

## **Transnational Modern Greek Studies by Prof. Yiorgos Anagnostou**

Modern Greek Studies has flourished through a commitment to the study of culture - texts, customs, genres, performances, institutions - in a national context. This nation-centric approach reflects the historical connection between disciplinary practices of academic specialization and modern forms of geopolitical organization. For political science, economics, archaeology, folklore, sociology, history, and linguistics, the nation-state offered a convenient unit of analysis to examine issues crucial to modernity - nation-building, democratization, modernization, consolidation, continuity, change, and national identity. For anthropology and literature, national discourses situated the production of texts and local practices. The political success of the nation-state legitimized its elevation as a privileged object of study. And the scholarly necessity to contextualize cultural production enhanced the value of the nation as a convenient framework to manage the analysis of complex phenomena.

This nation-centric approach averted introspective insularity. Modern Greek Studies effectively situated cultural practices in relation to discourses that transcended national borders. Fiction and poetry were analyzed through the prism of Modernism. Identity was analyzed in relation to western discourses on Hellenism. The field expended vast energies in reflecting how to position itself in connection to western epistemological developments. Sophisticated reflexivity led to an extrovert attitude that in turn helped advance the field, entering in conversation with numerous disciplines. The latest interest in opening venues of exchange with Classics testifies to this ongoing trend.

Thinking nationally generated an extraordinary wealth of detailed research across the disciplinary board, enabling and sustaining a comparative perspective. Linguists, for instance, compared how nations addressed the "problems" of diglossia. Ethnographers built on finely-tuned knowledge about localities to undermine notions of supra-national homogeneous cultural areas.

This rich cross-fertilization legitimized the nation-centrism of the field. At the same time it resulted in a paradox. As Modern Greek Studies cultivated venues of exchanges with numerous disciplines, it failed to establish enduring ties with scholarship on Greek culture outside the Greek national borders. In the United States, for instance, two fields committed in principle to advancing knowledge about the Greek world - Modern Greek and Greek-American Studies - suffer from an awkward - some would say embarrassing - relationship. Modern Greek Studies in this context largely translates into the study of Greek society. The conspicuous scarcity of scholarship on Greek culture outside Greece in its official institutional forum, the *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, illustrates the nation-centric bias of the field.

The powerful differential between these two fields of study - measured in terms of academic visibility in the United States - captures the extent of this break down. Unlike Modern Greek Studies, Greek America finds itself gravely underrepresented in prestigious academic publications in anthropology, folklore, history, diaspora, and literary studies. It borders invisibility in studies of popular culture, film, performance, women, theater and plastic and visual arts. For the last twenty-five years, when Greek anthropology has enjoyed widespread academic recognition, Greek America, astonishingly, can not even claim a single book-length professional ethnography!

An opportunity to reform this state of affairs presents itself once attention shifts from the analysis of Greek society to the comparative study of Greek worlds across national borders. This shift in the analytical frame takes into account multidirectional flows of people, ideas, practices, and material goods that link manifestations of Greek culture globally. Such redirection encourages the exploration of Greek circuits, convergences, similarities, disjunctures, continuities, and discontinuities beyond the nation-state.

Thinking about Greek worlds transnationally does not represent a forced academic imposition. Rather, such perspective belatedly strives to keep pace with historical patterns of movements that, though mediated by the nation-state, transcend the territorially-based nation to forge transnational ties, enable exchanges, bring about cultural appropriations, and contribute to the formation of new subjectivities.

In Greece and the Greek diaspora, transnational links are increasingly taken into account in literature, deployed in popular culture, and addressed by scholarship. Greek novelists for instance situate their characters in transnational fields, mapping out how diaspora Greeks contribute to social developments in their host society but also function as agents of social change in their places of birth. Popular ethnographers based in the United States travel in search of roots in Greece and produce narratives of multiple identities, in the process shaping the materiality of and knowledge about places of ancestral origins and places of dwelling. Scholars have been able to show how narratives of repatriated migrants about the self transgress the nation-centric frame, drawing upon personal histories of transatlantic migration as well as upon national histories.

Transnational practices denote spatial and cultural movement. Embedded in these flows are transgressions of traditional codes, translations between cultures, transactions among diverse peoples, and transversals across social fields. Transnationality juxtaposes differences and similarities in tension, necessitates cross-cultural exchanges, and brings about novel social arrangements while it reconfigures existing ones. It is timely therefore to systematically develop a transnational Modern Greek Studies that brings these processes into sharp focus.

A transnational studies perspective moves the debate beyond what I believe represents an erroneous dichotomy between Modern Greek Studies and Greek Diaspora or Greek Ethnic Studies. It does so by recognizing that transnationality unfolds at the intersection of at least two interrelated processes: culture is situated, it is embedded, that is, in specific political and cultural economies. And at the same time, culture cannot be seen as a monolithic entity contained by its national context, but rather as a process of complex links across national borders.

In the context of Greek scholarship in the United States, the former recognition addresses the complaint often expressed by practitioners of Greek American Studies: Modern Greek Studies has not paid sufficient attention to the American context that has shaped Greek cultural production in the States. The latter recognition serves as a corrective to the endemic nation-centrism of a powerful strand within American Ethnic Studies.

To think transitionally, then, means to map cultural production in terms of dispersed cultural fields differentially constituted by specific economies yet connected through common practices and discourses that cross national borders. For example, a Greek ethnic festival in Columbus, Ohio, and a folklore spectacle performed for tourist consumption in Athens, Greece share similarities while they are kept distinct by their defining cultural and political economies. Produced at the intersection between American liberal multiculturalism and local community activism, the former must negotiate the performance of difference in relation to a hegemonic culture. The latter on the other hand, is often subsidized and sanctioned by the state, manifesting the dominant culture. Yet both the ethnic festival and the national spectacle can be mapped in relation to global processes such as the tourist industry, the commodification of heritage, the valorization of authenticity, as well as the transnational circulation of knowledge about folkness among institutions in Greece and Greek communities abroad. Indeed, since the advent of post Civil Rights ethnic revival in the United States, a dense web of signifying practices (dance, costumes), internationally consumed cultural products (*Zorba the Greek*), and the travel of experts (ethnographers, dance instructors, ethnomusicologists, etc.) unify the transnational production of Greek folklore spectacles.

My reference to transnationality as a process of mapping is purposeful. For it appears that transnational processes that simultaneously create differences while pointing to families of resemblance require a detailed cartographic enterprise that traces specific routes of movement, identifies sites of articulation and contexts of negotiation, and points out geographical and conceptual spaces of realization. Take for instance Michael Kalafatas' *"The Bellstone: The Greek Sponge Divers of the Aegean - One American's Journey Home"* (2003), a popular transnational ethnography narrating the author's quest for ethnic roots. Preoccupied with roots, the narrative traces the family's migratory routes, elevating social justice as the thread that brings about intergenerational continuity. Representing a family's histories of travel but also a family's commitment to local politics, this ethnography illuminates how a transnational perspective

challenges the artificiality of the distinction between diaspora and nation-centric perspectives. The Bellstone ostensibly adopts a transnational frame of analysis, tracing how multiple facets of the Greek world (literature, heritage, traditional occupation, identity) intersect with the West in specific times and sites. It identifies the function of traditional poetry in anti-capitalist struggles in 19th-century Dodecanese. It alludes to how these struggles inspired early 20th-century Greek immigrant leftist activism in the United States and helped sustain intergenerational commitment to equality in diaspora. It draws from Greek modernist poetry and the discourse of late 20th-century anti-modernism to circulate in the English-speaking world a usable Greek ethos of the past. It builds on representations of Greeks by western anthropology to explain the Greek past and define Greek identity in the present. It draws upon Western Hellenism, theories of evolution, and the discourse on Greek diaspora to accommodate the author's binational (American and Greek) identity. The practice of attending transnational routes illuminates relations not always in sight from a nation-centric perspective.

The utility of mapping the Greek world transitionally can be further illustrated by the Greek media's recent discovery of Maria Menounos, an actress, model, reporter (Access Hollywood, Today Show, Entertainment Tonight), and second generation Greek-American who signed a lucrative contract to co-host the 2006 Eurovision Song Contest in Athens. The terrain that simultaneously produces "Menounos" as an assimilated American celebrity, a Greek diaspora subject, an ethnic who embodies the American Dream, and an agent of cultural change both in the United States and Greece is replete with ironies, contradictions, and disjunctures. The representation of "Menounos" in various sites (the Greek State and popular media, American popular media and web-sites, narratives of relatives in the United States and Greece) follows the logic of various economies. The sensualized image promoted by Hollywood's celebrity industry contrasts her making as the moral Greek woman by the narratives of Greek kin (a moralizing script that also framed the public consumption of yet another diaspora celebrity, Helena Paparizou, the winner of the 2005 Eurovision Contest). Menounos's self-professed aspiration to "become for Greece what [Jennifer] Lopez has become for Latin America" in the United States situates her in an emerging discourse that positions Greek-American artists and celebrities at the forefront of Greek production in American popular culture. At the same time, her function in Eurovision, an event that articulates national pride, Anglophone Greek culture, and Western aesthetics of femininity, makes her an agent in the hybridization and arguably the Americanization of Greek show-business.

An aspiring agent of Greek cultural production in the United States, and the embodiment of human capital (skills and know how) produced by the American celebrity industry, Menounos points to a form of subjectivity that transcends the binaries "national vs ethnic," and "assimilated vs diasporic." Consenting to the framing of her visit to Greece as "return" to the homeland, she demonstrates how the politics of flexible cultural identities and attachment can be put in service of capital accumulation, prestige, and power. In this respect, fluidity in identities dovetails with the global circulation of capital, the internationalization of celebrities, and mass entertainment.

The terrain that frames this flexible connectivity and the conditions that make it possible is criss-crossed with webs of transnational connections. A transnational analysis of this cultural and economic field must attend to the practices, narratives, and institutions that produced Menounos as Greek and legitimized her claim to Greek identity, and Greece as *patridha*. It must attend to how diaspora celebrities are grafted onto the nation in a way that repatriated working-class Greeks (*palinostountes*) are not. And it must also undertake the difficult task of mapping how assimilated diaspora Greeks simultaneously ethnicize their host societies and contribute to cultural change in Greece. To take up a specific example, the task becomes to map how Greek America both Hellenizes America and Americanizes Greece.

We can now discern the promises and challenges associated with Transnational Modern Greek Studies. The transnational model offers a historical opportunity to think of Greek worlds relationally. It enables, as I have indicated, the mapping of transmutations, links, and transformations in an increasingly interconnected world. A transnational perspective requires attention to the conditions that enable Greek production in specific economies, and the translations that come about as the result of cross-cultural interaction. This clearly entails interdisciplinary training that will position scholars to analyze cultural connectivities in more than one national context.

In a moment when overspecialization seeks to contain the explosion in academic knowledge, interdisciplinarity may appear as a misplaced methodological strategy. But we ignore the intensification of transnational exchanges and their embeddedness in specific economies at our own peril. This is because the list of Modern Greek practices and institutions that invite transnational analysis is long. A preliminary survey will yield these obvious candidates: the Greek Orthodox Church; immigrants; the production, circulation, and consumption of music, including Rembetiko; the translation and consumption of Greek literature; folk dances; festivals; international trade and cultural EXPOS; educational institutions (including Modern Greek Studies Programs, American Colleges in Greece, and Study Abroad Programs); sports (baseball in Greece, Greek soccer abroad, the Hellenization of "repatriated" athletes in national teams); the media (satellite TV, reality shows featuring "returning" diaspora Greeks); travel narratives (Michael Kalafatas, Eleni Cage); the World Council of Hellenes; and museums, among others.

At a time when a Swedish Greek (Helena Papanicolaou) wins the Eurovision Song Contest for Greece (with the support of the Swedish vote); when a Greek-American from Astoria (Kalomoira Saranti) becomes a Greek national icon (promoted through American celebrity imagery); when a German-born (Pericles Stoyannoudis) diaspora Greek wins the popular vote in the TV reality show Fame Story; and when Greek Americans introduce and promote baseball in Greece while a New York-based artist produces a documentary about it, the gains of a transnational approach to Greek culture are for us to imagine