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Racial and Ethnic Attitudes and Individual Relatedness Among Greek-Americans

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Racial and Ethnic Attitudes and Individual Relatedness Among Greek-Americans[1]

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Abstract (summary)

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It is in the complex interactions of the immigrants being citizens and members of two distinctive national entities, the interactions between these two nation-states and their cultural and political markets, and their attempts to remain faithful to the motherland while maximizing their group interests in the United States, that the immigrants construct a new set of group attitudes (Kunkelman, 1990: 1-3). There are three distinctive but interrelated sets of interests with their sources in the global, national and local levels, which interface and create a unique nexus of attitudes and "racial identity politics" for Greek immigrants and their descendants in the U.S. Home society national sovereignty issues, the interests and needs of the Patriarchate of Constantinople/Istanbul, along with immigrant and ethnic material and status interests, including increasing intermarriage rates, are the background against which immigrants construct a new set of group narratives, identities and attitudes.

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Official statistics indicate that there are less than half a million Americans of Greek origin living in the US today. Of these, between 75-80 % are American born and the remainder first generation immigrants (Moskos, 1989: 64-66). Despite their small number Greek or Hellenic Americans are one the most economically and educationally successful ethnic groups in the US. Citing official government statistics, for example, sociologist Charles Moskos states that "American-born Greeks are twice as likely to matriculate in college than the American average" (Moskos, 89:64). Yet they remain a distinct and highly "ethnic" group in America's multicultural mosaic. The paper concerns itself with Greek immigrant self-identity and incorporation of American racial ideologies into the racial repertoires they acquire in the home society.

Greek Americans create a unique national/racial framework, blending elements of both home and host society institutions and ideologies. Greek immigrants arrive in the United States with pre-existing national and racial narratives and identities of themselves and other groups. These have their sources in Greek national and political life of the past few centuries. It is in the complex interactions of the immigrants being citizens and members of two distinctive national entities, the interactions between these two nation-states and their cultural and political markets, and their attempts to remain faithful

to the motherland while maximizing their group interests in the United States, that the immigrants construct a new set of group attitudes (Kunkelman, 1990:1-3).

There are three distinctive but interrelated sets of interests with their sources in the global, national and local levels, which interface and create a unique nexus of attitudes and "racial identity politics" for Greek immigrants and their descendants in the U.S. Home society national sovereignty issues, the interests and needs of the Patriarchate of Constantinople/Istanbul, along with immigrant and ethnic material and status interests, including increasing intermarriage rates, are the background against which immigrants construct a new set of group narratives, identities and attitudes. These group narratives and identities occur through both formal and informal institutions (Ellemers, Spears, Doosje, 2002: 1). It is in this most current form of a "transnational cultural/political" space that Greek immigrants combine elements of home society political and national narratives along with American racial conceptualizations to create a complex array of group identities (Moskos, 1989).

It is impossible to talk about a Greek national identity without reference to the historical role the Ottoman Empire played or the role that Turkey (the inheritor of the Ottoman legacy) plays in today's Greek national sovereignty issues. This is the national identity and ideology Greek immigrants at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries brought with them to the United States. For this group, the relevant markers of a national identity were linguistic and religious in nature, both of which were blood-related. Races were synonymous with nations, which meant there were as many human races as there were nations or ethnic groups (Saloutos, 1956). As a result, the first community task of these early Greek immigrants to the United States was the creation of the Greek Orthodox Church in the United States. The fact that the Russian Orthodox had already established a church in the United States was irrelevant for Greek immigrants for whom language and religion were inseparable. Many arriving from lands still conquered by Ottoman forces viewed the idea of their joining non-Greek Orthodox religious institutions as a betrayal to the "ethnos"(Saloutos, 1956). The first Greek Orthodox Church in New York City (NYC) was created around 1880 (in downtown Manhattan). By 1996, there were 500 Greek Orthodox parishes throughout the country and the Greek Orthodox Church of America still maintains its own Archdiocese, headquartered in NYC (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America website).

Greek language schools were established around church parishes. School children recited and still recite poems and songs from the 19th century as Greeks defined and still define themselves as an "ethnos" and a race "(fili) distinct from the Turkish nation. Even "Ohi Day"(October 28), ostensibly celebrating Greek resistance to Mussolini and Hitler, becomes a celebration of Greek resistance under Ottoman rule and of Turkish irredentism. Hitler and Mussolini are pushed to the background as the more important current threat to the nation, Turkey, is emphasized. Commemorations of these

holidays both in Greece and in immigrant communities in the U.S. define language and religion as markers distinguishing Greeks from all other national/cultural/"racial" groups (files). The issue of language loss among the American born becomes a contested terrain for Greek immigrants throughout the U.S. For, if the American born do not speak Greek, they lose half of what defines them as Greeks (Kourvetaris, 1976). While some then turn to religion, Greek Orthodoxy, as the marker of Greek national/cultural/ethnic identity, the waters become even murkier given the plurality of Christian Orthodoxy and the American borns' high rates of marrying members of other Christian groups (Kunkelman, 1990: 172).

Nearly 180,000 Greek immigrants arrived in the United States between 1966-75, most of them settling in eastern cities (Moskos, 1989). New York City received the largest numbers and Astoria became the "center" of Greek American life. There are no reliable data on the number of Greek immigrants and Greek Americans in Astoria in the post-1965 period, but social workers in the area gave estimates that range between 40-50,000. Within this new immigrant cohort were exiled intellectuals, students and other immigrants radicalized by the military's far right politics (Vlachos, 1968). The Greek Left of the 1960s and early 1970s worked in Greek immigrant communities throughout Europe, Canada and the U.S. NYC was the center of this political activism. Greek immigrants had by the mid-80s began entering the lower middle classes (Kourvetaris, 1976).

The 1980s and 1990s bring new and old concerns to the forefront of Greek national politics. The Fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Balkan nation-states in the 1990s, and Turkish irredentist claims to Greek lands and history become the background against which Greeks in Greece and Greek immigrants in the United States try to define themselves as a national group. On a more micro-level, Greek immigrant and Greek American inter-marriage rates are increasing, and as Demetrios Constantelos points out, these rates may be as high as 80% (Constantelos, 1982:169).

Greeks in Greece, Greek Americans and Greeks in the Diaspora throughout the globe and with access to the internet, are busy contributing to the construction of the Hellenic identity in electronic discussion groups. Writers to these groups create an umbrella Hellenic identity bridging and connecting the numerous historically specific and contextualized experiences of those in the Diaspora, as they try to make sense of what it means to be Greek, to be a Hellene. While these diverse experiences are important in the construction of this Hellenic identity, the primary frame of reference for these internet intellectual groups is Greece, the nation state and the contemporary challenges it confronts on both the regional and international arenas.

On a micro-level, immigrants similarly combine elements of both the country of origin's national, ethno-confessional basis of group markers and the American biologically based race ideologies in their

day to day lives and thereby construct their own unique versions of racially/culturally defined national groupings (Hylland Eriksen, 2001 :42-46). There is hardly a logical thread to this construction as immigrants change categories contextually. When confronted or working within American racial politics based on color, recent Greek immigrants will define themselves as "Europeans" or whites. Greece's recent entry into the European Community is of course, proof enough of their being "European" and thereby "white." The American racial categories Greek immigrants, like all others, are offered with which to define themselves racially are White, i.e., of European origin, Asian, Black and Hispanic. For some Greek immigrants, these entail a regional origin so that they are within this context European and thereby white. Other immigrants define themselves as "white" in contradistinction to Blacks, Hispanics and Asians. Greek immigrants' "racial alliance" with Europeans is more often than not an uneasy one as immigrants in silence reflect upon the role that European nations, motivated by racism, have played in Greece's recent history.

Whether reflecting on Greece's national interests and its membership with the European union or Greeks' own economic and status interests here in the States, the immigrants will define themselves as "whites" because they of course must be "white" in a society that distributes resources by race. The more recent immigrants take their cues from the earlier immigrants who worked hard to exit the non-white racial category they were placed in upon their arrival in the United States. Helen Zeese Papanikolas' family history is often cited and recounted as simply one of the many hardship accounts of the early immigrants (Papanikolas, 1974).

The immigrants claim an affinity with other immigrant groups. This affinity is based on two dimensions (Hylland Eriksen, 2001: 42-47). First is the particular country's position in relation to super-powers, and specifically, the United States and England. During the brief war over the Falkland Islands, for example, Greek immigrants identified with and sided with Argentina rather than Britain. Despite the fact that Greece is geographically positioned within the European continent, Greek immigrants perceive non-European immigrants as arriving from countries which like Greece, have been exploited and oppressed by the United States and/or other Northern European imperial powers.

The second dimension is that of the immigrant experience. Greek immigrants identify with the common and much romanticized immigrant struggles, problems and sacrifices. These immigrant groups are seen, like Greeks themselves, as being forced because of economic and political exploitation of their home countries, to emigrate (Scourby, 1980). As immigrants to a strange and often unfriendly land, these groups must and do make sacrifices for the well being of their families and children. The immigrants work long hours at menial jobs with low wages. This is the immigrant story, with which Greek immigrants identify.

At the same time, the American born descendants of both the earlier and more recent Greek immigrant cohorts, are constructing a Hellenic identity which differs from the Hellenic identity constructed by intellectuals concerned with Greek national affairs. English language weekly and monthly magazines regularly feature articles on Hellenic themes, ranging from the Ancient to the modern. These intellectuals (historians, archeologists and linguists for example) engaged in the national identity construction of Greeks in Greece and in the Diaspora are concerned with national/cultural/religious and linguistic criteria. Often to the dismay of the authors themselves, readers often interpret this Hellenic identity within the American race-based framework structuring educational, economic and social institutions. This American interpreted Hellenic identity assumes or claims its "whiteness." "Whiteness" is a status that must be achieved by these Americans of Greek descent (Moskos, 1989).

Hellenism, with its links to two greatly admired civilizations (defined as white by American society) becomes the ready-made identity these groups latch onto. How better to claim one's racial equality and even superiority than to claim a direct link to the "white" defined civilization of Ancient Greece and the Byzantium, the Empire that is increasingly being seen as that which salvaged the Ancients' civilization from the ruins of Europe's Dark Ages? This particular Hellenic identity is telling American "whites" that they are the descendants of Ancient Greece, they are the Hellenes who contributed to the creation of western and thereby American civilization, both of which are defined as white civilizations (Kourvetaris, 1971). As a result, they are probably even in a roundabout way superior to these "biological whites" who are simply white because of their skin tone; they have contributed little to the advancement of humanity, while Greeks are responsible for so much. Indeed, as one American born man expressed, "when my people were writing philosophy and mathematics and history and poetry, your people were living in caves and throwing their sticks at mammoths. What did you do to advance the plight of humanity?" Framed this way, the national/racial superiority of Hellenes over the "biological whites" of America, is of course apparent to the eye.

The Greek Orthodox Church is the community institution bringing together faithful of all immigrant cohorts, classes and political orientations. It is here that Greek immigrants, Greek Americans and Americans of Hellenic Descent, battle out national, cultural and racial identity politics the most vehemently. The Church, in other words, is a micro-cosmos of the identity politics of the community at large (Constantelos, 1982). While the immigrants are working to maintain the identity of the Church as an immigrant institution, the faithful of earlier immigrant cohorts, overwhelmingly of middle and upper middle class backgrounds, are working towards Americanizing the Church. The immigrants want the Church to maintain its ties with Greece and the Patriarchate of Constantinople (Istanbul), the Americanizers want the Church to cut these ties and proclaim itself an American church. In the

process of unraveling these conflicts, one ultimately confronts issues of national/racial/cultural identity politics. The Americanizers, overwhelmingly descendants of pre-65 immigrants, see the new immigrants as "too ethnic," more concerned with "ethnic politics" than "spiritual matters." They argue that the Church can overcome this ethnic obstacle by removing itself from Greek national affairs or concerns, establishing an Archdiocese independent of the Patriarchate of Constantinople (which is increasingly referred to as the Patriarchate of Istanbul by the groups' representatives,) and by changing the official language of the Church from Greek to English. Many of the Americanizers are not satisfied with the Archdiocese's compromise to incorporate both languages in the religious services in parishes with large numbers of English speakers (Ta Nea, Dec. 17, 2003).

Immigrant laity, on the other hand, consider the language and the ethnic culture an integral element of their Church, and often complain of how the Americanizers treat them as "second class citizens. Interviews are revealing. "You know, the hicks, the greenhorns fresh off the boat," as one woman expressed. To the extent that immigrant status is given a lower social status in the larger society, the Church membership is not exempt from these views. Letters to editors and publications by Americanizers beginning in the 1980s were at best condescending to the Greek immigrants and Greek culture in general. Immigrants thus, in the eyes of the Americanizers, occupy a less than white-status. It is precisely this less-than-white status, which the Americanizers are trying to overcome in their struggles to define the Greek Orthodox Church of America as an Orthodox Church of America, i.e., a "white" Orthodox Church of America. It is not surprising that the very people who are active in the Americanization movement in the Church are also those who are outspoken on Hellenism as a cultural legacy reserved only for the Hellenes.

The Patriarchate of Constantinople has in recent years made a number of public pronouncements on the cultural nature of Hellenism and Orthodoxy. Patriarch Bartholomew has given a number of sermons as well as published a number of letters in his attempts to de-racialize the identity and define Hellenes as a cultural and religious group, which crosses racial boundaries. "The Patriarch seeks to cast Greekness and Orthodoxy in universal, civilizational terms. Hellenes are those of the Christian faith. This race stuff is a blasphemy, a sin to humanity, to God. We are Hellenes. We are Christians. Like so many other language and cultural groups are Christians under the Mother Church. God said 'go spread the word of salvation in different languages.' He said nothing about races. It's a blasphemy to think in these terms... The only relevant groups are linguistic and cultural groups. There are no race groups. God did not speak in these words, our Church's fathers did not speak in these words" (Ethnikos Kyrix, November 12, 2003)

While immigrants whose children marry outside the religious group and even "across racial lines" turn to the Church and its leaders for support in enabling their children, the spouses and grandchildren to remain within the group, i.e., the Hellenic Genos (nation), parishioners do take "racial positions" in cases where the non-white faithful are either not Greek or do not inter-marry with a Greek or Greek American. Our own personal experiences and observations confirm these attitudes. A Greek Orthodox priest in the New York area talked about a Nigerian family who had converted to Greek Orthodoxy back home and upon their arrival to NYC came to Church services. In spite of lengthy pleas and hard work by him and by the laity leaders of the parish, the family left the Church because the Greek and Greek American parishioners did not accept them. "They were black. No more, no less." The family joined a nearby Baptist Church with a "black" congregation. One of the parishioners argued that "these people were not accepted because they were not Greek. Look. We have a few intermarried families. A Colombian woman, there is a Greek-African American child in the afternoon school, and a Lithuanian woman. These people married Greeks. Their children are Greek. They were baptized as Greek Orthodox."

In yet another parish a woman spoke bitterly of how she failed to gain acceptance for herself and her children because her husband "refuses to be baptized as a Greek Orthodox. He's Catholic. Why should he have to give up his religion? My children are Catholic but I want them to come to this Church... I'm not Greek. That's what they keep telling me in different ways." This woman is herself of mixed ancestry, her father a Greek born immigrant and her mother of Irish ancestry. "I don't want my children to learn Greek. They don't go to afternoon Greek school. That's not the role of the Church."

The Church, as the institution symbolic of Greeks' and Greek Americans' identity, the marker delineating and defining the group in relation to others, a marker rising out of Greece's War of Independence from the Ottoman Empire in the 19th and even into the 20th centuries, is riddled with the national/racial/cultural identity politics of the time. The Church is the institution that American racial identity politics are played out. The clergy have provided poor leadership in these racial and national identity politics, and that Patriarch Bartholomew's pleas for the Church to unite under the idea of the Genos (nation) rather than be divided over race go unheeded.

Conclusion

While the Greek American community dates back to the late 19th century, a smaller stream of immigration in the post-war period was followed by a larger immigrant cohort arrival in the late 1960s and 1970s. These new immigrants, along with technological and transportation developments of the past three decades, have brought the Greek and Greek American societies into a "transnational field" of cultural, political and identity politics in which divergent frameworks of race play prominent roles.

Greek immigrants in America create a variety of national/racial classification schemes existing simultaneously, each vying with the other, in totality creating a confusion of these racial classifications. Depending on immigrants' and the community's leaders frame of reference (Greek vs. American) the overall racial schemes and attitudes used are a combination of two different historical contexts coming into one common field of politics.

Footnote

Endnotes

[1] This paper is partly based on personal interviews conducted by the two authors in various Greek Orthodox parishes in the New York and Northern California.

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