Doubly Outsiders: Pre-war Greek-Australian Migrants and their Socialist Ideals

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article nous plonge dans l'univers des Grecs immigrés en Australie dans les années trente et quarante. L'auteur expose comment l'engagement de certains Grecs dans le Parti communiste les a conduit à définir leur identité de façon très spécifique. Cette étude a été rédigée à partir d'une série d'entretiens, qui permettent d'entendre la voix de ces immigrés fort courageux.

ABSTRACT

This text invites us into the world of Greek immigrants to Australia in the thirties and forties. The author describes how their political commitment to the Communist party in particular led them to define their identity quite differently. The authors quote interviews with witnesses or participants so that we hear the voices of these brave immigrants.

Introduction

In the 1930s and 1940s Greek-Australian migrants with socialist ideals were positioned as dual outsiders. They were excluded not only from the broader Australian society but also from their own ethnic communities.

Australia's Greek communities had previously been established largely through the initiatives of the shop-owning classes or sections whose members forcefully advocated to their compatriots' conformity to a foreigner discourse. According to this discourse it was the place of the Greek-Australian migrant to work hard and remain law abiding without ever making any social and political demands on the system.

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In this paper we explore attempts by Greek-Australia radicals to overcome their dual outsider status through a process in which we construct the Greek communities of Melbourne and Sydney as political entities and link them to the Australian left and labour movements of the time. The account we offer draws on the archives of the Democritus League, Australia's first Greek-Australian workers' league, and the recollections of six Greek-Australians who migrated to Australia as young men during the 1920s and early 1930s. Our informants' stories, along with that of Andreas Raftopoulos, whose efforts to unionize Australia's Greek café workers ultimately resulted in his suicide, show how the outsider status of these migrants gave rise to a conceptual opening for the construction of an Australian identity that could be positively related to their Greekness. We argue that this opening was grounded in the idea that Australian citizenship could be detached from its exclusive ties to British nationhood.

Let us introduce our discussion with a quotation from the first article of the Constitution of a national confederation that was formed in Sydney in 1949.

We, the representatives of various Greek organizations - who strongly believe in the democratic ideals; and in the fundamental principle that the ethical, spiritual and financial advancement and success of individuals can only be achieved with the freedom guaranteed to them by a democratic state; and that for this reason every free person has the duty to defend above all the institution of democracy with every legal means available - at a meeting on the 28th and 29th October, 1949, have formed the Confederation of Greek Organizations in Australia (Democritus Archives, emphasis added).

The Confederation was formed as a means of co-coordinating and facilitating a range of Greek-Australian community organization activities Australia-wide. We will say more about this event below. At this point, the important thing to note is that the founders of this organization did not speak about Australian citizenship rights; instead, they spoke as Australian citizens, despite the fact that many of them would not have been granted this formal status. Indeed, in their

political practice they foresaw by 50 years what the current Australian Government's New Agenda for Multicultural Australia (December 1999) formulates as the essence of official policy on Australian multiculturalism, namely that it accepts and respects the right of all Australians to express and share their individual cultural heritage within an overriding commitment to ... Australian democracy (p. 6, emphasis added).

Who were these visionaries? What were the social and cultural conditions in which they came to formulate their ideas about Australian social and political life and what was the relationship between these ideas and their understanding of the role of their ethnicity? What did it mean for them publicly to articulate their commitment to Australian democracy above all else? Finally, in what ways did their position help to shape the direction of involvement by later post-war Greek-Australians in a form of political practice that constructed their identity as 'Australian citizens-of-Greek-origin'?

Greek Migrants' Australian Identities

Our answers to these and some related questions take us back to the 1920s and 30s when Greek chain migration to Australia had already produced established Greek communities in the major Australian cities. According to Michael Tsounis' extensive historical study of the period "the tendency in each capital was to fashion a typically Greek social and cultural environment which acted to perpetuate the identity of Greeks and maintain a link with their country of birth" (1971, p.115). The first organized moves in this direction came with the formation of the Greek Orthodox Communities (GOCs) in each city, beginning with Melbourne in 1897 and followed by Sydney in 1898. Initially these organizations focused on establishing churches but they went on rather quickly to extend their programs of activity to include social events, celebrations of Greek national anniversaries, charity work, support for the community's unemployed and for Greek national causes (Tsounis, 1971, p. 90; p. 97). Other ethnic

organizations, in the form of both pan-Hellenic and region-based fraternities, and institutions, such as the press and the Greek Church, were being established throughout the 1920s and 1930s. (Tsounis, 1971, p. 65; pp. 130-132).

The GOCs were formally constituted as democratic organizations that were run by leaders elected regularly from the membership base that was open to all Greek migrant men. In practice, however,

as permanent settlers in urban centres, Greek shopkeepers played the most important role in the affairs of communities assuring the continuing existence of Greek immigrant organizations, supplying leadership for these and determining many of their activities and policies (Tsounis, 1971, p. 205).

Furthermore, given that the economic activity of pre-war Greeks was concentrated in the catering trade, Tsounis maintains that from very early on 'the ideal ardently pursued was to become a shop-owner, *katastematarchis*,' so much so that large numbers of Greek migrants'served their apprenticeship as shop assistants and kitchen hands' (1971, p. 57). Work conditions and financial insecurity afforded relatively limited opportunities to the vast majority of pre-war Greek migrants for pursuing contacts outside their communities. But even those from the shop owning sections who, having established themselves financially now devoted time to their social advancement, were forced to restrict their activities to inward oriented Greek community affairs. As a result of the wider xenophobic climate amongst Anglophone Australians, Greek migrants were defined by a foreigner identity:

To the [Australian] people, we are above all a foreign group. They care little about whether we have our citizenship papers. All they want from us is that we should behave as befits foreigners and guests: obey the laws and attend to our business (Hellenic Herald, editorial 12/2/1931, p. 1).

Based on an analysis of conservative Greek press editorials from 1926 to 1935, Christina Holbraad maintains that:

Greeks at this time saw their ethnicity as the characteristic which defined their identity in the society and which determined the relationship of the individual to others. For the individual the most significant distinction in his social world was that between Australians and Greeks. Relations with Australians were seen exclusively in terms of unequal power; and this power inequality was perceived as absolute, vast and static. The immigrants' sense of powerlessness involved the belief that Greeks, as individuals and as a collectivity, were necessarily dependent, inadequate, unprotected and dispensable to the host society. A further and most important component of the sense of powerlessness was the belief that the foreigner identity precluded common interest or affinity across the ethnic boundary. Greeks could not draw on anyone in Australian society for help in achieving objectives (1977, p.167).[3]

To be sure, Holbraad's sources offer us a clear sense of the ways in which ethnicity, in this case Greekness, was lived as marking a rigid boundary between this group and Anglophone Australians. This was not surprising given that throughout this period of our social history, both formally and in public and political practice, Australian citizenship was conflated with British nationhood.[4] So, from this perspective, to be a Greek migrant was most certainly to be an outsider.

Notwithstanding this, the Democritus League records and the testimonies of our informants serve to provide a more complex picture of the positions taken up by pre-war Greek migrants and, indeed, of the role of Greek radicals in the construction of an alternative understanding of the relationship between ethnicity and Australian citizenship that was already in the making and served to challenge their outsider status. These activists first came into contact with left ideas soon after arriving in Australia during the 1920s and 1930s. They all became members of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) most of them having joined after experiencing the great hardships associated with the lead up to, and period of, the 1930 Depression. Indeed, they all attribute their radicalization to their experiences of economic hardship, though their ethnicity would, no doubt, have contributed the specific manner and intensity of their exposure.[5]

Unlike many in the Greek community at the time, the Depression communists[6] placed tremendous emphasis on self-education. This took the forms of listening to the Anglophone speakers at the Domain and Yarra Bank on Sunday afternoons and studying Australian history. It did not take them long to identify closely with the Australian people. They came to see themselves as sharing in an Australian tradition of struggles for survival and advancement that was not too different from their familiar Greek heritage.

Their insistence on self-education enabled the Depression communists to construct their identity as Australians. Jim Mitsopoulos explained that

We did that [that is, organize as Greek left] in association and as a branch of the Australian left movement. ... From the beginning the [Greek] Left movement was very closely associated with the Australian left movement (Interviewed by Stelios Kourbetis, 1987).

Not only did our informants typically refer to themselves as 'we Australians', but they also actively constructed a self-definition that went beyond divisions based on ethnicity. Another of their comrades, Alekos Doukas, sums up the ideals in which this self-definition was grounded. Writing of the Australian working people's solidarity activities, such as rallying support for the families of striking workers, he noted:

These anonymous soldiers ... don't have their own, separate homeland. Nor their own separate language. The whole earth is their homeland; peoples' solidarity is their common language. (Stin Pali, Sta Niata, (For Struggle, For Youth, 1953, p. 341, our translation)

As we will see below, their ethnicity certainly served as a source of meanings and values that could be invoked in the Depression communists' efforts to define their identity as a collectivity within Australian society. But Greekness was by no means the basis for positioning themselves alongside their compatriots as foreigners. Instead, not only did they see themselves as Australian communists but their 'Australianness' was mediated by their discourse of solidarity.

Within this discourse their socialist ideal of internationalism played a unifying role. Through it they were able to take on convictions and attitudes to life that they encountered amongst other Australians irrespective of different national origins. The commitment to bringing about democracy and social equality, the maintenance of a firm stand against racism and the struggle for world peace all extended beyond national origins or ethnic ties.

Their commitments drew our informants into struggles that were taking place within the wider Australian labour movement. The Depression communists were active in the campaigns advanced by their anglophone comrades. For example, they were active in the so-called 'fraternal organizations'. As Alexander puts it,

there were more fraternals than your two hand fingers. There was the International Labor Defence, it was the Workers' International Relief, it was the Friends of the Soviet Union, the Militant Minority Movement. There were more bloody organizations than I can think of. I had to support them, you see (Interviewed by Stelios Kourbetis, 1987).

According to Peter Stevens,

we were selling the [CPA paper] Tribune, books. We were struggling every day (Interviewed by Stelios Kourbetis, 1987).

But they also worked hard to unionize Greek migrant workers who, as we indicated above, wete largely to be found in the catering trade and they played a leadership role in co-operative initiatives such as the Australian Fishmongers' Association. They overcame the limits of an exclusive association with a migrant minority's natural language and customs by positioning themselves within the framework of the abovementioned discourse of solidarity. This discourse enabled them to see themselves as Australian in virtue of their identification with the life struggles of the Australian people.

Accommodating Ethnicity

Even so, this overcoming was not itself achieved at the cost of a rejection or undervaluation of the ongoing importance of their Greek ties and origins. On the contrary, while being active Communist Party of Australia (CPA) members at the margins of Australian society, by the mid-1930s they also succeeded in adding a new dimension to their understanding of their role within the Greek communities. Previously, they would meet, formally or informally, to co-ordinate their political activities as CPA members. In 1935, however, in line with the CPA's call to members to become active in so called mass organizations, the Melbourne based Depression communists were amongst a group of 24 progressives who succeeded in forming the first Greek-Australian workers' league in Melbourne. There were similar moves in Sydney that ultimately resulted in the formation of the Greek ATLAS League in 1939. In Adelaide, the foundation members of the Panhellenic Union drew upon a copy of the Democritus League Constitution to guide them in forming their own organization in 1946. Until then, Greek communists living in South Australia joined the Democritus League and co-coordinated their community-oriented political activities through correspondence with Melbourne based members from whom they also obtained resources from time to time. For present purposes we focus on the Melbourne-based organization.

According to its Constitution, the founders of Democritus, the 'Greek Workers' Mutual Aid, Cultural and Educational League', aimed "to raise members class consciousness ... facilitate their intellectual development' and grant them 'all possible support and help"(Article 2, Constitution, Democritus Archives). From the outset, the emphasis was on the democratic participation of all members in programs of activity and, unlike other Greek community organizations of the time, membership was open to both men and women of Greek origin.

It is worth noting here that the preservation of Greek culture was never represented as a central aim of the organization. From the very

beginning the League's program of activities sought explicitly to organize workers in the interests of the Australian labor movement. Consequently, a significant amount of voluntary work went into the organization of lectures, production and distribution of a bulletin and holding of social gatherings that combined fundraising for various causes. One of the League's first actions was to pledge moral and financial support to striking Australian maritime workers.

Still, an important part of the League's early program supported Greek community efforts to promote Greek culture in the Australian context. As its first major community event the League organized a fundraiser for Melbourne's Greek school. It also enthusiastically accepted invitations from the President of the Greek Orthodox Communities (GOC) and the Greek Church Committee to join in their respective fundraisers for the local hospital and church. This positive response to community needs in relation to three of its most important institutions and facilities represents the League's first attempts to insert itself into community affairs and to define its mass character. Indeed, it was high on the agenda of the League's first elected executive committee both to promote the organization to the Greeks of Melbourne and to initiate cooperative activity with other Greek organizations.

Ethnic Community and Australian Society

The League's attention to 'ethnic concerns' can be read as a way of guarding against political isolation from the mass of Greek migrants in the light of the likelihood of conservative attacks on them as 'un-Greek', a charge that was routinely made in Greece against the Left. Nevertheless, this attention to ethnic issues and the Greek community was not merely instrumental or strategic. Through their actions, League members took a decisive step in the direction of what would prove to be a historical redefinition of the relationship between the insular Greek community and the wider Australian society. In forming the first Greek-Australian workers' league the members were

responsible for socially instituting a new understanding of the connection between Greek ethnicity and Australianness.

Previously the forms of collective organization available to Greek migrants *as Greeks* were premised on an understanding of Greekness as marking separation; this difference was constructed by reference to the mutually exclusive categories of Greekness and Australianness. So, for example, the GOCs, understood Greekness in terms of the traditional valuing of the Greek language, religion and homeland and differed from Greek Church authorities only in that their decisionmaking structure was democratic rather than hierarchical. Both these institutions sought to preserve Hellenicity which they understood as a fixed and pregiven substance. They treated it as surrounded by another foreign substance, Australianness, that was only ever confronted as a potential or actual source of attack on Greekness. The conservatives within the GOC promoted this understanding of the relationship of ethnicity to Australianness as did the Greek press by regularly reminding Greeks that...

The Greek does not forget the traditions of his fathers. He does not forget his language. He never loses his orthodox ethos. Let them call him dago, as they will, the Greek will stay Greek in his soul and mind to his dying day (Hellenic Herald, editorial, 3/3/26, p. 3, cited in Holbraad, 1977, p.147)

In contrast, Democritus League members could at once embrace the Australian labour movement as their own site of struggle and raise funds for the community's Greek school and church because they acted within a framework that enabled them to see the ethnic practices of Greek language learning and spiritual expression as being amongst the particular and specific ways in which ethnicity marks universal values, in this case the values of human intellectual and spiritual advancement. For them, ethnicity was dynamically constructed rather than set out statically marking and preserving boundaries with everything Australian.

As such, their ethnicity offered them opportunities to explore its potential for articulating the universal values through which they could also identify themselves as Australian. Characteristically, in an editorial that sought to introduce their *Bulletin* to readers they drew upon the long tradition of Greek philosophy and on the history of Greek liberation struggles to point out to the readership the links between their twin duty to oppose the German occupation of Greece and to create 'a new life and liberty in Australia' (*Democratic Bulletin*, 1943, Democritus Archives).

Democritus 'call for' the creation of a new life and liberty in Australia marks the first occasion on which a Greek migrant organization advanced this kind of ideal. The Leagues' members were well aware of the radical nature of their claim, not only because migrants were excluded from mainstream Australian society, but also because, as explained earlier, Greek migrants typically defined themselves in insular and ethnocentric terms. They were so convinced that it was the right time for them to present themselves as an integral part of Australian society that at their General Meeting, in July, 1943, they decided to change their emblem that consisted of 'two hands that greet each other as a symbol of solidarity' (Democritus Minutes Book, 1943). This was replaced with interwoven Greek and Australian symbols. Article 10 of their revised Constitution, reads:

The League seal is composed of the Greek Flag in a Circle with the torch of Education upon which the Southern Cross is superimposed, and the League's name around it in Greek and English (Democritus Archives).

One of the founders of the League, Vasili Stefanou, recalled that if you looked at the emblem of the Democritus, you would see that it is a round thing with the Greek flag and the name of the organization around it. If you noticed more carefully you saw that on the Greek flag is the Southern Cross to bring about the relationship of the Greeks with the Australians. Most of the Greeks only wanted the Greek flag. So we said, 'Not on your bloody life. You've got to have something about Australia' (Interviewed by Zara Sarandis, 1986).

In other words, they took their Australian identity to incorporate, rather than deny, their Greek heritage. One consequence of their stance was the rise of what was to become a long-standing conflict between left and right forces within the community. Conservative Greek migrants had always been reluctant to show any critical stance to the representatives of the Metaxas régime in Australia and this had caused some friction from as early as 1939 when Democritus League members succeeded in calling upon attendants to disrupt a public meeting at which the Greek representative of Metaxas was due to speak. The reaction of the GOC was to attempt to ostracize the Democritus League. It refused to attend any community gathering at which the League was also represented in the hope of pressuring other community organizations to distance themselves from co-operative activities with the League.

These kinds of tensions between the left and right were not restricted to Melbourne. In Sydney, they resulted in Andreas Raftopulos' suicide in 1941. Raftopoulos, who had been married with two children, had left his family behind in Greece to become one the many young migrant men who found work as a kitchen hand in Sydney's Greek restaurants and cafés. However, Andreas was also an intense person with a heightened sense of social responsibility and this led him to join the Communist Party of Australia. He had been putting in long hard hours seven days a week at his brother-in-law's restaurant on Oxford Street in Sydney when the Party decided that the Greek comrades should attempt to unionize the café workers. After some discussion with his Greek comrades Raftopoulos left his job to become an organizer with the Restaurant Employees Union, making him this country's first union organizer of Greek origin.[8]

Those who knew Raftopoulos were under no illusions as to the cause of his suicide. According to Alekos Doukas' portrayal of events in *Kato Apo Xenous Ouranous* (Under Foreign Skies, our translation), a novel based on the author's real-life experiences of pre-war Australia:

[H]is [Raftopoulos'] 'compatriots' pushed him over the edge. They would lay complaints with the authorities branding him a terrorist and

an anarchist. On his way home every night he would be accompanied by a couple of shadows. They never approached him, they would not speak to him, they only followed him. His room would always be disturbed; his bags opened and his belongings scattered around yet nothing was ever taken. They wanted to shatter his nerves and they succeeded. On Judgement Day the blood of this unfortunate man, still in the prime of his youth, will weigh heavily against those responsible (1963, p. 252).

Dimitris Kalomiris, another of Raftopoulos' comrades, confirms that Raftopoulos had fallen victim to a concerted effort to rid the community of left activists. Kalomiris recalls that

when word of Raftopoulos' suicide got out we [left activists] panicked whereas the community establishment celebrated his death as a moment of success in its war against the progressive movement. Indeed, as the news spread throughout the community the threats we had been receiving for some time increased: it would be our turn soon; we would be imprisoned, killed, exiled and the like (Chronico, 10, p.15).

Throughout the 1940s, conservatives within the community tried to construct as un-Greek all League initiatives. In this way they constructed a dual outsider status for their opponents. But the conservative community leaders also sought to be seen as acting in accordance with the image of Greek migrants that they believed the Australian authorities preferred. This explains why the conservatives within the community often sought the support of the Australian authorities in their attacks upon the left.[9] These actions represented attempts to root out troublemakers who behaved in an un-Australian way. Their strategy was to create an image of the Greek left that represented them as, at one and the same time, less than Greek and less than Australian.

Despite this atmosphere of conflict and all efforts to restrict Greek activists to the margins of the Greek communities in both Melbourne and Sydney, the response of the workers' leagues to international events resulted in their becoming a major political force by the mid-1940s. During this period the Democritus League membership shot

up to 250 and repeated new membership drives setting targets for 150 new members came to be considered entirely realistic in this period. Wide respect and mass support was gained, not only because the workers' Leagues led community campaigns in support of the Australian war effort, but also because they took a strong stand against British intervention in the immediate post-war conflict between Greece's opposed political forces that resulted in civil war. (Democritus Minutes Book, 1943-46)

Throughout the 1940s, League members put a lot of time and effort into strengthening ties, not only with other Greek community organizations, but also with other migrant groups and with progressive and democratic organizations including trade unions, the CPA and the Australian Labor Party. These efforts constituted an on-going struggle to transform the Greek community from an inward looking, isolated group to a political entity that could ultimately function as an integral part of Australian social and political life.

The Confederation of Greek Organizations

It was in this climate that the Confederation of Greek Organizations was formed in 1949. As indicated at the outset, the Confederation representatives chose to speak as Australian citizens but migrants' citizenship status was not itself an issue at the conference. Instead, the meeting adopted aims addressed to the social conditions of the time, seeking

- to support world peace and a return of peace to Greece;
- to co-ordinate member organizations' efforts to promote humanitarian relief to the victims of the Greek civil war;
- to co-ordinate member organizations' efforts to defend the democratic ideals and the state of democracy in Australia;
- to struggle against anti-foreigner feeling and to cultivate friendly relations with Australian democratic organizations;

- to contribute to the organization of Greek life in Australia in the areas of community politics, educational and cultural developments;
- to provide support to new Greek migrants and
- to assist in their free absorption into the Australian people.

These aims developed out of a year-long series of meetings held around the country. It is worth noting also that the conference participants had already claimed for Greek migrants the identity of 'citizens' and, indeed, of 'Greek-Australians' at least from as early as 1944 with the distribution of the June edition of the *Democratic Bulletin* (Democritus Archives). Incidentally, in the same edition an article on racism in Australia offers an early rendition of the principle of multiculturalism. By introducing the idea of 'bringing together all nationalities ... for the pleasure and benefit of all' the article effectively reduces the dominant culture to one amongst many.

Against this background and judging from the choice of Confederation aims it is probably fair to speculate that the Confederation founders did not address migrants' formal citizenship status because they placed their emphasis on the work that needed to be done to transform and accommodate Australian conditions to their own, already existing concept of active Greek-Australian citizenship. Even when they enjoyed formal citizenship status, it was not possible for Greek migrants to participate in Australian political life as equal citizens in the absence of an effective separation of Australian citizenship from British nationhood. The first challenge to the conflation of these two ideas arose with the Conference participants' adoption of the identity of Australian-citizen-of-Greek-origin. In this way the 1949 conference also marks the beginning of a 20-year struggle by Greek-Australian activists to translate into concrete political practice their demand for the separation of Australian citizenship from British nationhood.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented to 'Traditions and Transitions: 13th Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative', Melbourne, 2001. The authors conducted the research for this paper in their capacity as staff members of the University of Adelaide pursuant to an ARC grant administered by the Department of Social Inquiry, Women's Studies, Labour Studies. We would also like to thank all the contributors to our research and especially the members of the Democritus League and the Atlas League for allowing us access to the organizations' archives.

2. Tsounis, 1971, p. 56; p. 205. Indeed, by 1947 this trade occupied 71% of Greek migrants. See Tsounis 1971, p. 56; p. 205.

3. Later researchers have also argued that it was, indeed, in the class interests of the shop-owning classes to perpetuate this stranger mentality amongst their work force. See, for example, Kakakios and van der Velden, 1984.

4. Davidson, 1997.

5. Stelios Kourbetis argues that ethnicity based concerns were at the heart of the radicalization process for these 1920s and 1930s Greek communists, despite their own claims to the contrary. As evidence he cites editorials of the first left leaning newspaper, The *Australian-Greek.* As further evidence he points to (1) their concern to establish Greek workers' leagues; (2) the naming of the leagues after Greek philosophers and mythological figures; and (3) the Democritus league's support for the Melbourne community's Greek school (Kourbetis, 1990, pp. 58-61). However, all these events took place well after the people in question had become active members of the CPA.

6. We have borrowed this phrase ftom from MacIntyre, 1998.

7. For a comprehensive history of the CPA in this period see MacIntyre, 1998.

8. Editorial interview with George Kalomeris, Chronico, 10, pp. 10-15.

9. For a depiction of these attacks, see Doukas, 1963, p. 253.

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