The widely shared sentiment that international migration brings about economic advantage links that advantage to macroeconomic indicators such as income differentials between countries. My fieldwork among the Albanians of Greece, however, abundantly showed how income differentials between countries do not necessarily translate into economic advantage for every individual immigrant. And even though the emigrants never doubted the economic advantage of emigration, not even when speaking about the “exploitation” of their labor, a motley assortment of narratives went on about the mundane economic hardships they encountered. Those narratives reveal how, to an emigrant, being in Greece equaled being in a position of severe economic disadvantages, vis-à-vis the “Greek” workers as well as vis-à-vis at least some of those who had not left Albania.

Racism and Economics

After a few months among the emigrants, it became clear that an ethnic conceptualization of reality determined how things were spoken about. Absorbed by their suffering, emigrants spoke of “Albanians” and of “Greeks” when speaking of the injustices they encountered in emigration, and they commonly rendered ethnically the very categories “emigrant,” “boss,” and “coworker.” Similar to the view of Greece as being materially superior to and generally better than Albania, the view of the everyday universe as populated by Albanians and by Greeks underlay myriad instances of talk—not just on employment but on a far wider range of topics. The emigrants’ ethnic conceptualization of their world—and of the world—resembled perhaps what some anthropologists describe as schemas of cognitive underpinning.¹

The way the emigrants spoke, things in general were either Albanian or Greek. An injustice done to an emigrant by an employer, for example, was typically spoken about as something that a Greek had done to an Albanian. Caught in the explicit dimensions of the insults and provocations they encountered, the emigrants often saw ethnic discrimination as an intrinsic feature of their specific circumstance of being

Albanians in Greece. Some propounded that the tensions of the present were rooted “deep in history,” though this could not be quite logical. Along the same path, an emigrant who had stolen from the shop where he worked was an Albanian who had stolen from a Greek. Even the “scandalous cases” of those handful of emigrants whose running amok had attracted some media attention, and which at another level were explained as collapses of weaker human psyches under ubiquitous pressures, were seen in this same ethnic grid, as rooted in the ethnic dynamics of the emigrants’ being Albanians in Greece:

Because he cannot stand it any longer. One endures, one endures—then one explodes. That’s why the guy gets a gun, that’s why the guy hijacks a bus—because his mind is gone. If you have an old person, you can say things to him. Not to a young guy. If you say “Albanians, Albanians,” all the time, the young guy can no longer control himself.

But if suffering resulted from “the Greeks” exerting pressure on “the Albanians,” the injustices suffered by at least certain emigrants were not recognized. One former math teacher, portrayed here as Llambi S., presented himself as a member of an overlooked category of emigrants, those of Greek ethnicity. The legal arrangements of the ethnic Greeks who had emigrated from Albania were often thought of as “better” than those of the majority of the Albanians in Greece, and certain emigrants envied them openly and loudly. Yet, as this one-time math teacher who had emigrated legally would make clear, even though considered “luckier” than the rest of the emigrants, the ethnic Greek emigrants too could be quite unhappy with their condition in Greece.

What was even more, as both an ethnic Greek and an emigrant from Albania, this one-time teacher felt alienated by the much talked about opposition between Greeks and Albanians. He was disturbed perhaps by the very ethnic view of things that dominated the social world he inhabited. To him, the emigrants carried the ethnic articulations of racism too far. An ethnic Greek though he was, the one-time math teacher had been just another emigrant in Greece; he had gone through one manual job after the other just like the other emigrants, and felt that he had been treated not that differently from them.

I know so many people think that way. They think of the words the boss has said to them, or of the words they hear in the bus. Some emigrants tell me of the good treatment of the minoritar\(^3\) in Albania. “We treated you well in Albania; you had your schools, your villages were prosperous. Is this how you pay back the favor to the Albanians?” As if I am to blame for the racism in Greece! It is painful to see young people, even some young people who

\(^2\) For one thing, emigrants were separated from “history” by at least the four decades of Albania’s state socialism, a time during which the governments of Albania and of Greece maintained relations that were too distant for any engaged animosity to breed. Furthermore, if the present tensions between “the Albanian emigrants” and “the Greeks” were somehow expected as being due to tensions between the governments of Albania and of Greece from a distant past, suffering had to also be expected—at the very least, the emigrants would not get as agitated by the insults and provocations as they typically did.

\(^3\) During state socialism, a member of the Greek minority in Albania was colloquially referred to as a “minoritar.” While denoting both being ethnically Greek and being in a demographic minority, the term appears not to have had any profound negative connotations: those handful of ethnic Greek emigrants that I met commonly used it to refer to themselves.