Cultures, Multiculturalism and Difference: Some Greek-Australian Initiatives

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RÉSUMÉ

Les cultures du multucturalisme officiel Australien sont les ethnocultures qui peuvent engendrer certains stéréotypes. Ici, j'analyse les initiatives de quelques Grecs Australiens, qui démontrent les intersections des rapports sociaux. Je traite les thèmes suivants : la participation des femmes et des personnes âgées, les activités interculturelles, les études du racisme institutionel et les conséquences des politiques multiculturelles. Les Grecs Australiens sont aussi très actifs dans le domaine des arts, en maintenant des formes de dialogue entre les générations et les ethnocultures. Ces connaissances narratives de plus en plus traversent les discours publiques et démontrent une société Australienne hétérogène. Celles-ci suggèrent aussi la possibilité d'une démocratie participatoire et interculturelle.

ABSTRACT

The cultures of Australian multiculturalism are defined as ethnocultures: forms of essentialism that easily become stereotypes. In this paper, I analyse the activities of several Greek Australians who demonstrate the 'connectedness' of social relations, of living across difference. Some of the themes discussed here are : the participation of women and the elderly, intercultural activities, studies of institutional racism and of the consequences of multicultural policies. Greek Australians are also prominent in the arts, maintaining a form of 'conversation' between generations and ethnocultures. This narrative knowledge increasingly caracterises public discourse reflecting a heterogeneous Australian society. They also raise the possibility of a participatory intercultural democracy.

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The Cultures of Multiculturalism

The cultures of multicultural societies are usually read as ethnocultures, subsuming other forms of culture related to class, gender, region, urban/rural location, and so on. In official celebrations of multiculturalism, ethnocultures are invariably represented in ways that frame acceptable aspects of tradition and custom for general consumption. This rather static model of ethnic diversity renders manageable a complex reality, criss-crossed by 'fuzzy boundaries'. Not surprisingly, the unfuzzy version concentrates on groups and associations that can be articulated to the governmental apparatus within specific models of political organization. The individuals who constitute 'ethnic communities' tend to disappear in these forms of structured multiculturalism. At the same time, the ethnocultural categories that define such imagined communities can become essentialisms of 'national character' that readily generate stereotypes (cf. Herzfeld, 1992 ; Bottomley, 1994).

Within the space of this paper, I will trace some of the activities of a small number of Greek Australians who have questioned the neat essentialisms (and abuses) of official multiculturalism and, in the process, posed the possibility of a genuinely participatory pluralism. The Australian version of multiculturalism that developed in the 1970s indicated progress beyond the earlier policy of assimilation, but the multicultural ideal has wanned during periods of conservative government; a tendency which suggests that such an ideal is necessarily associated with rights, participation and what Charles Taylor (1994) describes as a politics of recognition, an openness to the displacement of horizons of understanding. The multicultural apparatus in Australia has included Ethnic Communities Councils, Ethnic Affairs Commissions, a National Multicultural Advisory Council and numerous other formal organizations, but has not faced squarely such crucial issues as systemic racism, sector inequalities and the recognition of Australia itself as a polyethnic, multilingual and increasingly intercultural nation. Such a recognition, as Taylor suggests, requires some understanding of difference, including attention to the lived

experience of members of ethnic minorities and an ongoing critique of the pervasive Anglomorphism of Australian society. It would also include minority interests, not simply as window dressing, but as different ways of inhabiting the world (and the space) that we all share. The 'subjects' of this paper demonstrate, in various ways, their active engagement with connectedness rather than separation.

Some Greek-Australian Initiatives Towards Intercultural Participation

The Greek population in Australia has an established reputation for social action that goes well beyond celebratory multiculturalism (cf. Dimitreas 1998). Such action includes the early establishment of community-based welfare centres, workers' associations and networks of advice and assistance, and the later proliferation of educational programs, films, literature, theatre and other intercultural arts. My focus here on a few individuals barely scratches the surface of this energetic engagement, but this brief account offers a glimpse of the activities of a small number of Greek Australians using their particular skills and understanding in working towards a more participatory intercultural democracy in Australia. These thumbnail sketches are not intended as biographies, but as examples of social action within specific contexts. However, they do not represent `types', either. Their individual trajectories differ and their choice of action has been self-motivated, partly arising from personal experiences and qualities. The one orientation which they have in common is formulated around the sharing of knowledge, ideals of democratic participation and the human right to develop areas of freedom. These ideals cannot be confined within the limits of official ethnocultures, but they are particularly important themes in Greek history and culture.

The most consistently activist of these 'subjects' is Dorothy Buckland Fuller, who was the first woman to be appointed as Commissioner in the Ethnic Affairs Commission of New South Wales, undertaking pathbreaking work in the latter part of the 1970s. Born in Alexandria, Dorothy lived and worked in London before migrating to Australia with her family. I was fortunate enough to

meet her in 1969 when she was employed as a part time social worker at the Greek Orthodox Community of New South Wales and was also concerned to widen the agenda of the Community and to include non-Greeks in Community activities . At the same time, Dorothy was completing an Honours degree in Sociology at the University of New South Wales, where she later taught classes in the sociology of migration. Her personal and intellectual generosity has been an invaluable resource, not only to researchers, but to a wide range of people seeking advice and support. She particularly encouraged the participation of women in Community affairs, and has remained a tireless advocate of what the late Jean Martin described as 'robust pluralism' (Martin 1978). Within structures such as the Ethnic Affairs Commission, the Ethnic Communities Council, and the Forum on the Ageing, Dorothy has continued to challenge, mediate and explain, using radio, television and print media to bridge gaps in language and experience, and forcefully arguing alternatives to the comfortable status quo presented by various oligarchies. She has continued her work in education, organization, advising and analysing well beyond the age of retirement, and beyond the domain of 'ethnic affairs'. Her services have been recognized in several awards, including an M.B.E. , but she considers the increasingly active and intercultural participation of younger Australians, many of them women, to be more satisfying than official recognition. The internationalism that underlies her openness to difference has also been widely recognized, to the extent that Dorothy has the unusual distinction of being an invited and honoured guest at gatherings of First Nation people in Australia, Canada and the United States.

Another Greek Australian, Dr Alex Kondos, who also worked in sociology at the University of New South Wales, used his considerable analytic and research skills to address institutionalized discrimination in Australia. Working with undergraduate classes on social research projects, Alex undertook detailed studies of Aboriginal housing and access to legal support in inner city Sydney, where exclusion and discrimination are widespread. In 1978, however, the same areas of inner city Sydney witnessed a slightly different form of discrimina-

tion when, in his words, 'about 180 or so Greek Australians in Sydney were arrested and charged with conspiring to defraud the Department of Social Security - an event popularly known as the "Greek conspiracy". (Kondos, 1992, p.5)

These raids took place in the early morning, and Commonwealth police confiscated property, including children's bankbooks, and bundled shocked and disoriented 'suspects' into cells with drug addicts and criminals. The committal hearings, which took five years and cost an estimated $100 million, revealed that a conspiracy certainly existed, but it was generated against rather than by 'the Greeks'. This abject contradiction to multiculturalism has been analysed by several writers (cf. Jakubowicz, A. et al, 1984; Bottomley, G. and de Lepervanche, M.,1990), but Alex Kondos examined the event in terms of the concept and practice of 'institutional racism'. In this analysis, he challenged the assumption that multiculturalism has addressed and diminished institutional racism. With particular concentration on the way the 'Greek conspiracy' was constructed for public consumption, he analysed press coverage of the events over a period of five years from April 1978 to June 1982. By 1979, a number of authorities had begun to question the validity of the evidence offered by the Crown prosecutor, and media reports changed from a general, and prejudiced, acceptance of the accusations to a critique of police procedures. The last of the accusations was finally dismissed 8 years after the arrests.

In 1982, after all the charges had been dropped, Dr Kondos and his students at the University of New South Wales undertook a small scale survey of 300 Anglo-Celtic residents of Sydney, and found that 70% believed that the Greek defendants had been guilty of conspiracy to defraud (Kondos 1992, p.12). At the same time, the victims of this massive injustice continued to multiply - there were se-veral suicides and long term traumas, and a widespread feeling that the reputations of all Greek speakers had been impugned. Although the proceedings produced a damning indictment of the Australian autho-rities, the generator of these actions, the Chief Inspector of the Australian Federal Police, has never been charged and is now a barri-ster in

receipt of a police pension (cf. Bottomley, G. and de Lepervanche, M. 1990, p.66).

These examples of mainstream reactions reinforce Dr Kondos's focus on institutional racism, which, he argues, has been overt in Australia's treatment of the Aboriginal population and exclusionist immigration policies, notoriously the 'White Australia Policy' which defined post-war immigration selection procedures. These policies also reinforced commonsense understandings, including what he calls 'antagonistic sentiments' that come into operation within a poli-tical arena and are identifiable in verbal and non-verbal techniques. In this particular case, there was close co-operation between several go-vern-ment departments, and the police assumed the guilt of those accused. In analysing the media accounts, Kondos revealed the same common-sense racism, the assumption of guilt that 'drew upon the Anglo-Celtic collective memory of antagonistic sentiments against non-English-speaking migrants' (1992, p.20). The language used to describe this 'conspiracy' depicted a homogeneous and close-knit 'enemy within', determined to generate 'chaos' and promulgate mafia-like tendencies.

To a considerable extent, this form of categorism is a distor-ted rep-resentation of the simplistic multiculturalism referred to earlier in this paper, whereby all Greek-speakers, for example, are lumped into a homogeneous designation that obscures considerable diffe-rences and exaggerates similarities to the point where stereotypes rea-dily fold into forms of cultural racism, within which cultural characteristics or practices are seen as somehow innate ('in the blood'). This model is closely linked to ethnonationalisms, which also homogenize differ-ences within nation states such as Greece itself and can be reproduced in countries of emigration, despite the dislocation. The idea of a mul-ticultural nation, therefore, requires a radical questioning of the basis of European nationalisms.

I have discussed Dr Kondos's paper in some detail because it is one of the few addressing the negative possibilities inherent in forms of multiculturalism that fail to examine the consequences of stereoty-

ping. In this research, Kondos chose to employ his experience as a skilled researcher, in Australia and elsewhere, and his more general interest in social justice. But he also used his own resources as a Greek Australian with an extensive social and cultural understanding of the research 'subjects'. This material and other sources were made available in an excellent video named Witch Hunt, which was screened several times on ABC and SBS television. But the omnipresence of commonsense racism has also been demonstrated in recent political movements in Australia, especially around the One Nation Party, whose agenda contains anti-migrant, and, especially anti-Aboriginal programs. Clearly, the kind of rigorous critique provided by Dr Kondos remains an important component of a genuinely multicultural society.

The third individual on my list is Vasilis Georgiou, whose pre-migration experience in Greece demonstrated a deep commitment to education, achieved, despite problems of distance and limited financial resources. This commitment continued in Australia, where Vasilis and his brother Christos combined family responsibilities and full time work with part time tertiary studies. Graduating with a B.Ec. from the University of Sydney in 1982, Vasilis gradually gathered support from Greek organizations, brotherhoods and individuals to set up a program of Modern Greek Studies at Macquarie University. The program was based on those of the Department of Modern Greek at the University of Sydney and was generously supported by staff members from Sydney, who provided what one of them described as 'Greek on wheels', regularly making the half hour or so journey to give lectures at Macquarie. The Sydney department also offered honours and postgraduate study to eligible students from Macquarie. Without this voluntary labour, together with the energy and commitment of a small number of people and the financial support of Greek community organizations and individuals, the Macquarie initiative would have been impossible. For reasons that remain unclear to me, even as a longterm staff member, Macquarie University itself has offered minimal support to programs in Greek and Italian, the languages of the two largest non-Anglophone minorities in Australia.

During the mid to late 1980s, Vasilis and I formulated a study of Greek Australian families in Sydney, exploring some of the consequences/outcomes of a decade of multicultural policies. We undertook this project together with the assistance of a small Macquarie University Research Grant, but Vasilis defined its trajectory and did all the interviewing. Because of his increasing responsibilities and serious health problems, he was never able to complete the transcription of these long and detailed interviews, intended as a comparative socio-economic study in the areas of Marrickville, Kogarah/Hurstville, and Kingsford/Kensington. But we were able to publish some preliminary results on the Marrickville study of fifty households, covering economic, social, and multicultural themes as well as feminism and familial changes (cf. Bottomley and Georgiou 1988). Several significant trends emerged. For example, 36% of these households had been affected by unemployment and suffered severe economic problems. The rate of work-related injuries was also high, at 25% of those in paid employment. Knowledge of and contact with Greece was an important and current aspect of people's lives, although most identified positively with Australia, despite experiences of discrimination. `Ethnic' media - print, radio, and television - were considered valuable and well used. In general, the policy of multiculturalism was regarded favourably, signalling to these families that their interests had gained some recognition, despite the overt discrimination apparent in the so-called 'Greek conspiracy' case. But a strong theme emerging from Vasili's interviews was that of the importance of (i) a reliable material base, and (ii) kin-based solidarity for the maintenance of self-respect.

An important contribution of this research rests in its detailed attention to the influence of government policy and socio-political circumstances on the lives of these working class families. At the same time, Vasili's long and detailed interviews (taking up to 4 hours per household) explored cultural and intergenerational changes, including those related to feminism and family ideals. Vasilis had his own observational and experiential understanding, as an acute observer and careful listener, of the lives of his friends and relatives and of the students in his classes, hence the interviews were always interactive. One of the

many tragic aspects of his early death in 1996 was that the short paper to which I have referred is the only record of this carefully planned research project.

My intention here, however, is to demonstrate the significance of projects such as those undertaken by Vasilis Georgiou. The establishment of studies of Modern Greek is generally accepted (though not necessarily supported) as being immensely valuable to the offspring of migrants, but also in offering to a wider audience a more profound understanding of a significant part of Europe, which has influenced Australia in a range of ways that include cultural, historical, religious, linguistic and philosophical aspects, among others. A genuinely participatory multiculturalism would facilitate the exploration of that complex range of influences, as part of a politics of recognition. At the same time, it would be attentive to the lived experiences of families such as those included in Vasili's interviews.

Cultures Beyond Ethno-Cultures

I mentioned earlier some of the problems generated by the definition of the 'culture' in multiculturalism as essentialist 'ethno-cultures'. In practice, the fuzzy boundaries of ethno-cultures have enabled movement well beyond the parallel ethnicities implicit in most official versions of multiculturalism, which also ignore crucial aspects of power relations, as we saw in the conspiracy case. One of the most interesting and productive manifestations of the Greek-Australian presence arises from cultural creativity that moves beyond the limits of, but remains in conversation with a more formally constituted 'Greek culture'. I want to emphasize the concept of 'conversation', partly because of the pervasiveness of a commonsense notion that the second and third generation offspring of migrants necessarily reject their parents' horizons of understanding. This digital model of generational change has been challenged by empirical research for decades now, but it tends to endure in a kind of two-step with the assimilationist aspects of multiculturalism. Not surprisingly, intergenerational transformations are much more complicated. The idea of conversation, however, retains a sense of connection between generations and ethnocultures that is neither that of cultural reproduction

nor of total rejection. Terms such as 'interweaving' have been used to recall this connectedness, which is clearly apparent in creative work as well as in the daily negotiation of what Sigmund Freud described as the agonistic psychic process of identification (cf. Zaretsky, 1994).

The proliferation of and interest in new forms of literature, music and other creative work demonstrates ways in which this process has been obscured by the assumption of essentialist identities. As I argued earlier, official multiculturalism has offered acceptably public 'ethnic identities', while maintaining boundaries around a private domain where less acceptable aspects of multiculturalism can remain hidden. But the second and third generations cross or straddle those boundaries, writing, singing, painting, performing and filming cultural practices that interrogate ethnocultural and other 'identities' defined as sameness. Even where the performances include traditional models - for example, of dance and music - these are inflected by the context and the performers (cf. Bottomley 1992). Demeter Tsounis (1995) has made detailed studies of 'diaspora musical style and identity', with special reference to forms of rebetika in Australia, which is readily classifiable as 'ethnic music' but has much wider appeal. Other creative work is more confronting, including themes of familial and interpersonal conflict, homosexuality, delinquency, and everyday racism, as well as love, compassion and generosity, revealing, in the words of Hannah Arendt, 'how rich and manifold the hidden can be under conditions of intimacy' (Arendt, 1958).

Clearly, these particular cultural practices develop the sharing of a public symbolic space marked by erstwhile private narratives that evoke both intimacy and ambiguity. They often take the form of auto-biography, but provide a basis for a range of universal reflections. A brilliant recent example is George Alexander's *Mortal Divide: the autobiography of Yiorgos Alexandroglou* (1997). The author, suffering from 'incremental reality slippage', tracks through a labyrinth of memory and reflection, accompanied by his alter ego, Yiorgos Alexandroglou. During excursions into the lives of George's mother and father (especially the latter, as this crisis blends masculinity, parenthood, love, sexuality and ethnicity), the reader encounters brilliant descriptions of his

father's cooking, and the multilingual melange of his Greek/Italian/Egyptian background. George himself was born in Australia, hence his memories are often comparative and screened through those of his parents. For example, in attempting to imagine his father's imagination, he notes the 'rhymes' between Australia and Egypt-the deserts, the frangipani flowers and flame trees, the boats on the rivers, 'the fellaheen and the blackfella' (p.38). One of the striking aspects of this book is the brilliance of its imagery; another is the play of language(es). George's reflections are recorded in letters to his daughter, a major thread in this conversation that crosses generations, genders and the contingencies of ethnic and geographical location. The accompanying photo-montage by Peter Lyssiotis is suitably surreal and polythetic, but the small photograph on the back cover of tiny 5 year old George engulfed in an over-large version of an evzon costume and standing in a vast ex-urban front yard has its own surreal qualities!

I have neither the space nor the expertise to expand on the range of cultural work being produced by Greek Australians, but I would note its high profile and energy, especially in engagement with the private in the public, and with the project of what I have described as 'connectedness'. The agonistic aspect of the process of identification (i.e. in the Greek sense, as struggle) is central to the work of another Greek Australian, Dr Nikos Papastergiadis, who was born in the heartland of the Melbourne Greek community (Brunswick Street), but has travelled widely and worked outside Australia. Dr Papastergiadis has explored themes of ethno-nationa-lism, migration, exile and diaspora, particularly in sensitive and powerful studies of writers such as John Berger, Homi Bhabha, and David Malouf, but also within socio-political contexts (cf. Papastergiadis, 1998,1993). In 1999, he organized a series of public seminars in Sydney around the theme of 'Disappearing Publics' posing some of the questions that I have alluded to in this paper, such as the connection between private and public, the effect of state policy in pre-defining people's lives, and the location of art in a disappearing public, where privatization is rife. These well-attended seminars were held at Artspace, a visual arts centre that

includes space for book launches, discussions, and seminars as part of a continuing engagement beyond the traditional concept of an 'art gallery'. Artspace, under the direction of Nicholas Tsoutas, also publishes some of the material arising from these activities. The participants in the 'Disappearing Publics' seminars - artists, film-makers, academics, curators and others - constantly related the wider sociopolitical 'picture' to lived experience, their own and that of other people, particularly those who are increa-singly excluded from 'the public'.

In the widespread reception of what Lyotard (1959) described as 'narrative knowledges', which tend to be glossed as irrelevant to the 'main game', other forms of collective memory are under construction. This process is something like a practice of recognition, not simply a celebration of difference as an aesthetic project, but an identification with experiences that are partly shared and partly translated through specific understandings. Areas of conversation can thus open up through a logic of practice which, to paraphrase Bourdieu (1990), is always polythetic, taking up many positions and able to sustain a multiplicity of meanings. It is worth bearing in mind that this is not the logic that underlies the State versions of multiculturalism but it clearly 'speaks' to a sizeable proportion of the population.

'Multicultural arts' in particular have emerged from the domain of 'the Other' into a space where they present sophisticated challenges to the main game, including ways of recalling lived experience in all its contradictions, rather than in stereotyped form suitable to neat political packaging. In lifting a mirror to this heterogeneous society, they also reflect the shared process of living across difference, where private and personal themes are tangled together with the political and public. I have argued in this paper that such interconnections are crucial if we are to move beyond the essentialisms of categories that define much of the policy and practice of multiculturalism. The aspect of containment within the boundaries of official multiculturalism is constantly challenged in practice that raises issues of participatory democracy and a genuinely intercultural political project. Within such a project, the activities of individuals who question essentialisms and exclusions, expand possibilities and displace horizons of understan-

ding are crucial. This is not 'minority politics', but the practice of working towards ideals that are widely claimed to be shared.

Acknowledgements:

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