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Teaching Modern Greek Culture

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For over 25 years, I have been actively involved in developing Modern Greek Programs, first at Ohio State University from 1983-1999, then, since 1999, at the University of Michigan. Today the Program at U-Michigan offers a concentration and minor in Modern Greek, with about 25 students each year pursuing a these degrees and total of 300 to 400 students enrolled our classes from the Fall through the Winter semesters. The linchpin of both programs has been the language sequence, on the one hand, which fulfills the College of Literature, Science, and Art's Language requirement, and an Introduction to Modern Greek culture, taught in English, on the other hand, which fulfills the College's social science requirement. Here I would like to bring your attention to the course in Greek culture. I will talk about how I teach the class.

Why Modern Greek Culture?

Culture is the face of Greece; it is what people encounter when they visit Greece. It is what intrigues them when they observe Greeks talking over a cup of coffee in Tampa, Florida. It is what baffles them when they hear Greeks arguing over the smallest matters and what captivates them when they attend a local *panygyri*. Of course, the word "culture" has several meanings. It

refers to great works of art produced by cultivated individuals in the spheres of literature, painting, sculpture, music, film, dance, theatre, and other kinds of performance, which are received as singular examples of a unique form of expression. Greek culture in the 20th century become identified at home and abroad with the poetry of C. P. Cavafy, George Seferis, and Odysseus Elytis, films by Michalis Cacoyiannis and Theo Angelopoulos, music by Vassilis Tsitsanis, Manos Hadjidakis, and Mikis Theodorakis, paintings by Yannis Tsarouchis, revivals of ancient Greek tragedy and comedy at Delphi and Epidavros. In 2004, Dimitris Papaioannou captured that artistic sensibility in a 21st century spectacle that marked the Athens 2004 Olympics as singularly Greek. But “culture” also refers to the unwritten rules underlying shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices, which express themselves in everyday life. Greek culture is a puzzle charmingly touched upon in films such as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, where the future *Amerikanoi sympetheroi* (in-laws)—and members of the audience—are overwhelmed by the number of members of a Greek family who respond to the name Nick or Nickie; or in *Shirley Valentine*, when tourist Shirley finds herself drawn into the rhythms of island life that allow for the kind of human interaction she has been missing in her middle class neighborhood in the U.K. I find that many students have been exposed to vignettes of Greek culture such as these, or, even more puzzling to them, scenes of young people much like themselves throwing stones at policemen on the streets of Greece’s cities and towns in December 2008, or protesting education reforms or budget cuts almost any day. They are intrigued by a culture that, on the surface, appears rather indistinguishable from their own, yet becomes indecipherable to them in its details.

While Greek language learning is like golf—it takes a lot of effort to become just mediocre—an introductory course in Modern Greek culture gives students quicker, deeper rewards. I have devoted more than half my life to making sure that students get the most from the effort they make in language learning. I would never recommend backing away from this goal. Modern Greek language learning is the necessary tools for entering Greek culture fully. Through language learning, students acquire, bit-by-bit, incredible instrument of communication, honed by over 3000 years of continuous usage. They cannot gain the full rewards of comprehensive approach to Greek learning by any other path. Yet I also recognize that this kind of full entry is not a destination for most language students who pass through language programs, let alone the millions of students who enroll in American Universities where Greek is not taught or anyway not the language they learn. In our program at U-M, each year I see about 25-30 students make their way through first-year Greek. Another 18-20 complete the second year, and some 20 take at least one third-year class. Culture is an important element in their language education. They learn to complain in Greek by singing Greek songs, for example, and when at a very early stage in their language learning they count the floors of apartment buildings from the bottom up—*υπόγειο, ισόγειο, πρώτος, δεύτερος, τρίτος όροφος, κτλ.*—they discover that the distance between the ground floor and the “*ρετιρέ*” also represents economic distinction though not necessarily social distance. Students enjoy and sometimes even perform paradoxes of Greek culture such as the *zeibekiko*, a dance that is exhibitionist in its effect but should not be perceived thus in its intent. Yet only a handful of students will become competent enough communicators in Greek to read the analysis of such phenomena in newspapers, books, or the web. Most will never converse easily on advanced topics that satisfy their intellectual curiosity.

In contrast, in my course on Modern Greek Culture, which I teach every fall semester, some thirty to forty student—more than half of them not of Greek descent and with no prior knowledge of Modern Greek—gain the necessary background to trace historical references in Greek fiction in translation, or analyze how language functions as cornerstones of Greek identity, or how religious belief expresses itself beyond regular churchgoing, a rare practice. The puzzles they encounter in Greece’s everyday reality open their minds. Studying Greek culture gives them practice in talking and writing about ways of life that are similar on the surface yet quite different from their own. Frequently these students are drawn to learn more about Greece after they complete the class. They make Greece a piece of their universe and later may introduce it to others in the educated general American public, including colleagues in their own fields.

How I Teach Modern Greek Culture

For years the greatest obstacle to teaching a Modern Greek Culture that fully explored culture in both senses of the word was the absence of comprehensive, up-to-date textbook introducing Greek culture to an English-speaking audience. Of course I recognize the contribution of books such as John Campbell and Philip Sherrard’s *Modern Greece* or John S. Koliopoulos and Thanos Veremis’s *Greece: The Modern Sequel*—but the first is more than 40 years old and the second focuses on politics and institutions over culture. Over the years since I first began teaching a course on Modern Greek culture in 1983, I tested different alternatives. For a long time I was using an introduction to Modern Greek history, which covered its own topic, history, so well that it left little time for culture. Then I assigned a tour guidebook with a strong cultural component, but this celebrated formal elements of culture such as holidays and customs, without giving

adequate tools for analysis. It is one of my firm beliefs that a course on Greek culture should not be a celebration of roots, but instead it should require students look back at Greece's long and difficult history from a contemporary perspective that requires that they think about how cultures subsume, transform, and even subvert older ways of knowing.

Gradually I abandoned my experiments with history textbooks and tour guides and instead collected articles, poems, stories, visual sources, and films. A course website became the marvelous tool for disseminating many of these resources. The process of collecting literary texts inspired me to edit a collection of short stories newly translated from English to Greek, in which events such as the Asia Minor disaster, World War II, Civil War, and decades of internal migration serve as a backdrop against which individual dramas takes shape. That book, titled *Greece: A Traveler's Literary Companion* (because it also addresses itself to potential travelers), has become a textbook for my culture class. Still I found that the course was missing a comprehensive book on Greek culture. And so, when the opportunity arose, I wrote *The Culture and Customs of Greece*, a book in the series, "Culture and Customs of Europe," published by Greenwood press. Following the structure of this Greenwood Press, eight narrative chapters, discuss the land, people, and history of Greece; religious practices; society, gender roles and the family; leisure, holidays, and the Greek table; language and literature; music and dance; media, theater, and cinema; and architecture and art. Illustrated with up-to-date photographs taken by myself and others, this volume also includes a chronology from the Stone Age through the Archaic, Classical, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, and modern periods to 2008; a glossary that explains *filoxenia* as well as *frappé*, *frontistirio* as well as *parea*; and a selected, very rich, chapter-by-chapter bibliography that cites many useful websites as well as a range of

titles of English-language or English-translated books on Greece. At its heart are a series of puzzles, drawn from observation, which show that things in Greece are never exactly as they appear.

To teach Modern Greek Culture, I use the two textbooks and resources in the following way. In the first four weeks of class, which I call “Greece Condensed,” students explore the idea of Greece as manifested in the creation of the Modern Greek nation state. They read the book’s chapters on “Land, People, and History,” “Religion,” and “Architecture,” and essays by Nikos Kazantzakis, George Seferis, and Vassilis Vassilikos in the Literary Companion, and they think about the ideas, images, and stereotypes applied to Greece, on the one hand, and the meanings and forms Greeks give to their ancient legacies by way of their artistic and religious expression. They also consider the challenges to Greekness posed by migration and Europeanization.

The second four-week section of the class, entitled “Traditional and modern,” explores how things are marked as “traditional” in contemporary Greece, and how these align with a premodern as opposed to a modern or post-modern Greece. Students study demographic statistics of the 19th and early 20th century to try to envision what the “traditional” village looked like, and they read short stories from that era and from the present to compare how “traditional” divisions of labor, gender roles, and values such as *filotimo* functioned, and how contemporary social networks today, as stretched as they may be by urbanization, relate to those values and roles. They consider how traditions rework their way into rather contemporary performances, for example the Pontic lyra that distinguished Greece’s winning 2005 Eurovision song contest. They also study how a dance such as the *zeibekiko* has changed over time. At one time it

followed strict rules, for example, it was danced by men, not women, of the working class or in proximity to the working class, who moved with control and disdain for excess, as if their masculinity depended on understatement. Today some would argue that there has been a breach of its form, while many youthful dancers of my students' generation do not care what it meant to their elders. Studying old and new versions of the *zeibekiko* in films and on YouTube, we pursue the question: how far can a tradition be transformed before it is subverted or becomes something new; and why do now cultural forms in Greece still insist on appealing to tradition. Students read chapters on "Society," "Music and Dance," and "Leisure, Holidays, and the Greek Table."

The third section of the class, "Remembrance of Things Past," is devoted to 20th-century works of literature, art, music, theatre, and film, as well as the historical events to which they refer. The Balkan Wars, two World Wars, the Asia Minor Catastrophe, and the Greek Civil War, and the military dictatorship of 1967-1974 transformed not only the state of Greece but also Greek cultural production. Students consider how various cultural forms process the past, and how they reach back to ancient myths to produce historical understanding. Together with the chapters on "Literature and Language" and on "Media, Theatre, and Film," students read Thanasis Valtinos's *Data of the Decade of the 1960s*, a book of documentary fiction that helps students explore the line dividing primary and secondary sources, history and fiction.

An introductory course in Modern Greek Culture such as the one I have been describing can reach students who may never have the opportunity to learn Greek, yet who benefit from their exposure to Greece not only because they learn about Greece but also because they develop a

richer critical understanding of their own cultural practices. It can stand alone, taught by a faculty member with knowledge of contemporary Greece working in almost any discipline in the Humanities or Social Sciences. Or it can become a keystone in a Modern Greek program that builds student knowledge through language learning and through the systematic exploration of Greeks manifold, rich, complex, and captivating contemporary cultural expression. I myself never cease to be stimulated by the challenge.

In closing, I thank the organizers of this conference and to the audience for your interest.

University of Michigan

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