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The Changing Nature of Greek America

Dan Georgakas

The nature and demographics of Greek America are always changing. The immigrant generation at the onset of the twentieth century was not sure how American it wanted to be or would be allowed to be. Up to 50% of that generation would return to Greece due to the xenophobia they encountered and an economy whose streets were not “paved in gold.” Those remaining would form Greek America.

The first American-born generation was not sure how Greek it wanted to be or would be allowed to be. They encountered many in the immigrant generation uncomfortable with how American their offspring had become. When American-born Greeks ventured to Greece, they were usually regarded as not being “real” Greeks.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, another basic change is in progress. By 2028, the majority of Greek Americans will have a mixed ethnic heritage. For that generation, assuming a Greek identity will be more a matter of individual choice than the continuation of a specific ethnic heritage.

The appearance of multi-ethnic Greek America is a consequence of a Greek outmarriage rate to non-Greeks that is at least 80% and probably higher. This outmarriage is not due to parental or community shortcomings but part of a national trend in America. Multi-ethnic Greek Americans inherit at least three cultures: Greek, American and a third ethnic heritage. One or both parents may be multi-ethnic themselves, leaving their offspring with multiple cultural choices. Another new factor is that almost 9% of the new multi-ethnic families will include non-Europeans.

The choices facing the new multi-ethnic Greek American are complex. *Papou* may quote Confucius and *yaya* may sing Irish lullabies. No one in the immediate family may have been born in Greece. The tendency of many multi-ethnics will be to simply spice their Americanism

with ethnic foods and songs. Culturally identifying as being Greek will be a choice that has much to do with what the Greek community offers in terms of personal fulfillment and economic opportunities.

The Assets of Greek America

Greek America has numerous assets to deploy in winning the allegiance of multi-ethnics. The average income of Greek Americans is significantly higher than the average American income. Greek Americans also are more likely to own their homes and hold a college degree. Greek American families are more stable than most American families and have a low rate of crime. These advantages are further enhanced by a positive public image that became quite visible with the smashing success of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. In short, the community profile is appealing, not something from which to disassociate.

Contemporary Greece is an even more appropriate and stronger asset for Greek Americans concerned about preserving the community. A number of Greek American organizations have found sponsoring trips to Greece by young people in their late teens or early twenties has highly positive results. The overwhelming response to experiencing contemporary Greece is a desire to be more Greek. Many even show interest in the Greek language. Among the organizations sponsoring such visits abroad are AHEPA, the American Hellenic Society, the American Hellenic Institute, and numerous regional societies.

The success of these efforts has been so obvious and positive that there is discussion of creating a free two-three week stay in Greece for every maturing Greek American. This concept is modeled on the highly successful Birth Right organization of American Jews. The Jewish trips can have a cultural, regional, or economic focus. The security of their young people involves young Israelis of the same age who are doing military service and speak English. This insures the Americans get a genuine taste of homeland culture. Greeks could adjust this program to serve Hellenic needs. If there is one action Greek Americans could take to promote Hellenism in multi-ethnics in would be the Birth Right concept. Greek American has the assets to do so, but as yet has not found the will such an effort requires.

Another related asset for Greek Americans is the history of Greece. Most Americans are well aware that Classical Greece was the fountainhead of European thought, science, and the arts. Fewer realize that Jesus of Nazareth and some of his disciples spoke Greek. Americans

may know some of the New Testament was written in Greek, but many fewer understand early Christian theologians wrote in Greek and were heavily influenced by Neo-Platonic thought. Even in college textbooks, the Byzantine Empire which repeatedly warded off Islamic empires long enough for Europe to become Europe rarely rates more than a few paragraphs. Nor do many Americans realize that Greeks who fled to Europe after the fall of Constantinople played a significant role in fueling the Renaissance in Italy and humanism in northern Europe. That the Greek war of independence was the beginning of the end for Ottoman rule in Europe doesn't merit much space in mainstream histories. Even more disgraceful is that despite all the films and television shows on World War II, there is no recognition that Greece was the first nation to defeat a Fascist invader. We are told that Britain stood alone in 1940 at the time of Blitz. Not so. Hollywood is overdue for making *My Big Fat Greek OXI*. Finally, the history of the Greeks in America rarely surfaces at any level of education.

Getting Hellenic history known to mainstream America is not an easy task, but it is doable in segments as demonstrated by the Italian Americans of New York. For years, the state's public-school history books presented the tragic Irish potato famine as a matter of Irish backwardness and unusual weather, holding the British blameless even though British actions were the true cause.

Irish Americans rallied their historians to compile an irrefutable historical record and then used their political muscle on the state legislature. The process took more than ten years, but textbooks were finally made historically accurate. The most positive aspect of this reform was that it educated every student in the state system, not just Irish Americans in parochial schools.

If Greek Americans want to get the remarkable history of Hellenic culture better known, it must work in similar fashion. That means funding scholars and not allowing politicians to get away just sponsoring Greek-day events that are mainly photo-ops that do not substitute for taking substantive actions to get our history known by the general public.

The Academic Sector

Presenting the post-Turkish Occupation history of Greece in higher education is the mandate of Modern Greek Studies programs. We are routinely told there are fifty such programs. In fact, only twenty offer a range of courses and even fewer often a minor. The others are mainly confined to teaching modern Greek, which is certainly a positive, but does not qualify as a multi-

faceted program. And only a few Modern Greek Studies programs regularly offer courses on Greek American history.

The Modern Greek Studies Association (MGSA) which represents current scholars in the field has some 300 members. A very healthy aspect of the MGSA is that it includes scholars from Canada, Greece, the UK, Australia, and other nations. Such scholars speak at the bi-annual national conference and publish in the MGSA journal. MGSA programs have done an excellent job in teaching Greek and advancing techniques for doing so. A number also have viable study abroad programs.

Modern Greek Studies programs usually have dedicated staffs that work under tremendous pressure from their university hierarchies. Non-academics do not realize that universities generally do not like special study programs unless they are highly attended, bring in significant outside financing, or have visible scholarly impact on the public or general scholarly community. Modern Greek Studies programs, unfortunately, are often isolated within their universities and discipline with very little outreach. This was evident during the Greek crisis when Greek academics were rarely called upon by mass media, and there were no major initiatives by the programs that commanded public attention. One huge problem is funding. Greek American philanthropists generally do not give much money to educational projects and when they do so, it is usually to the Classics. The Greek community certainly has the funds to fill that gap, but a double problem exists. Academics are often isolated from their immediate community and wary that community involvement would come with limits on their academic liberties. These concerns are well-founded but not insurmountable.

The Pontians have been particularly adept at working with academics, often including joint ventures with Armenians and Assyrians. A positive step for promoting Greek identity would be for each Modern Greek Studies program to have one major annual event, not *for* the community but *with* it. This means community turnout and other support, not just check writing. If annual events prove rewarding, more ambitious community-academic projects could follow. A good starting point might be discussing local history and contemporary issues.

Another positive factor in cultivating Greek identity is the communications revolution. Due to the internet, no individual needs to be isolated from community news and projects due to geographical location. The internet also provides more intimate and immediate connections to Greece and Cyprus, whether the purpose is familial, professional, or cultural. Co-ordinated

national and international projects can occur in reasonable times and forms that were not technologically possible even 20 years ago.

A new encouraging initiative occurred in early 2018 with the launching of *Ergon*, an on-line journal of the arts in Greek America that features new creative work. During that same time frame, the American Hellenic Institute issued its annual policy journal which is aimed at American legislators, think tanks, activists, and journalists interested in foreign policy. Both journals are available gratis at their respective web sites.

Our secular organizations, often in tune with the Greek Orthodox Church, are good at organizing dance and music groups. What does not abound are regular forums such as the one sponsored by Hellenic Link - Midwest which generated this essay. Regularized presentations need to occur in every major city.

Chicago's National Hellenic Museum performs an invaluable service in reaching into the public-school system with programs that involve non-Greeks. Other cities could be doing something similar even if the scale was more modest. An example of that is a museum focused on local history such as once existed in Salt Lake City. We have the means for such enterprises, and there is often additional funding available from federal and state cultural agencies.

Film is another underused medium. Although there are a number of Greek film festivals, local groups rarely have film nights. Such ventures are not moneymakers, but they draw attendance from those most interested in the arts and the Greek language. A frequent programming blemish is failure to show films made about by, for, or about Greek Americans. A film night can be attractive to those multi-ethnic Greeks who wonder what Hellenism in America is about beyond what they see in their family.

A simple and inexpensive boost to Hellenism would occur if every Greek American household subscribed to a Greek newspaper or journal. Icing on the cake would be purchasing books that can range from cookbooks to history books to novels that deal with Greek America. Young people are not likely to buy such print items on their own, but if they are in the home, they might take a look that will awaken or enrich their sense of Greek identity.

The Greek Orthodox Church

No one can speak of the viability of Greek Americans without speaking of the Greek Orthodox Church. My comments are offered as a historian of Greek America, not as a

congregant with a position regarding specific leaders and agendas. Leaving aside the enormous financial and sexual scandals currently engulfing the Archdiocese, it is evident that the Greek Orthodox Church is in serious decline.

Recent studies reveal that Greek Orthodoxy has the highest rate of people leaving a Christian denomination. The membership of 250,00 households in 1976 has fallen to between 160,000-190,000 as of 2018. Recent decades have witnessed a 40% decline in weddings and baptisms with a corresponding rise in burials. Some parishes are growing, but the total number is ever fewer and associated Orthodox parochial schools are steadily declining. There is a chronic shortage of priests. Although there is an annual \$12 million Church subsidy to support Hellenic College Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, total enrollment is 200 and dropping. This falling enrollment and related factors have risen the specter of loss of accreditation.

A few years ago, Archbishop Demetrios declared the Church was no longer an immigrant institution. That's true, but misleading. Aside from the fact there are few new immigrants, there is no viable plan to attract multi-ethnic Greek Americans, much less those without a Greek heritage. Most converts, in fact, are non-Greeks who marry into the faith. In that respect, the Church remains mostly an ethnic conclave. Moreover, the Church seems content to remain reactive to changing tides. The few responses made tend to be far too little, too late. Existing parishes languish while enormous sums go to showcase projects such as St. Nicholas Church being built adjacent to the new World Trade Center.

The dominant pattern throughout the history of the Greeks in America is that wherever a Greek community forms, it builds an Orthodox church. The relationship is symbiotic. The community sustains the Church while the Church provides a historical identity and memory for the community. If that relationship continues to deteriorate, the very existence of an organized Greek America is at risk.

Looking Ahead

The success of Greeks in America has been phenomenal. Partly this is due to each generation being adept at accepting and adjusting to change. We cannot afford to deviate from that orientation. If we proceed on the firm rock of Hellenism and do not allow ourselves to be trapped in the quick sands of nostalgia and wishful thinking, we can continue to be a prosperous and coherent community. We begin by not denying the challenges presented by the emerging

multi-ethnic Greek America. Our considerable economic, technological, and cultural assets must be put into motion. We cannot be passive.

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