic pattern closely associated with rebetiko), and have a fairly similar overall melodic structure and texture” (ibid.). Therefore, the year 1932 marks the beginning of a musical era characterized by the popularity of hashish-themed songs, performed mostly by males and accompanied on the buzuki, and often in the *zeybékiko* rhythm. The ensuing dominance of hashish songs, many of which have achieved and retained the status of a ‘standard,’ is a core cause behind the common perception of rebetiko as deviant and nonconformist. Yet, it is important to note that such themes did not *originate* in the ‘classical’ rebetiko style that was mass-produced and mass-marketed in the 1930s; they are to be found in the earliest orally transmitted songs, dating back to before what is typically considered the beginning of ‘rebetiko proper’:

We see from the statistical classification of the [sample of 48 ‘rebetiko’] songs of the [pre-1922] period that about 90 per cent of them reflect a set of beliefs and moral principles which is radically different from the conventional one and manifests itself mainly in the form of praise of the virtues of potheads, pimps, and other wrongdoers; derision towards any value that comes ‘from outside;’ extreme epicureanism; the simultaneous glorification and disdain of money; ridicule of taboo symbols of bourgeois society; verbal abuse against policemen, prison guards, and the state authorities in general. (Damianakos 2001, 212, as cited in Koglin 2016, 39)

In this sense, rebetiko has always had a close association with a deviant morality and a nonconformist attitude. These two terms, “deviance” and “nonconformity,” may be used interchangeably; however, I

prefer the term ‘nonconformity’ when discussing such themes and tropes in a political sense, following Koglin’s convincing argumentation posited by Koglin on his own distinction between the two terms:

Nonconformity, as I use the term, has ideological, and frequently positive, connotations. ‘Deviance,’ on the other hand, refers to behavior that, firstly, is usually also defined as illegal, and second, diverges from the norms of the dominant group for practical rather than ideological reasons: either because the ‘deviants’ have less money or fewer opportunities than most other people, or because they adhere to subcultural norms and values that approve of, say, violence and drug use, or because their behavior is encouraged by circumstances such as the social disorganization and overpopulation typical of growing urban centers [such as the urban centers of Greece following the ‘Asia Minor Catastrophe’]. (43)

Therefore, in Koglin’s view, the use of the term ‘nonconformity’ over ‘deviance’ depends on whether or not we interpret the actions of the rebétes, i.e. breaking the law, behaving in complete opposition to bourgeois morality, and mocking authorities, as a conscious political choice, a form of deliberate protest against the status quo. An attempt to understand the motives of rebetiko songwriters and lyricists via a critical analysis of the lyrics themselves would be an interesting pursuit, but, unfortunately, I agree with Koglin that, “whether rebetiko songs are ‘hidden transcripts’ [...] of dissenting views or whether such meanings are read into them by posterity cannot be decided by looking at the lyrics themselves” (ibid.).

Nevertheless, biographical information on various rebétes can provide some insight into whether those musicians held an explicitly nonconformist attitude, and to what extent. The resulting conclusion is that, quite often, what rebétes sung about did not necessarily represent their reality. Specifically with regards to songs about hashish smoking, the evidence shows that their predominance during the ‘classical’ period of rebetiko was due to their popularity and commercial success, more than any other reason. The following account about Vamvakaris’ 1933 audition at Odeon Records is somewhat eye-opening: “they asked him: ‘What have you got?’ and he sang them many beautiful [songs], but they chose the ones about hashish” (Schorelis and Ikonomidis 1974, 30, as cited in Koglin 2016, 40-41). Additionally, as outlined earlier, while the Pireaus-style rebétes were of a lower socio-economic standing and, thus, were likely to have been members of the drug scene themselves, Smyrna-style musicians may have had a more privileged upbringing, and they often achieved better-paid positions in the music industry, reducing their likelihood for participating in working-class drug scenes.

Yet, a 1991 study by Aulin and Vejleskov surveyed 75 commercial recordings about drug use, all recorded before 1940, to find that 47 of them were in the Smyrna style and only 28 in the Pireaus style. This may be attributed to the Smyrna style's 'oriental' sound, which would fit in nicely with popular perceptions of a hedonistic 'Orient,' characterized by an "excess of libidinous passions" (Said 2003, 162), and by "mysteriously attractive opposites to what seem to be normal values" (ibid., 57), to quote Edward Said's influential work on orientalism. This view also helps us understand the popularity of hashish songs among Greek audiences, who may not have had any contact with the 'underworld' frequently described in rebetiko. Surely, the music industry was well aware of the profitability of eastern-sounding songs about hedonistic, "mysteriously attractive" lifestyles, and so were composers and songwriters. Therefore, it is doubtful that, during rebetiko's heyday, hashish songs reflected the experiences of their authors or the habits of their audiences, at least not as a rule of thumb.

Similarly, autobiographical accounts by prominent members of the rebetiko scene show us that, ironically, stereotypical images of nonconformist behavior by rebétés may in part have derived from "a strong wish to *conform*" (Koglin 2016, 43) to certain expectations of their in-group. Koglin highlights how even behavior deemed as nonconformist is learned behavior, and "involves a certain degree of conformity to some alternative model behavior" (44), as evidenced by two anecdotes:

In his autobiography, Markos Vamvakaris remarks that, even as a newly-wed, he would frequently join his friends for a visit to the brothels of Piraeus. 'There,' he remembers, 'I too acted like a bully boy. I did some pimping as well. I took my cues from what I saw around me' (Vamvakaris 1978,91). And buzuki player Michalis Yenitsaris recalls his engagement at a live music restaurant in the mid-1930s where he made friends with the bouncers – thuggish guys who had spent years in prison: "I listened to their stories and got down to putting them into practice myself" (1992, 35). (ibid.)

Finally, the fact that most directly contradicts the popular perception of rebetiko as anti-authoritarian is that "several members of the subculture of rebetiko co-operated with the police or other authorities and enjoyed their protection" (ibid., 47). Why is it, then, that I even chose to investigate the political value of a musical genre that is so ambivalent and contradictory? The answer is that the myth of the rebétis as a nonconformist, anti-establishment, rebellious figure is so deeply ingrained in the discourse on rebetiko that it has come to shape the very reality of the genre's political dimension. In fact, it is

necessary to address these contradictions, to realize how fascinating it is that this genre has acquired such political value *despite* its originally ambivalent politics. Furthermore, I will later argue that the performance of rebetiko fosters practices that *confirm* this rebellious mythology; but, for now I will focus on the mythology itself, outlining how it came to be that this music penetrated so deeply into the hearts and minds of politically nonconformist Greeks.

In his thorough analysis of the discursive construction of rebetiko, Koglin (2016) explains how, during its early stages, rebetiko was looked down upon by both representatives of the “ruling elite,” and by more “progressively minded” individuals (46). Nevertheless, “[by] the 1960s [...] rebetiko had become quite popular among leftist sympathizers in general, and among the student population in particular, to the extent that [it served] as a marker of group identity and a symbol of protest against the military regime that governed Greece from 1967 to 1974” (47). It was such groups of politicized students that played an integral part in the genre’s revival in the 60s and early 70s, an era marked by severe political instability and brutal repression of any insurgent political thought and action. The epitome of the strife of the Greek people during that period was the severe repression enacted by the military junta, immediately after it rose to power in 1967; thousands of people were sent into exile or, worse, to torture centers, solely because of their association to leftist ideology⁷. However, this repression did not begin with the military regime. The democracy that preceded it suffered from the actions of a highly ideological and excessively violent police force, whose obsession with demolishing the Greek Left culminated in the murder of liberal and pacifist politician Georgios Lambrakis in 1963 during a peace demonstration in Thessaloniki, by two individuals who were “revealed to have links with the gendarmerie in the city” (Clogg 1987, 43). Given this political context, it is understandable how students and political dissidents may have found a powerful artistic voice in songs mocking “cops

⁷ These brutalities are described in a chilling report by *Time* magazine on the 1975 trials of the ‘colonels,’ who instigators of the coup d’etat and the led the ensuing military regime: “Witness after witness testified that within a week of Papadopoulos’ April 21, 1967, coup more than 8,000 had been arrested. Of these, 6,188 were banished into exile. Another 3,500 were subsequently sent to ESA torture centers. One prosecution witness, former Colonel Spyridon Moustaklis, 49, was unable to answer questions because brain damage caused by beatings had left him mute and semiparalyzed. Communicating by groans and gestures, glaring at the defendants, Moustaklis clumsily tore his shirt open to reveal the scars that marked his body. Said his wife: ‘We have a little girl who has never heard her father’s voice.’ Verdicts on the 31 accused, which could lead to maximum sentences of 25 years, are due next month.”

and gendarmes”⁸; this politicized appropriation of rebetiko songs continues to this day, with violent repression by state apparatuses remaining a primary political concern in the minds of many Greeks, as I explained in my introduction.

This short historical digression may help us understand the motives behind the redefinition and appropriation of rebetiko by later generations of Greeks. It seems that political meaning can often be imbued into art after the fact, regardless of its original purpose. While this may sound controversial to art historians, I find that, at least in the case of rebetiko, it does not matter what the political intentions of the original artists may or may not have been, if later audiences find through this art an avenue for stylized rebellion. Yet, I would even argue that there is an *inherent* political effect in a song that provides an accurate and honest portrayal of life on the margins of society; even if this portrayal is often imagined and non-autobiographical, the struggles implied by a song about criminal activity and drug use are very real. I would even assert that a rebetiko song can induce a critical consideration of the conditions – political, social, and economic – that gave rise to such desperation. Some songs are, admittedly, better than others in precipitating such reflections; one example is ‘To pedhí tu dhrómu’ (‘Child of the Street’), recorded in 1937 by Yorgos Kavouras. Below, I interpretatively translate some of the song’s lyrics that best illustrate my point:

‘The cold is my bitterness; the heat is my joy [...]

I was never scared of hunger, and I do not remember orphanhood

This is how I found myself in this world, and I do not complain

And if I die and someone is found to bury me,

I am the child of the street, and the street shall be the one to cry for me.’⁹

I find this to be far from a “defeatist, sad, anti-heroic, neutral [song] of eroticism, escapism, and hashish” (Fotiadis 28 IV 1976, as cited in Koglin 2016, 56), as a writer once argued for the communist-stalinist newspaper *Rizospástis*. The only hint of defeatism seems to derive in this case from the line ‘I do not complain,’ assuming that a lack of vocal denouncement of the causes that led to one’s misery could

⁸ Lyrics from a popular rendition of the song “Τούτ’ οι μπάτσοι που ‘ρθαν τώρα” mentioned in the introduction, as performed Yorgos Koutoulakis et. al, on Kostas Ferris’ show *Oniru Ellas* [the Greece of a dream].

⁹ Original lyrics: ‘Το κρύο είναι η πίκρα μου, η ζέστη είναι η χαρά μου [...] | την πείνα δε φοβήκα, ορφανιά δε θυμούμαι | βρέθηκα έτσι στο ντουινιά και δεν παραπονιούμαι | και αν πεθάνω και βρεθεί κανένας να με θάψει | είμαι του δρόμου το παιδί κ’ εκείνος ας με κλάψει’

imply a defeatist stance. However, the song in its entirety shows a head-on contemplation of life as a homeless orphan, as well as a persevering attitude towards this unfortunate condition, which many people found themselves in during the interwar era, especially in the years following the forced mass exodus of Anatolian Greeks. Moreover, the general attitude showcased by this song with regards to life and death is another fascinating point for analysis. I see in the song's lyrics an expression of the devastating nature of poverty's hardships, yet coupled with an acceptance of them and a declaration of perseverance and lack of desperation ('I was never scared of hunger'); a recognition of the arbitrariness of our existence in this world ('This is how I found myself in this world'); and, a remarkable acceptance of a lonely, inglorious death ('if I die [...] the street shall be the one to cry for me'). I will dare to summarize my perception of the attitude showcased by this particular song through paraphrasing Nietzsche's own summary of "[the] double essence of Aeschylus' Prometheus, his simultaneously Appoline and Dionysiac nature," from his influential *The Birth of Tragedy*: "'All that exists is just and unjust and is equally justified in both respects.' That is [our] world. That [we] call a world" (1999, 51). Another example hinting at a quasi-Nietzschean attitude is the song 'Elliniki Apolafsis' ('Greek Pleasure') by Yorgos Katsaros, one of my personal favorites, which ends on the line: 'When I die on the boat, throw me into the sea | so that the black fish and saltwater shall eat me.'¹⁰ The humorous ease with which the narrator deals with his own death, in conjunction with the title 'Greek pleasure,' seems to express a strong will to overcome the misery of a tough life that ends in certain death, by engaging in a pleasurable lifestyle instead of resorting to despair and inaction. To me, such an outlook is reminiscent of Nietzsche's concept of the 'Will to Power,' and it seems that I am not alone in thinking this. As Koglin posits, referring to ideas expressed by sociologist and rebetiko specialist Stathis Damianakos, "[the rebétis] can be glorified as a modern hero who allegedly faced his social marginalization with an almost Nietzschean ideology of heroism." Nevertheless, Koglin himself finds this analogy between the rebétis and the Nietzschean *Übermensch* to be "a wild exaggeration," yet not without a "grain of truth" to it (2016, 48).

¹⁰ Original lyrics: 'Άντε, σα 'ποθάνω στο καράβι, ρίξετέ με στο γιαλό, αμάν, γιαλό [x2] | άντε να με φαν' τα μαύρα ψάρια, άντε και το αλμυρό νερό, αμάν αμάν.' The dating of the original recording is disputed, and while it was originally dated to 1927, it is now estimated to have been recorded as early as 1919, according to an online database by the Department of Folk and Traditional Music at the Technical University of Epirus.

Admittedly, it would be a vast overstatement to say that rebetiko *in general* showcases a Nietzschean attitude towards life and death, or to draw a parallel between rebetiko and ancient Greek tragedy through the lens of a fusion of Dionysiac and Apolline art. Even if the application of Nietzsche's philosophy onto these two examples may seem somewhat appropriate, it would be plainly wrong to generalize such claims to the entire genre. Instead, my main point here is that I vehemently object to the labelling of rebetiko as merely escapist. Quite the contrary, rebetiko, more often than not, addresses the abyss of human existence, in the specific context of an underprivileged life, sometimes in a rather 'shallow' way by narrating tales of hashish smokers trying to wash away their pain, at other times in greater depth by dealing with undignified death in all its terrifying glory. In each case, it can have a significant political effect on a receptive listener, by inviting them to think deeply about matters like poverty, prison life, resorting to drugs, alienation from society, and a solitary death. Of course, the eternal problem of political art, as explained eloquently by Rancière, is that there is "no reason [...] why understanding the state of the world should prompt a decision to change it. There is no straightforward road from [...] intellectual awareness to political action" (2011, 75). Nevertheless, one can hope that the tales of suffering told through rebetiko will produce a sensitized understanding of the human condition, a sense of solidarity and empathy for the less advantaged, a better understanding of those we deem to be deviant and anti-social, a "look at the criminal underworld and its problems with a loving eye" (Petropoulos 1990, 20).

I would like to end this section on the themes and attitudes expressed by rebetiko by introducing the concept of the rebétis as a persisting role model. So far, we have hinted at various behavioral patterns and moral standards expressed in rebetiko songs, which may or may not have reflected the real-life attitudes of their authors. Having established the inevitable contradictions between reality and popular imagination, what concerns us now is how Greeks continue to perceive the role model of the rebétis, as summarized convincingly by Koglin through four polysemous adjectives, each implying a variety of meanings, which I shall slightly paraphrase as follows: integrity (i.e. pride, honor, honesty, generosity, loyalty), simplicity (i.e. spontaneity, straightforwardness), hedonism (i.e. improvidence, unworldliness, opposition to crude materialism), and nonconformity (i.e. rebelliousness, independence, emancipation) (2016, 28). Fortunately, some severely problematic aspects of the 'original' rebétes, such as a frequent

resorting to extreme violence and a glorification of drugs, have been ‘filtered out’ by contemporary fans, resulting in what Koglin termed a “domesticated” stereotype of the rebétis as “a model for thinking and acting in a way different from the current norm,” characterized by “values, beliefs, and typical patterns of behavior [that are] in many respects considered more *humane* than those prevalent in contemporary Greek society” (191, emphasis added). Those alternative modes of social existence will be further examined in the upcoming section, where I will take a closer look at the experiential aspects of rebetiko performance and the surrounding convivial celebration, the sum of which can be referred to as a rebetiko ghléndi.

The rebetiko ghléndi: heterotopia & catharsis

The personal anecdote I narrated at the very beginning of this essay serves as a helpful, yet somewhat unusual example of a ghléndi. It lacks the scale of the common setting for a rebetiko performance, which would usually take place in a taverna or a tekés – a world used by early rebétes to refer to hashish dens, originating in the vocabulary of Sufi mysticism, as shall be addressed later. Our ‘miniature ghléndi’ took place inside an apartment, and, consequently, was a lot more intimate, with all of its participants being members of the same friend group. Nevertheless, our gathering that night shared some core aspects with the more conventional ghléndi, which can be summarized as follows: it temporarily constituted an alternative ‘economy’ based on the principle of reciprocity¹¹; it involved different kinds of ‘disorderly behavior’ such as drunkenness, musical improvisation, and spontaneous group singing; it induced powerful feelings oscillating between elation and sadness; and, in immediate association with the previous two points, it provided us with an opportunity at catharsis. These aspects of the ghléndi provide ample content for analysis, from a point of view regarding the latter two types of ‘desired outcomes’ of political art, as listed in my introduction: the allusion to or simulation of an alternative reality, and the provision of existential solace to participants in the experience.

¹¹ This may sound exaggerated, especially to my friends who were present that night. However, many of us contributed ‘financially’ to the occasion, either through cooking, buying wine, or giving away cigarettes. These contributions were made out of generosity, and with the expectation that they will be willfully reciprocated at some point in time. These are the exact principles of the ‘alternative economy’ I am referring to.

Concerning my very first point, it would be helpful to consider the role of money in the minds of rebetiko artists, as another way of examining their oft-hypothesized opposition to the status quo, implicit or explicit. The evidence reviewed by Koglin (2016, 36-37), who argues that, “economically speaking, [rebétes] behaved in an absolutely *rational* manner” (original emphasis), suggests that ‘unworldliness,’ i.e. an indifference towards material concerns and a disregard for money, may not be the right word to describe their attitude, as money *did* play a central role in their lives. Instead, the rebétes “differed from ‘proper’ citizens in *the way they made use* of their money – i.e. by ‘splurging’ it on entertainment rather than saving it or buying things” (emphasis added). This ‘splurging,’ in the form of buying drinks and *mezédhes*¹² for one’s entire friend group, or, in more extreme cases, for the entire taverna, may be interpreted as a display of financial prowess, serving to establish one’s prestige within their social group; yet, the ultimate motives for such behavior seem to be a lot more communitarian than a mere concern for individual benefit, as Koglin very eloquently argues:

A typical rebétis would attempt to maximize not his fame, power, or material comfort, but the strength of horizontal ties among the members of his *community*, which ruled out any purely hedonistic behavior. Consequently, we might say that for most members of rebetiko culture the value of money depended, to a great extent, upon the possibility to spend it for the benefit of their ingroup. While not downright altruistic, their system of economic transactions seems to have been based on a relatively ‘open [form of] reciprocity [which] keeps no accounts, because it implies a relation of permanent, mutual commitment’ (Graeber 2001, 220) among community members. *Kuvardilíki*¹³ is a right rather than an obligation, and he who is a generous person (*kuvardás*) does not raise himself above the others, but wants to underline that he considers the others his equals. Hence, the *kuvardás* can expect an indirect personal benefit, for his generous behavior not only confirms his commitment to his ingroup, but also strengthens its solidarity. (38, original emphasis).

Hence, rebetiko may be conceptualized as a type of alternative ‘economic system’ – albeit one that only holds temporarily – based on a “law of *reciprocal dissipation*” (ibid., original emphasis), which is

¹² Mezés, pl. mezédhes (μεζέες, μεζέδες, from Persian *maze* meaning ‘taste’) refers to small portions of various kinds of mostly savory food, consumed as an accompaniment to alcoholic drinks. This tradition is common across the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

¹³ *Kuvardilíki* (κουβαρντιλίκι, from turkish *hovardalik*), lit. ‘generosity,’ denotes the type of lavish spending on entertainment described in this section, where one person will usually take on the entire group’s expenses for a particular occasion, or at least a part of them, e.g. a bottle of wine or a round of mezédhes.

fundamentally at odds with the main driving force of a capitalist economy, the accumulation of capital, as Koglin explains: “Unlike capitalist economies, wherein some individuals strive to maximize their profit by fueling the general consumption of goods and services, the type of economy exemplified by rebetiko keeps private funds in a state of flux” (ibid.). It should be noted that this type of ‘economy’ is not exclusive to rebetiko, but holds true for different kinds of ghléndi, or, more broadly, collective drinking activities at tavernas and coffee houses, which are to be found across Greece to this day. Social anthropologist Efthimios Papataxiarchis, in his study of collective drinking in contemporary rural Greece, asserts that, “[from] the drinkers’ point of view, the world of the coffee house is in obvious contrast to the world of the household, the market, and the state” (2006, 239). While establishing that the kinds of alternative economic relations exhibited by the rebétes are still commonplace in Greek culture, Papataxiarchis’ assertion also highlights my argument that a ghléndi simulates a reality that contrasts, and I would add *contests*, the realities that contemporary Greeks deal with in their regular lives. This is the kind of political effect that many artists from other domains have explicitly attempted through their work; in *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière discusses various admirable attempts at “[works of art] that can be the direct presentation of another form of community in which artists are directly fashioning new social bonds” (2011, 76). To me, it seems quite extraordinary that a musical genre, whose original political intent is debatable and ambiguous, can foster the kinds of social and economic relations that ideologically motivated artists may idealize; relations based on principles of community and reciprocity, rather than individualism and self-interest.

In addition to modes of economic organization, the temporary reality constituted by a rebetiko ghléndi provides alternative modes of *physical* existence as well. It presents an opportunity for its participants to engage in disorderly or irregular behavior, and to escape the restrictions of everyday life, the most obvious example being the loss of control induced by a state of intoxication. Beyond simply getting drunk, but perhaps assisted or encouraged by such an altered mental state, a very common type of disorderly behavior is to be seen when participants in the ghléndi leave their tables and their drinks behind in order to perform an improvised dance. A well-known style that is predominantly danced by women is called the *tsiftetéli*; a quite sexual dance, involving a gyration of the hips along with sensual movements of the hands, it can serve as an avenue for female audience members to attain a feeling of

vitality and pride, through a very intentional performance of sexuality that defies the restrictions on the female body as imposed by a patriarchal Greek society. Cypriot writer Stavros Stavrou Karayanni, in the preface to his 2004 book titled *Dancing Fear And Desire: Race, Sexuality, And Imperial Politics In Middle Eastern Dance*, claims that the tsiftetéli “[signifies] transgression by giving voice to parts of the body that are expected to remain silent, unobtrusive, and discomfited” (xiii). The potential for self-emancipation to be found in a sexual dance like tsiftetéli is a fascinating topic that deserves further analysis, yet the purposes and spatial limits of this study only allow for a brief reference to it, as an example of the potential power of dance in rebetiko.

Another style of dance, perhaps more strongly associated with the genre, is the zeybékiko, usually performed by a single male dancer. Rich as it is in symbolic meaning, I will do it the inevitable injustice of referring to merely one interpretation of zeybékiko’s signification and significance, a particularly politicized view expressed by rebetiko specialist Stathis Damianakos: “the zeybékiko is a solitary and individual dance par excellence, a manifestation of the new conditions that affect social relationships in an impersonal modern city” (1994, 61, as cited in Koglin 2016, 86). Koglin takes this view even further, to claim that:

The zeybékiko is not only an externalization of *real* feelings, e.g. the sense of isolation of modern townspeople. It is also a temporal realization of an *ideal* situation (of manhood, freedom, unity, etc.) wherein the dancer transcends, as it were, his or her ordinary self, thereby achieving [...] a temporary *fusion* of an ideal archetype with actual human existence. (ibid., original emphasis)

Thus, the zeybékiko can be understood as a physical expression of the contradictions between the ideal and the actual, as well as of the emotional frustrations arising from such contradictions, yet it is also a temporary inhabitation of the ideal *through* the actual, all of this through a medium of ‘disorderly’ yet creative, improvised yet controlled bodily movement. Hence, the dance, being an alternative physical reality in itself, i.e. a mode of physical behavior that does not form part of one’s ‘regular’ life, also presents an allusion to and a simulation of an idealized political or existential reality, that of an individual who is proud and free, and who overcomes the alienation and nihilism of contemporary city life. If this sounds familiarly Nietzschean, that is because, as opposed to analysis of song lyrics, which is often controversial in how it derives meaning, an analysis of the *experience* of rebetiko can more

reliably provide us with evidence of a will to overcome, one might say a ‘will to power,’ as a response to political and existential concerns, exhibited by the participants in this artistic experience.

Spiritually empowering improvisation is not only to be found in dance, but also forms an integral musical component of rebetiko through the *taxími*, a rhythmically free improvisation that usually takes place before the beginning of a song. It is a common feature across many musical cultures of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, and has therefore been the object of study for many academics in the music field; as such, it has received a fair share of exaltation, with Ayari and McAdams calling it “the model *par excellence* of instantaneous musical exposition and composition” (2013, 159), in their analysis of improvisation in Arabic music. As a long-time fan and an amateur performer of rebetiko, I will confidently say that the *taxími* can often be the most compelling and exhilarating part of a performance, inspiring awe and an almost religious attention to its audience. The duality of ‘disorder’ and ‘control’ that is seen in improvised dance is also evident here, “for improvising means [...] to maintain the delicate balance between control and chaos which keeps the audience in suspense” (Koglin 2016, 87). The feeling of skillful control in the practice of an inherently spontaneous and unpredictable art form can have a strong impact on an individual’s sense of self-worth. To illuminate this point, I will draw from some ideas expressed by Ben Malbon in his excellent book on clubbing, called, of course, *Clubbing: Dancing, Ecstasy, and Vitality*. Malbon himself draws from the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on ‘flow,’ a state that can be achieved through “sensations of competency at playing” (Malbon 1999, 199), where ‘play’ refers to an activity unlike work, yet which requires work, in the form of practice, in order to be performed correctly; dance and musical performance both qualify as this kind of ‘play.’ At states of “extreme flow,” as Malbon describes the experiences recounted by some of the clubbers he interviewed, individuals can experience “sensations of control over their own body, [re-energizing] of their sense self-worth, [eliminating] alienation and [experiencing] an exhilarating feeling of vitality” (149). While dancing in a club context is a radically different experience from improvised music and dance in a rebetiko *ghléndi*, the concept of flow as a revitalizing and empowering physical dimension of an artistic practice provides an interesting and perhaps peculiar supplement to our analysis of rebetiko’s value, in that its effect is the most purely physical and the least ideological or abstract form of ‘political’ value to be found in this music. This kind of alternative

physical reality is just that: a mode of physical existence in which the individual achieves full control of their body and enjoys the full manifestation of their skills in music or dance. The elimination of alienation asserted by Malbon has very little to do with considerations of social, economic, or political conditions; it is a purely *internal* process, a result of the individual's "exhilarating feeling of vitality." It is a sense of belonging, and an attribution of meaning to one's life, resulting from powerful sensations of being *alive* and *in control*.

Nevertheless, there is another interesting connection between the otherwise disparate worlds of rebetiko and clubbing: the relevance of the word 'ecstasy.' To It seems to be used quite often to describe experiences related to rebetiko; the following interview excerpt from Koglin's book may best summarize what people mean when they employ this word in this particular context:

[Rebetiko songs] carry a weary mind along towards Dionysiac ecstasy, that is, you escape from daily routine, and perhaps also from space and time, into another dimension of reality. And you become completely open to stimuli that have nothing to do with verbal communication, but with music, vibrations, and body language. Wine can be of help too. You're in a state of intoxication without being drunk. (Interview with Kostas, 8 December 2004, as cited in Koglin 2016, 63)

Here, the use of the phrase 'Dionysiac ecstasy' seems quite appropriate; to quote another use of this phrase, Nietzsche wrote in *The Dionysiac World View* that "[the] ecstasy of the Dionysiac state [...] destroys the usual barriers and limits of existence" (1999, 129), which is precisely what I've been describing in this section. However, what this excerpt from Kostas' interview adds to our discussion is that, in his words, rebetiko is ascribed an almost metaphysical or religious value, yet unsurprisingly so. In fact, religious metaphors are used quite extensively in the discourse around the genre, even if the latter is clearly secular and quite often even sacrilegious. For one, there is an abundance of metaphors to be found within rebetiko culture that derive from the tradition of Sufi mysticism, such as the epithet 'dervîsis' (*dervîş*, member of a Sufi order), used frequently by rebétes "to express their admiration for a member of their circle" (ibid., 72). Furthermore, the use of the word tekés to refer to hashish dens, which is derived from the Turkish *tekke*, a place where the Sufis gathered to worship, is a peculiar way in which the rebétes may have ascribed to their own music scene a quasi-religious value; although, the extent to which they had such a self-perception is disputed. The causal development of such metaphors

has been debated extensively and is still not resolved; thus, it shall not concern us any further. Instead, I will now turn to the religious tradition most familiar to the audiences of rebetiko, Orthodox Christianity, where we may find the most useful religious metaphor employed in the discourse on rebetiko, with regards to how it reflects the *emotional* and *spiritual* experience it constitutes.

A word often used to describe the emotional effect of rebetiko music is the oxymoron *charmolípi* (from *chárma*, ‘joy’ + *lípi*, ‘sorrow’); Koglin overviews a variety of writings from the Orthodox tradition to conclude that “charmolípi’ is *the* prevailing mood of Orthodox faith” (82, original emphasis). The following segment from his book further elaborates on the relevance of this mood in both rebetiko music and Orthodox Christianity:

This attitude is as far away as possible from any sort of eudemonism; nor does it have anything in common with the ‘Epicurean’ belief in the pointlessness of fearing death, as if the course of all things were subject either to blind necessity or to unpredictable chance. On the contrary, rebetiko cultivates an emotional ‘oscillation’ fairly similar to the Orthodox Christian sense of charmolípi felt by the faithful who rejoice at the divine grace while recognizing, to their deepest regret, that neither they nor the world are free from sin. (ibid.)

Hence, the emotional effect of listening to rebetiko may attain a spiritual function comparable to that of a religious experience. As an atheist that has never reached such a state through any sort of religious practice, I am unqualified to further assess this comparison. Nevertheless, for the purposes of my argument, it should suffice to understand that rebetiko, apparently in a similar manner to a religious ceremony, forms a complex emotional experience with affections oscillating between “sorrow, high spirits, Dionysiac enthusiasm, and, despite all suffering, a deep, invincible love for life” (Papadimitriou 30 III 1961, as cited in Koglin 2016, 81). Therefore, in accordance with the running theme of this section, a rebetiko ghléndi forms an emotional and spiritual reality of its own, whose effects on the participants echo many of the ‘political effects’ of rebetiko that have been previously addressed: a direct confrontation with the tragedies of human existence, an affirmation of the beauty of life *despite* its inherent tragedies and its inevitable end, and thus an overcoming of nihilistic dread.

Now, it is time to tie together all these aspects of the rebetiko ghléndi by circling back to the central argument of this section. Each thread of my analysis of the ghléndi concerned a particular

alternative reality that can be experienced through participation in the rebetiko experience; economic, physical, emotional, and spiritual realities, none of which are necessarily exclusive to rebetiko in and of themselves. However, the co-presence and interaction of this sum of alternative modes of behavior, movement, and feeling, comes to constitute a complex *heterotopia*, a concept coined by Michel Foucault and defined as follows:

[Heterotopias are] real places [...] which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (1986, 24)

Koglin briefly entertains this idea of rebetiko songs as constitutive of heterotopias in his conclusion; arguing against a previous application of the term by ethnomusicologist Dafni Tragaki, he posits that “rebetiko creates heterotopias from where people actively ‘contest’ (to quote Foucault) *part* of their reality – a reality which is comprised of both their experiences and their imagination – rather than avoiding or forgetting about it” (194, original emphasis). While Koglin uses the plural form to refer to rebetiko *songs*, which I do not necessarily disagree with, I prefer the singular form to refer to rebetiko as an experience, comprised of both the performers and the audience, and best exemplified in the *ghléndi*.

The effects of this heterotopia constituted by the rebetiko *ghléndi* can be effectively summarized into two ‘outcomes.’ First, participants experience at the same time the actual life as they are regularly accustomed to it, which is to be found in all spaces and sites to some extent, *and the ideal*, e.g. an economy based on reciprocal dissipation, a sense of freedom and pride, a complete control over one’s body, etc. Hence, they engage in an active consideration of the problems and limitations of their own reality, while they get a glimpse, or rather multiple glimpses, of various alternative modes of existence; this could potentially point them towards building a better, more humane world, even if only through the embodiment of the values they consider ‘better’ and ‘more humane.’ This is how people actively contest their own reality through the heterotopia of rebetiko.

Second, the multiple alternative realities that constitute this heterotopia share a significant feature: the potential for catharsis, i.e. for the reconciliation of negative feelings and destructive forces

through their inversion and conversion into empowering, creative activity and an ultimately positive feeling. This is best exemplified by improvised dance and musical performance; however, it extends beyond the physical into the mental and spiritual domain of the rebetiko *ghléndi*. Characterized by *charmolípi*, the simultaneity of sorrow and elation, the overall emotional experience of rebetiko is a mode of catharsis in and of itself, in that it is a healthy, relieving, comforting, and, ultimately, joyful externalization of otherwise negative feelings and experiences. Therefore, catharsis is intimately tied to the quasi-Nietzschean theme of overcoming nihilism and re-asserting value and meaning in life, of turning a confrontation with tragedy and dread into an expression of power and beauty.

Rebetiko and the problem of ‘aesthetic separation’

Having established the immense value of rebetiko as an experience, we may now examine this art form from yet another perspective, which will further add to our understanding of its political potential: that of the relationship between art and society in general, as theorized by Jacques Rancière in *The Emancipated Spectator*. Rancière is generally concerned with the ‘distribution of the sensible,’ the subtitle of an earlier book of his, and he has developed a theory on the development of this ‘distribution’ across the history of art, which he divides into distinct ‘regimes.’ He identifies the current era as the “aesthetic regime of art” (2011, 66), defined by what he calls an “aesthetic break”; “[the] aesthetic break has generally been understood as a break with the [previous] regime of representation or the mimetic regime” (60), which was instead characterized by a “correspondence between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*” (61, original emphasis). Rancière then elaborates on the nature of this aesthetic break that marked the transition between the two regimes: “What was broken was the continuity between thought and its signs on bodies, and also between the performance of living bodies and its effect on other bodies. ‘Aesthetics’ above all means that very collapse; [...] it means the rupture of the harmony that enabled correspondence between the texture of the work and its efficacy” (62). What is at stake as a result of this aesthetic break is the ability of art to have an effect upon its intended audience. Moreover, what seems to have been lost in the aesthetic regime is the fostering of a ‘being together’ through art. Using the example of theater in the mimetic regime, Rancière explains the interrelation between the efficacy

of art and the ‘being together’ of the community it addresses, centered around his idea of a ‘continuum’ between art, audience, and the wider reality:

[in the mimetic regime] there was a language of natural signs, there was a continuity between the intrinsic consistency – or ‘autonomy’ of a play and its capacity to produce ethical effects in the minds of the spectators in the theatre and in their behavior outside the theatre. The ‘being apart’ of the stage was enveloped in a continuity between the ‘being together’ of the signs displayed by the representation, the being together of the community addressed by it, and the universality of human nature. The stage, the audience, and the world were comprised in one and the same continuum. (61)

In the absence of this continuum, we are faced with the problem of aesthetic separation. Aesthetic separation is a term that entails both the discontinuity between poiesis and aisthesis, in an era characterized by non-representational or non-mimetic art, and the disconnection to be found in the greater community due to the absence of a *sensus communis* or a ‘common aesthetic,’ which can be partly attributed, in my view, to the abundance of radical artistic movements purposefully breaking with the long tradition of representational art, as well as the sheer potential for the mass (re)production of art, which has saturated our society with diverse aesthetic stimuli. Lacking a *sensus communis*, contemporary society can be described as a “dissensual community, an aesthetic community [...] structured by disconnection” (59). Therefore, the larger questions addressed by Rancière are the following: how can art overcome the problem of aesthetic separation in order to address a wider, more inclusive aesthetic community? Moreover, how can art achieve its greatest efficacy for this aesthetic community?

I would like to briefly interrupt my flow here for the sake of argumentative clarity, to state that neither Rancière nor I are claiming that art in the so-called mimetic regime was in some way contributing to the bettering of society or to political progress. In my interpretation, this continuity between the artwork, the audience, and the world at large, often served rather conservative purposes. A good example of such art is the paintings decorating the palaces of kings, such as the gigantic portrait of Louis XIV in the Château de Versailles. This work of art was effective in achieving its purpose, namely reminding whomever was to enter the palace that they should feel tiny and unimportant when faced with the grandiose figure of their king. Therefore, the function of art in the mimetic regime may

be described as a “ritual function,” to quote Walter Benjamin (2005, IV). What Benjamin terms the ‘loss of aura’ in the age of mechanical reproduction has, in fact, many parallels to Rancière’s idea of the ‘aesthetic break;’ however, a further examination of those parallels would be irrelevant for the purposes of this study. The point is that art in the modern and post-modern eras has taken upon a radically different relationship to society at large, which artists are now struggling to navigate.

The case of music is a peculiar one, and this may be the reason why Rancière does not address any musical works in his book. Apart from its lyrics, music is rarely ever representational, meaning that ideas on mimesis and the aesthetic break do not apply here. Nevertheless, the separation between art and its intended audience, and the aesthetic separation within the audience itself, as theorized by Rancière, are still relevant obstacles faced by music, when considering its political efficacy. Music’s inherent abstractness may be its greatest strength in overcoming such obstacles, for music can communicate meaning in a variety of ways in which other arts cannot. The excerpt from Koglin’s interview of his friend Kostas, which I cited earlier, further highlights this point: “[listening to a rebetiko song], you become completely open to stimuli that have nothing to do with verbal communication, but with music, vibrations, and body language” (Koglin 2016, 63). These multiple modes of communication, in conjunction with their multi-directionality (communication among musicians, among audience members, and between performers and audience), are an essential aspect of the complexity of the heterotopia that a ghléndi constitutes. In fact, partly due to its multimodal nature, the rebetiko ghléndi is a surprisingly good fit for what Rancière identifies as a potential means for “coping with the [aesthetic] rupture.” Drawing from the conclusion of Immanuel Kant’s *Letter*, he argues that “[what] must replace mimetic mediation is the immediate ethical performance of a collective that knows no separation between performing actors and passive spectators” (2011, 62). Through its constitution of alternative realities, rebetiko *is* an “immediate ethical performance,” to which all audience members participate in some way; either through the ‘performance’ of reciprocal acts and altered emotional states, or, more actively bridging the gap between audience and spectator, through group singing and improvised dance. Furthermore, as a musical genre that is ‘dead’ in terms of production, yet survives through regular live performance, rebetiko in its current form *presupposes* a continuum between art,

audience, and the world. “[The] performance of living bodies and its effect on other bodies” (ibid.) are inextricably connected; poiesis and aisthesis occur simultaneously.

Therefore, rebetiko is an odd, yet fascinating example of political art; a popular art form through and through, which lacks any inherent revolutionary intent, rebetiko is nonetheless quite the opposite of what Guy Debord would call a ‘spectacle.’ As Rancière himself drew significantly from Debord’s concept, evidenced in the very title of his book, a brief juxtaposition of the notion of spectacle and the reality of rebetiko should further underscore the latter’s political value. In *The Society of The Spectacle*, Debord posits that “life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation” (2002, 10). Yet, rebetiko, as I have argued, represents not only what was “directly lived,” but also realities that are outside the spectrum of ‘actual’ lived experience. Debord also describes ‘spectacle’ as not merely “a collection of images,” but “an official language of universal separation” (ibid.); furthermore, in his earlier *Preliminaries Towards Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program*, he talks of an art where “[the] relation between authors and spectators is only a transposition of the fundamental relation between directors and executants. [...] [The] spectacle/spectator relation is in itself a staunch bearer of the capitalist order” (1981, 307). In short, he conceives of the role of art in the society of the spectacle as an upholding of the status quo, or of “the capitalist order,” and this manifests through both the relationship between spectacle and spectator, and through the “universal separation” that the spectacle reinforces. Rebetiko seems to be performing the exact opposite function. Most especially in moments of intense audience participation through singing and dance, the distance between “spectacle and spectator,” or between the performers and the audience, is reduced to a bare minimum. Moreover, far from reproducing hierarchal orders as seen in outside society, the heterotopia of a rebetiko ghlénda is virtually egalitarian. Finally, with regards to Debord’s idea of art reinforcing “universal separation,” I shall turn back to Rancière and his term ‘aesthetic community,’ as I apply it in the context of rebetiko.

Appropriating Rancière’s ideas, I interpret ‘aesthetic community’ as a group of people, which may or may not be interconnected geographically, ethnically, etc., that shares a somewhat common ‘aesthetic,’ a common ‘taste,’ or a common capacity to be reached and affected by certain aesthetic stimuli. In the case of music, a similar term that Koglin uses to conceptualize the groups of “regularly

interacting individuals” (2016, 3) who share an interest in rebetiko, is John Blacking’s term ‘sound group,’ a group brought together by “a common musical language, together with common ideas about music and its use” (Blacking 1995, 232). However, the term ‘sound group’ may only refer to devoted rebetiko fans, who will frequently choose to participate in a rebetiko ghléndi; instead, what I term the aesthetic community addressed by rebetiko is a rather wider group, in that it may include any individual who is capable of genuinely enjoying a rebetiko experience and, hence, receiving its benefits. Therefore, while individuals may be members of a sound group “because they identify themselves with the values they connect to that music” (Magrini 2000, 239, as cited in Koglin 2016, 3), the membership in rebetiko’s aesthetic community is solely a matter of aesthetic preference. In short, anyone who may be aesthetically pleased by rebetiko could be considered a member of the aesthetic community it fosters, and eventually gain from the experience it provides.

Throughout its history, rebetiko has shown a remarkable ability to reach individuals across class boundaries. As I mentioned earlier, rebetiko developed from a ‘subcultural’ art form into a ‘popular’ one, reaching wide appeal across the Greek population. Many contributors to the rebetiko discourse attribute this development to the work of Vasilis Tsitsanis, and they are not wrong in doing so. As the common narrative goes, Tsitsanis ‘cleansed’ rebetiko of all its marginal, deviant, and generally undesirable elements, and made it a true Greek popular song. Poet Dinos Christianopoulos provides an artful verbalization of this view on the historical development of the genre: “Tsitsanis found a despised song about hashish and debauchery, he found it in the mouths of prisoners and criminals, among the scallywags of the market and the harbor – and he cleansed it of everything vulgar and low [...] and included it in the worries and longings of the Greek soul” (1961, 10, as cited in Koglin 2016, 41). While it is true that what once was a marginal low-life song is now perceived by many Greeks as “one of the great achievements of Greek civilization” (ibid, 92), in part thanks to the prolific work of Tsitsanis, the above statement by Christianopoulos is not entirely accurate. As I explained earlier, rebetiko as a quasi-oral tradition *outlived* rebetiko as a widely popular, industrially reproduced, and mass-marketed product. Moreover, rebetiko as a low-life song survives to this day *alongside* the more refined rebetiko associated with Tsitsanis and his successors, performed by the same musicians and listened to by the same audience within the same night. Drawing from the terminology of Mark Slobin, Koglin concludes

that “[rebetiko] is a ‘subcultural’ music associated with individuals branded as outsiders by the dominating majority, *as well as a ‘supercultural’ music adopted by sound groups whose members transcend social, national, and cultural boundaries*” (42, emphasis added). As such, *all* of rebetiko is accessible to the Greek population at large, as well as to non-Greeks, as evidenced by the recent increase in participation in online rebetiko forums by people from all over the world (cf. Koglin 2016). This rise in outsider interest may be attributed to rebetiko’s current reputation as, perhaps, the most authentic musical expression of the modern Greek people, a reputation that is based on *both* its origins as an honest expression of the strenuous lives of sub-proletarian Greeks, *and* of its status as “one of the great achievements of Greek civilization.”

This dual nature of rebetiko as simultaneously ‘subcultural’ and ‘supercultural’ is key to its ability to address an ever-widening aesthetic community, providing its potential members with its empowering and cathartic effects. Nevertheless, apart from individually empowering each participant, rebetiko can promote solidarity and unity within its aesthetic community, and even beyond it. As I have argued earlier, the reciprocal principles of the ‘rebetiko economy’ serve the purpose of tightening intra-community bonds, and they promote an interest for the well-being of the community over a sole focus on individual benefit. Moreover, participants in a rebetiko ghlénda may attain a powerful sense of ‘being-togetherness,’ simply through collectively experiencing the physical, emotional, and spiritual realities that such an event constitutes. Finally, the thematic content of rebetiko, dealing with the hardships of people on the margins of society, yet relatable to all of us to some degree, can promote a solidarity and empathy that extends beyond the members of its aesthetic community, onto individuals in our society that may never have the opportunity to find themselves in the same spaces as us; refugees and the homeless, drug addicts and violent criminals, disadvantaged and deviant people of all sorts, may all be looked upon with a “loving eye” (Petropoulos 1990, 20). Therefore, in addition to its broad and inclusive aesthetic community, rebetiko indirectly addresses an even wider ‘imagined’ community, urging us to understand and empathize with all its members. To sum up, the thematic and experiential qualities of rebetiko, in conjunction with the inclusiveness of its aesthetic community, provide it with a multi-faceted potential to overcome separation, both ‘aesthetic’ and social.

Conclusion; on the breadth and depth of the present study

This essay attempted to explore a variety of ways in which rebetiko has provided and can provide some sort of political value to its musicians and its audience. By choosing to survey a multiplicity of political functions that can be attributed to the genre, I necessarily prevented myself from engaging with each of these functions in greater depth. Each thread of my argument – namely: the relationship between rebetiko and social outcasts in early 20th century Greece; its appropriation by later generations as a voice of dissent against a repressive state; the potentially Nietzschean approach to life as exhibited in some rebetiko songs; the alternative economic relations that manifest in a *ghléndi*; the cathartic and emancipatory potential of rebetiko’s physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions; and, finally, the genre’s ability to transcend and even combat separation – constitutes a topic that is worthy of much deeper investigation and analysis than what I have provided here. All of these individual aspects of rebetiko’s politics should be, and some of them *have* been, subjects of lengthy academic studies and even entire books. All this is to say that the present study is only the tip of the iceberg, or rather, the tips of multiple icebergs, in addressing such a complex and polysemous art form.

Inevitably, yet deliberately, some aspects of rebetiko’s political significance were entirely left out. For one, I did not even briefly entertain the idea of rebetiko as an opposition to any specific political model, in my attempt to approach the politics of the genre in a non-ideological fashion – which is, of course, impossible, yet some approaches come with stronger ideological hues than others. For instance, albeit with the necessary hesitation, Koglin addresses what precisely it could be that the rebetiko heterotopia “[throws] into question,” namely: “the bureaucratic and highly centralized system of government that was implemented after 1833 by the newly arrived Bavarian regency of Greece and has, in many of its basic features, remained unchanged since.” He goes on to say that “[many] an intellectual in Greece today firmly believes that this foreign-derived administrative model, i.e. the ‘semi-despotic nation state [...] exported by post-feudal Europe (Kondogiorgis 2007, 75), was intrinsically alien to the ‘nature’ of Greek society” (2016, 194-195). Insightful and helpful as this claim may be, I find myself reluctant to engage in a discussion of the ‘nature’ of any particular national society as fundamentally at odds with certain political structures. Similarly, it may have been constructive and useful for me to discuss how Greeks perceive of themselves as marginal in the world political arena, in arguing about

how they derive political meaning from a genre that is seen as inherently marginal. The choice to listen to rebetiko, a ‘rebellious’ song that is also perceived to be the Greek song *par excellence*, could be interpreted as a stylized rebellion against a world order dominated by Western powers, which have left the oft-exalted Greek nation on the fringes. Nevertheless, I chose to avoid a discussion of international politics and of the Greeks’ self-perception and self-positioning in the global hierarchy, despite its relevance in rebetiko’s political significance. The reason for this has to do with my own opinions on the genre’s politics; I believe that the ways in which rebetiko achieves political outcomes, both intellectual and experiential, have very little to do with how Greeks face their marginality in global politics, and a lot more to do with how they face their daily struggles, as well as how they may think about other, less fortunate people’s daily struggles. I do not think that rebetiko urges people to look ‘outside,’ ‘to the West,’ and to consider their own relation to this ‘outside.’ Instead, I find that it urges people to look ‘inside’ their own selves, as well as at their immediate surroundings – their social ingroup and their society at large. Therefore, my idea of political value in the present study concerns how subjects deal with the social, political, material, and existential struggles and considerations that they encounter in their *own* lives, and not with more abstract and distant notions of their nation’s power and significance in global politics, even if the latter may directly influence the former.

In short, my goal for the present study was to understand some of the many ways in which rebetiko constitutes a *response to the lived realities* of individual subjectivities, and to the trials and tribulations that those realities entail, whether that be the suffering brought about by concrete political developments, such as the ‘Asia Minor Catastrophe’ or the 1967-1974 military junta, or banal, quotidian struggles related to the absurdity and alienation of daily life in the post-industrial cityscape. All in all, I hope that I managed to convey how valuable the experience of rebetiko can be, not just for some Greeks, but for a community that transcends socioeconomic, national, and cultural boundaries.

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