

The Now and Future Greek America: Strategies for Survival¹

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The major concern of Greek America at the turn of the twenty-first century is the same as at the onset of the Great Migration of 1900-1924 one hundred years earlier: how can Greek identity be retained in America? With only 200,000 Americans identifying themselves as fourth-generation Greeks,² with outmarriage at 80%,³ and with new immigration down to between one and two thousand annually,⁴ the Greek in Greek American is steadily dissolving. Increasingly, more individuals prefer to identify themselves only as Americans of Greek descent. In all of these trends, Greek America appears to be following the pattern of other European immigrant groups.⁵ Absent recurring or continuous waves of immigration, such communities culturally perish in approximately four to five generations, if not sooner.

Among the million or so Americans who currently claim a Greek identity, a commanding majority are post-war immigrants and their children. More precisely, most are from the Second Wave of mass immigration (1960-1980). This indicates that the survival of Greek identity in America is largely dependent on these immigrants resisting cultural assimilation more resolutely than any early Greek immigrant wave has done. To date, however, Second Wave immigrants and their children have largely responded in the same way as their predecessors. The majority, following

the standard American ethnic profile, has identified itself as Greek American. A minority, however, has self-identified as American Greek. The essential difference between the two, of course is that in Greek American, the primary identity is American modified by Greekness while in the American Greek model, the opposite is true. A third, more complex response that I will refer to as binational Greekness also has emerged in the post-World War II immigrant cohort. Before looking at how this third way welds aspects of the other two paradigms with new elements, we need to review why the other models cannot sustain Greekness in America.

As the very designation of diaspora indicates, diaspora communities are ethnic enclaves that maintain primary cultural loyalty to the originating homeland rather than to the country in which that community physically resides. Although such Greek communities flourished in colonized nations such as nineteenth-century Egypt, they were not possible in a twentieth-century American republic that demanded European immigrants *become* American. What made such cultural transformation palatable was that all barriers to economic, social, and political advance were lifted when it was clear that the immigrants had transferred their cultural and political allegiance to their new nation. A large number of Greeks were unwilling to strike such a cultural tradeoff and returned to Greece.⁶ Among those who remained, no sizable formal diaspora community ever formed. Nonetheless a modified diaspora sensibility that stressed the use of the Greek language in the United States found expression in organizations such as the now defunct Greek American Progressive Association (GAPA),⁷ in numerous *topika somateia*,⁸ in a durable Greek language press,⁹ and in the cultural orientation advocated by the Greek Orthodox Church until mid-century.¹⁰ We can also name a handful of poets and writers living permanently in the United States who opted to write almost exclusively in Greek.¹¹ Despite

such efforts, in these early years of the twenty-first century, most American-born Greek Americans are not able to speak Greek fluently and very few are literate in Greek.

Far more common than the modified diaspora model even among the immigrants of the Great Migration and nearly universal in all second generations, has been avid Americanization. The long term result is that few Greek Americans follow political events in Greece, and with the possible exception of music, most are unfamiliar with the contemporary Greek arts. Their Greek identity almost exclusively revolves around family rather than community. Such an outcome is logical. If a Greek American can win an Oscar, write for the *New York Times*, win a Pulitzer Prize, or host for ABC and other television networks, why would he or she insist on thinking, speaking, and writing in the Greek language? Greek culture is notoriously political. In America, a Greek may become mayor of San Francisco, governor of Massachusetts, a member of either house of Congress, director of the CIA, Ambassador to the United Nations, Vice-President of the United States, and even a major party's presidential candidate. Nor are there any ethnic limits in business, science, sports, the military, or any other field a Greek American might wish to enter. Given the opportunity to take leadership roles in the world's most powerful nation, only the incompetent and unimaginative would be satisfied to marginalize themselves in a cultural ghetto. These very opportunities obviously have an inescapable ethnic downside.

That downside is seen even in the Greek Orthodox Church, now the focus of nearly all Greek American community life.¹² The Church fully reflects the Americanization of the Greek community in America. Most parishioners and even some of the American-born clergy cannot speak Greek fluently. The language problem is steadily intensifying as congregations include more converts and the children of intermarriages.

This disintegration of Greekness within the Church may take a considerable time to be absolutely manifested, but parish life in the Church in America already resembles that of other American Churches more than that of the routines of the Church in Greece. An artful combination of Greek and English is indeed possible, but the long term trend is toward the absolute domination by the English language.

Further complicating matters is that the Greek Church, like other Orthodox Churches in America, is an administrative appendage of an overseas Patriarch. The normal organizational framework for Orthodoxy, however, is a national church that utilizes the national language and is administrated by a self-headed national hierarchy. In that regard, the gaggle of non-English-language Orthodox Churches in America is an Orthodox anomaly caused by the phenomenon of immigration. The inevitable movement toward creation of an American Orthodoxy has been gaining momentum over the past two decades, forcing Greek Americans to take sides for or against. The formation of an American Church makes absolute theological sense and would likely increase the visibility and attractiveness of Orthodoxy for more Americans. While such a religious project might be best for Orthodoxy in America, it most certainly is not best for the preservation of Greek identity in America. Even though Greeks would initially be the largest ethnic group in such an endeavor, the whole logic of the project is a total Americanized embodiment of Orthodoxy. A future in which Greek Americans divide over what kind of Orthodoxy they wish to practice seems probable. This bodes ill for Greek America as any sizable fracture would subdivide an already small community.

Amid this unremitting and seemingly irreversible erosion of Greekness in America, a third kind of ethnic identity has begun to emerge, a response that might be described as binational or transnational Greekness. Unlike

the assimilationist Greek American, the binational Greek actively cultivates the culture of the ancestral homeland, but unlike the diaspora American Greek, the binational Greek simultaneously embraces the culture of the new world.¹³ Instead of agonizing over the choice between two cultures, resisting and even resenting the language of one or the other, binationals are comfortable with both. Not surprisingly this sensibility is most often found in recent immigrants and their children rather than in older cohorts. And it is most prevalent in the highly educated and those most involved in the arts or commerce.

Central to the emotional and psychological comfort of the binational personality is genuine bilingualism. Greatly easing the practice of this bilingualism are the new communication technologies. For the first time in human history, low cost electronic media provide high quality, continuous, and instantaneous connections between individuals anywhere on the planet. Whether physically in Greece or the United States, one can remain absolutely current with the latest Greek music, periodicals, and breaking news. One can work on projects with colleagues living on other continents almost as easily as if those colleagues were living a few streets away. Thus, being located in an area where there is only a minuscule Greek community is no longer a barrier to accessing contemporary Greek culture. Also greatly facilitated are family bonds, which in addition to being the strongest component of Greek American identity, are also the strongest emotional links between Greece and America. This ability to stay in constant and intimate touch with the homeland has no historical precedent.

Economic and cultural globalization abets binationalism in other ways as well. Although English is currently the lingua franca of globalization, the strident monolingualism that was an asset in the internal development of the United States is now an acknowledged handicap in diplomacy, the marketplace,

and the arts. Bicultural persons, as a result, are increasingly seen as assets, even by mainstream American institutions.¹⁴ Nor is binational identity limited to Greeks. As the United States attempts to cope with the new global economy, many persons in its ethnic dimensions, particularly recent arrivals, behave as binationals. This reality reduces the hostility to binationalism that might be expected if binationalism were exclusively a Greek phenomenon.

What most distinguishes the binational paradigm from its two predecessors is that it regards culture as a two-way street with active traffic in both directions. Rather than trying to make the Greek ethos abroad synonymous with the Greek ethos at home, binationalism generates a creative and dynamic tension in which each side is affected. Even what constitutes Greek culture becomes open to redefinition. Using cinema as an example, a binational can argue that, in different ways, the *Z* of Costa Gavras, the *America, America* of Elias Kazan and perhaps even the *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* of Nia Vardalos are expressions of Greek culture, even though mainly filmed in Algeria, Turkey, and Canada with non-Greek production companies and many non-Greek actors speaking languages other than Greek. Similar discussions might also ensue about the Greekness of a *Zorba the Greek*, *Never on Sunday*, or *Phaedra*. The work of John Cassavetes, Gregory Markopoulos, and Nico Papatakis offer other avenues of consideration. The existence of such films and filmmakers also suggests that binationalism is not an entirely new sensibility. It is linked to homeland culture, but is quite distinct. The artists are not simply Greeks living abroad.

The situation of cinema is paralleled in all the arts. We can speculate that binationalism is not likely to produce another Cavafy, for Cavafy was perhaps the highest embodiment of the diaspora model. On the other hand, Cavafy is reported to have said that he sometimes thought or dreamed in English.

In any case, binationalism is anathema to parochial notions of what is Greek and what is not Greek. The very notion that Greeks in America must add to the Greek arts, whatever the language or format, is quite different from the preservation mandate that has been at the core of most Greek American culture projects.¹⁵

Binational consciousness also alters the transatlantic political dialog. The Greeks in the homeland often regard Greek Americans as almost indistinguishable from other Americans, mostly useful for serving as a built-in overseas lobby for views developed in Athens or as interpreters/translators of Greek culture for their fellow Americans. Conversely, Greek Americans often see homeland Greeks as citizens of a quasi-Western nation that suffers from a penchant for conspiracy theories, corrupt bureaucracies, and inept government. Over the decades such attitudes have bred an increasingly unhappy relationship between the Greeks in the United States and the Greeks in Greece. This is quite unfortunate for both sides of the binational coin. At a time when the United States increasingly is viewed unfavorably throughout the world, Greek Americans could benefit from a candid but mature critique of America's failings from a Greek vantage point. Conversely, Greeks are now confronting issues of cultural identity in the new Europe that are similar to those Greek Americans have been negotiating for over a century.

Both the American Greek and the Greek American models tend to be static as they seek to maintain values based either in the culture of the nineteenth century *horio* or the traumas of twentieth century Greece. Binationalism, in contrast, is largely a product of new and dynamic global currents now transforming all national cultures. Just as we ponder what signifies Greekness in America, homeland Greeks now must ponder what Greekness means in the new Europe. What role can the Greek language play? Will most of the new immigrants

in Greece remain? Do Greeks want them Hellenized as Greek emigrants to the United States were Americanized? If so, will the Hellenized immigrants be considered "real" Greeks? And what will it mean if immigrants want to remain in Greece but reject Hellenization as the Greeks who once lived in Egypt rejected becoming Egyptians? Will a Greek ethnic living in Brussels be considered less Greek than the Greek who remains in Athens? Binational Greeks in America are an integral part of that experience, not bystanders or cultural distant cousins.

The fledgling binationalist sensibility in formation is not a formal movement or even a shared consciousness. Largely, it is an attitude observable in many individuals active in Greek American educational, political, commercial, and cultural life. It does not stem from any ideological premise, but is an intuitive existential solution to the dilemma of maintaining some kind of Greek identity in America. It also has counterparts in Greece.¹⁶ To date this pathway has largely been an informal, personal, and even circumstantial response. We need to consider if it would be wise to encourage binationalism in some programmatic manner. The devil is always in the details, but two seemingly contradictory actions need to be addressed: the revival of Greek language in America and the systematic recovery of Greek American history.

Reasonable theoretical and historical arguments about whether the Greek language is essential for maintaining Greek cultural identity can be made, but in the United States, the demise of an ethnic language always signals the demise of ethnic identity. Given the failure of existing institutions to create bilingual Greek Americans, the status quo is not acceptable. By and large, most current formal Greek language instruction is focused on the very young. The logic of that emphasis is the desire to implant Greek as early as possible, a reasonable approach to language

maintenance. The historical record, however, shows that after-school and even weekend programs are often counter-productive as children resent being separated from their American schoolmates and come to view Greek culture as a burden. Language education efforts currently in place need to be re-evaluated to determine what the investment/payoff ratio really has been. We can no longer afford feel-good annual reports that do not reflect the reality that the programs being praised are not producing Greek speakers. While successful programs deserve to be continued and even strengthened, funds involved in failed efforts need to be deployed elsewhere. New technologies offer possibilities for low-cost, high quality language education. With the realities of the global economy becoming evident to all Americans and the rhetoric of multiculturalism commonplace, formerly closed doors may have opened. Wherever the number of Greeks is sufficient to form an interest group, getting Greek language instruction into regular high school curriculums and other public programs, such as charter schools, may now be possible.

Although Greek-language programs for the young that have proven effective should not be abandoned, Charles Moskos, among others, has suggested that it might be wiser to shift our formal language training emphasis to higher education. The argument for putting most funding into the college years is that this is the time of life when young adults begin to solidify their personal values and life options. Foreign language is often a requirement for a college degree and in any case, Greek language courses earn credits without complicating relationships with non-Greek students. Truly attractive college language programs that go beyond the routine of three classes a week by offering a full cultural complement can transform language study from a duty to a joy. The possibility of a junior year of study in Greece could be decisive in shaping an individual's cultural orientation.

Substantive summer programs in Greece or even shorter study tours would also be helpful. Systematic assistance from Greek institutions in such matters would be extremely useful in offering a cultural immersion that could well provide many long-term benefits for all concerned. Some college programs, of course, are already involved in such efforts, but even the best are severely underfunded. As is the case with numerous Greek American endeavors, funding too often has been diverted into architectural projects rather than the less glamorous needs of quality education. Nor has there been substantive formal discussion about how such programs should be conceived and executed.

Equally as important as reviving the Greek language in America is finally coming to terms with the need for Greek American Studies. Except for the monumental work of Helen Papanikolas on the Greeks of the Intermountain West, we do not have substantial histories of how Greek Americans fared in various regions and time periods.¹⁷ Our general histories are relatively thin, rarely taking on the most recent decades in any detail and largely limited to themes of struggle and success. We lack systematic cultural studies that examine the ethnic aspects of gender, class, and sexual preference issues. Not a single chair in Greek American Studies exists anywhere in the United States, and many Modern Greek Studies programs do not even offer courses in Greek America. The Modern Greek Studies Association belatedly has begun to give some attention to the topic of Greek America, but even now there is a tendency for academics to place Greek American Studies into a strictly diaspora discourse, as if the need for Greek Americans to know our history in America is equivalent to learning the history of the Greeks of Australia, Zaire, and Germany. Not surprisingly, Modern Greek Studies Departments are not producing scholars of Greek America who can give the community the kind of self-scrutiny, data, and counsel needed for cultural survival.¹⁸ Ironically, more

of that kind of work seems to be going on in Greece itself. We certainly are not going to survive if we do not know who we are. I sometimes think Greek Americans are in the same situations as the African Americans in the 1950s, when Ralph Ellison wrote of being an invisible man and James Baldwin lamented that nobody knew his name.

The recent upsurge in the creation of museums and archives, a phenomenon that Steve Frangos has called The New Preservationist Movement, attests to the community's hunger to finally know itself.¹⁹ Most of these efforts, unfortunately, are quite amateurish, frequently naively celebrationist rather than analytical in nature, and often dependent on one or two highly energetic persons for survival. Desperately needed is a well-funded, professional national research center that offers a one-stop collection of scholarly works, memoirs, resource documents, and guides to local Greek American collections throughout the country. Such a center would cost less than the building of a single church. That this kind of research facility center does not already exist is disgraceful.

Generally speaking however, seeding a binational Greek identity does not require elaborate national coordination. The new technology by its nature is multi-centered, allowing for numerous non-competitive hubs of local and regional initiatives, each with the potential of having national and even international impact. The relatively low costs involved and the limited number of persons required even for major undertakings are significant advantages. Such decentralized hubs are likely to produce richer results sooner than more elaborate national schemes that usually become mired in the planning or funding stages. Even the relatively small number of Greek Americans can be treated as a positive. Our small numbers ease the task of communications and the deployment of limited materials and personnel. To realize this mobility, however, we need to cease making senseless claims that we number in the millions and to cease wasting

time on programs based on such mythologies.

Binational identity has arisen spontaneously as a means for individuals to maintain their Greek identity in America. It could be a fleeting phenomenon. It could remain a strictly personal response or one that involves extremely small numbers of people. Whether it can or should become a conscious community survival strategy is debatable. But I think that a dialogue on the perspectives raised by the binational alternative is one worth having. We must determine once and for all if there is energy for the revival of the Greek language in America and we must determine if there is a real commitment to our specific American experience. If the answers are in the affirmative, rather than a demise of Greek identity in America, we might experience a Greek American renaissance.

NOTES

¹ On February 14, 2004, I presented the second annual Dr. Dimitri and Irmgard Pallas Lecture in Modern Greek Studies at the University of Michigan sponsored by the Foundation for Modern Greek Studies and the Regents of the University of Michigan. The text which follows is an expanded version of this lecture. I wish to thank Vassili Lambropoulos and Artemis Leontis for encouraging me to take on this topic, and I wish to thank the dozen or so persons who have been kind enough to read earlier versions and offer comments, many of which I have incorporated.

² Charles Moskos, "Faith, Language, and Culture," in *Project for Orthodox Renewal*, ed. Stephen J. Sfikas and George E. Matsoukas (Chicago: Orthodox Laity Inc., 1992): 20-22, has an excellent discussion of population numbers based on the 1990 census. There were no significant changes in the 2000 census.

³ This is the percentage usually given for marriages within the Greek Orthodox Church. As such, it must be seen as a minimal rate, as those marrying outside the Church are not included. For general discussion of outmarriage based on church statistics see James Steve Counelis, "Greek Orthodox Church Statistics of the United States 1949-1989," *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 26, nos. 1-4 (1989): 129-160.

⁴ This number has generally fallen since 1990 and is balanced by a return migration rate of approximately the same number of persons.

⁵ See commentary in specific essays on Poles, Ukrainians, Germans, Italians, and Lebanese in Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas, eds., *The Immigrant Left in the United States* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996). Although Jews are often cited as exceptions to this rule, the ethnic aspect of Jewish identity such as Hungarian, Polish, German, and Russian fades at least as rapidly as in other European ethnic groups. There is also a Jewish outmarriage rate in terms of religious identity that hit 50% by the end of the century. Like outmarriage rates for the Greek Orthodox, the Jewish statistics begin with those already in a synagogue so they, too, are minimal numbers.

⁶ Greeks had among the highest return rates of all European immigrants, at least 25%, and perhaps as high as 50%. This wide range exists because sometimes the same person might be counted more than once as many individuals went back and forth. Another problem in counting Greek ethnics is that many carried Italian, Turkish, and other non-Greek passports.

⁷ Unlike the American Hellenic Education Progressive Association (AHEPA), GAPA's organizational language was Greek and the promotion of the Greek language was its major mandate. It was started in 1923, one year after AHEPA, and largely ceased to exist by the end of World War II, while AHEPA became the largest Greek fraternal organization.

⁸ These organizations stressed local customs and worked diligently on Greek language education. Over the course of time, most of them have adopted English as the organizational language and in all organizational publications.

⁹ The Greek language press has proven more enduring than the foreign language press of other more numerous ethnic groups. Through most of the twentieth century there were at least three national Greek language newspapers (*Atlantis: 1894-1974; Ethnikos Kyrix 1901-ongoing; Proini: 1976-1998*). *Proini* also published the English language *Greek American*, and *Kyrix* currently publishes an English language *National Herald* that is different in content from its Greek parent. There are numerous local publications that publish in Greek or have Greek language sections.

¹⁰ The U.S. Department of Justice, among other American federal agencies, worried about the way the Greek Church referred to Greece as the motherland or homeland among other expressions of what might be construed primary cultural loyalty to another nation. In 1944 Constantine D. Yavis wrote "Propaganda in the Greek-American Community" for

the Foreign Agents Registration Section of the Justice Department's War Division. His article analyzed this phenomenon in the Church and other Greek organizations in America. His commentary was based on research by federal agencies.

¹¹ Two such writers are Theano Papazoglou Margaris and Regina Pagoulatou.

¹² In many locales, the Church is the only Greek institution with a physical presence.

¹³ I am using the term "binational" as a cultural rather than a political designation. "Transcultural" or "bicultural" are reasonable alternatives, but I think binational more aptly evokes the reality that two or more national cultures are involved, rather than merely describing a vague, transcendent cultural phenomenology that is manifested differently in different geographical locations.

¹⁴ Charles Moskos, for example, has written about how, when he was doing military sociology in Iraq, he emphasized "the Greek card." Greekness also was handy in other work he has done in the Balkans and Middle East. Bob Costas used his Greek heritage to great effect when reporting on the 2004 Olympics for NBC.

¹⁵ Among recent cultural projects involving Greek Americans and/or Greeks in America, many have a binational aspect. *Mondo Greco*, for example, mainly features literary works about Greece and translations of Greek writings. Nonetheless, one of its most successful issues was totally dedicated to Greek American writing. A group of Greek American women who call themselves the Mad Pomegranates have been instrumental in getting Greek films screened at New York's Museum of the Moving Image. Valerie Kontakos, one of the Mad Pomegranates, also makes films, as do some of her close associates. Her most recent project is a film about the Greek Americans who constituted the Greek baseball team in the 2004 Olympics. The film world includes numerous individuals who work in Greece and/or America and make films in either or both languages about either or both countries. Tassos Rigopoulos's *Greeks and America* practically defines biculturalism with Greek language sections subtitled in English and vice versa. A project by Spiro Taraviras makes an even more complicated mix. His film is about Greek/Armenian-American A. I. Bizerides who wrote films for Hollywood. The film is jointly produced by German television and a subtitled version will appear on Greek television. Greekworks.com, an on-line magazine, is written in English about all things Greek and is aimed at the world-wide Greek diaspora and interested phil-Hellenes.

¹⁶ George Papandreou is an intriguing case in point regarding the advan-

tages and disadvantages of binational identity in Greek politics. In the academic field, numerous Greek intellectuals work in Greek universities but specialize in Greek American literary figures and Greek authors who have lived for significant periods in the USA. My colleague George Kalogeras is an outstanding example of this phenomenon.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the range of Papanikolas's achievement see the Homage to Helen Papanikolas, special issue of the *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, 29, no. 2 (2003).

¹⁸ Almost all scholars who have done significant work in Greek American Studies have come from other academic disciplines or work outside the academy. The situation has not greatly altered from that described in Dan Georgakas, "Toward Greek American Studies," *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, 16, nos. 1-4, (1989): 9-16.

¹⁹ Steve Frangos, "Grassroots Efforts to Preserve Hellenism," *National Herald*, January 17-18, 2004, 1, 5.