Ethnicity as an Organisational Concept in the Life of the Community*

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In this paper we explore ethnicity as a basic organisational concept in the life of the Greek-Australian communities. We begin our discussion by outlining two conceptions of ethnicity that we call static and dynamic. We explain the ways in which these conceptions have respectively informed two types of community organisation that have been influential in the life of the communities. These are the Greek Orthodox Communities and the Greek workers leagues that have operated in Australian cities for most of the twentieth century. In our discussion we explain the strengths and limits of the concept of ethnicity for organisational purposes, through an analysis of its uses as the basis of members’ organisational unity.

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Introduction

When discussing ethnicity in connection with the organisational life of the communities theorists of the migrant experience typically invoke the concept of ethnicity in two ways. The first draws attention to its relationship to identity-constituting processes. So, for example, to understand how Greek-Australian identities are shaped and lived researchers investigate the intersections of ethnicity with other social factors, most notably class, gender and sexuality. A second common way of invoking ethnicity is to use the term descriptively. When we speak of the “Greek-Australian communities”, we use the term “ethnicity” to identify a segment of society as an object of our investigation. In this second case of marking out a site of social life, the meaning of “Greek-Australianness” may well be taken for granted. We shall discuss ethnicity in connection with the organisational life of the communities, but instead of viewing Greekness simply as descriptive of cultural difference we shall focus on its community-constituting dimensions.

Our approach will be to situate our claims within a theoretical framework that assigns a role of national historical significance to Greek-Australian community life. From this perspective we read community processes of institutional organisation as responses to the foreigner position that the dominant white Australian discourses assigned to Greek migrants in the twentieth century.1

Elsewhere (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2003) we argue that, prior to official multiculturalism, Anglophone discourses invoked two concurrent images of the southern European foreigner. One was an image of the foreigner as subversive and the other represented the foreigner as potentially compliant. Each had a role to play in constructing the migrant as what we call the perpetual foreigner-within. We will briefly outline the two images here in order to frame our discussion of ethnicity.

1 See our article in this collection, “On the Methodology of Greek-Australian Historiography”.


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The key element of the image of the subversive foreigner was
the view that migrants' political allegiance was determined by their
national origins. This tight connection between allegiance and eth-
nicity made it impossible for southern Europeans to demonstrate
genuine allegiance to the Australian state and its people. Indeed, when
the Australian authorities assigned to all non-British immigrants a
predisposition for leftist political ideas any immigrant could be iden-
tified as a subversive irrespective of the nature of his or her actions.
The foreigner-within could thus always be rendered fully visible to
the white Australian authorities and society. From this it followed that
even though southern European foreigner communities established
themselves as spaces in which to preserve cultural difference, as the
sites of non-assimilable difference, they also supplied one of the two
indispensable qualities of the foreigner, that of remaining the “ethnic
other”.

A second indispensable quality was assigned to the southern
European immigrant through the image of the compliant foreigner.
This image disassociated allegiance from national origins, making
it possible for southern European immigrants to demonstrate their
loyalty to the Australian state and its people. Acts of loyalty made pos-
sible the state’s recognition of the southern European foreigner as a
property-owning subject who could in turn recognise the rightfulness
of white Australian authority.

Until the adoption of official multiculturalism in the 1970s the
interplay of the images of the subversive and the compliant foreigner
provided the framework in which southern European migrants of the
past retained their position as perpetual foreigners-within. Elsewhere
we show how immigrants who ultimately became naturalised and/or
lived the better part of their productive lives in Australia became
white enough to count as formal property-owning subjects without
ever becoming “white” enough to receive the very same privileges of
white citizenship as the dominant white Australian (Nicolacopoulos
and Vassilacopoulos, in press b; id., in press a).

In different ways, the Anglophone images of the subversive and
compliant foreigner inform the competing conceptions of ethnicity that we derive from our study of Greek-Australian community members’ efforts to make sense of their foreigner status (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2001; id., in press c). Focusing on community members’ representations of both the form and the content of their Greekness, in what follows we shall identify what we call static and dynamic models of ethnicity. These two models came to be reflected in the diversified institutional organisation of the Greek-Australian communities.

**Static versus dynamic ethnicity**

The dominant pre-war Greek-Australian migrants’ discourses typically represented Greekness in conformity with what we call a static model of ethnicity. Here are two characteristic examples from editorials of the *Hellenic Herald* published respectively in 1931 and 1926.

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 February 1931:1).

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 March 1926: 3; cited in Holbraad, 1977:147).

Note that within this model it is not the specifics of a language, spiritual beliefs or traditions that are themselves necessarily represented as static. These could take different historical forms over time. For example, Greeks abroad expressed their patriotism by showing their continued support for the governments of Greece, even through changes from elected governments to dictatorships. On the contrary, what remained fixed was not the substance or content of Greekness but its form as something self-contained. That is, for the purposes of the agency of Greek migrants, whether as individuals or in their collective...
capacity, the form given to Greekness remained fixed and community self-constituting processes had to take the implicit relationship of Greekness to Australianness as a given.

Significantly, in this relationship Greekness was surrounded by Australianness where the latter was represented as another foreign substance. Australianness was not represented as merely different; it was the dominant power and was confronted as a potential or actual source of attack on Greekness. In line with the assumptions about ethnicity that respectively underpinned the subversive and compliant foreigner images, Australianness was read as co-extensive either with British national origins or with the political allegiances flowing from such blood ties. A static model of ethnicity thus conformed to the dominant Anglophone representations of the fundamental structure of ethnicity.

From a discursive position that had internalised Greek migrants’ perpetual foreigner positioning, attention to Greekness involved more than its representation as a self-contained substance. This approach also called for its protection and preservation. This was certainly the line of conservative press editorials that repeatedly represented ethnicity in terms of the interaction of mutually exclusive substances, but they were not alone in this. The Greek Orthodox Communities (GOCs) also gave institutional effect to the static model of ethnicity. The first GOCs were established in Melbourne and Sydney in 1897 and 1898 respectively. Within a few decades similar organisations had been set up in other states across Australia beginning in Western Australia in 1921 and followed by Queensland and South Australia in 1928 and 1930 respectively. To the extent that these organisations represented Greekness as a matter of preserving the language, religion and members’ loyalty to the homeland (Tsounis, 1971:45–195) they too drew upon a static model of ethnicity.

Indeed, reliance upon a static model of ethnicity was part of the means by which they promoted their own image, that of the submissive foreigner. This was an image of the foreigner as someone who could submit with integrity to the Australian authorities (Nicolacopoulos, Toula and Vassilacopoulos, George 2005. Ethnicity as an Organisational Concept in the Life of the Community. In E. Close, M. Tsianikas and G. Frazis (eds.) “Greek Research in Australia: Proceedings of the Biennial International Conference of Greek Studies, Flinders University April 2003”, Flinders University Department of Languages - Modern Greek: Adelaide, 263-274.

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and Vassilacopoulos, in press b). This image combined a static notion of Greekness that grounded Greek migrants’ eternal allegiance to their original nation-state with subjects’ acceptance of the responsibilities that go hand in hand with the exercise of their property-owning powers. Dual allegiance to the Greek and Australian states could be justified in these terms.

By way of contrast to the above, a second Greek-Australian community discourse represented ethnicity in the terms of a more dynamic model. On this model ethnicity was not defined by reference to self-contained substantive categories; it centred on individual and collective practices of creatively translating Greek symbols into universal values, that is, into values that mutually informed particular ethnicities. For example, in the 1940s Greek-Australian community activists advocated “a new life and liberty in Australia” (Democratic Bulletin, June 1943). This was effectively an invitation to imagine a new life for all Australians of different national origins. It invoked Greek migrants’ collective identity as bearers of a long tradition of liberation struggles. Greek liberation struggles represented ideals that could appeal to all Australians because they expressed the universal values of freedom and democracy. So, rather than marking and preserving boundaries with everything British Australian, Greekness was represented as a particular ethnicity with an open-ended content in the sense that it could be reconstructed in various ways. By exploring the potential of their particular ethnic symbols to articulate universal values, Greek migrants could identify as Australians-of-Greek-origin. For this reason the model of dynamic ethnicity made possible the articulation of a position from which to reject the southern European migrants’ assigned foreigner position.

Like that of static ethnicity, the model of dynamic ethnicity was given institutional form in the life of the communities. This was achieved with the formation of the first Greek migrant workers leagues, the Greek Democritus Workers League established in Melbourne in 1935 and the Greek Atlas League formed in Sydney in 1939. Similar organisations were progressively set up around the
country. The regional centres of Mildura and Newcastle set up respectively the Platon and Socrates Greek workers leagues. Platon was also the name given to the Adelaide-based workers league that was set up following the dissolution of the Panhellenic association in that city. Brisbane saw the formation of Rigas Fereos that was later superseded by Palamas (Tsounis, 1971).

Against the background of the abovementioned broad contrast between dynamic and static ethnicities, we can analyse the strengths and limitations of the organisational forms that conform to one or other of the two models and, consequently, either conform to or reject Greek migrants’ assigned position as the perpetual foreigners-within.

The GOCs as spokesperson organisations

Let us begin this analysis by explaining how the GOCs’ underlying conformity with the model of static ethnicity affects their potential to act as community spokesperson organisations. On the one hand, the GOCs rely on Greekness to ground the unity of their membership base. In being open to all Greek migrants by virtue of their Greekness they are ideally positioned to represent the members of the Greek-Australian communities to the Australian authorities and people.

On the other hand, this reliance on members’ ethnically determined common identity also renders uncertain their ability to give full effect to their spokesperson position. How is this so? As recent history demonstrates more clearly, modern western liberal societies make room for ethnicities to be constituted as inherently fluid (cf. Castles, 2002; Kalantzis, 2000). For this reason, when it is understood statically — as with a pre-designated commitment to Greek Orthodoxy, language and the nation-state — ethnicity is incapable of securing stable forms of social unity. Ethnically determined unity always remains vulnerable to challenges from representations of ethnicity that are more dynamically constituted.

In practice, then, the GOCs have been constituted by reference

to an *imaginary* ethnic unity. Prior to official multiculturalism when migrant communities were designated foreigner communities, Greek migrants formed a unity from their outside so to speak. What they all shared as Greek migrants was their assigned positioning as the perpetual foreigners-within. Accordingly, their differences in terms of factors such as class position, economic success, formal citizenship status or length of stay in Australia, were subsumed under this collective positioning as an inside-outsider.

At the same time, the abovementioned equality of Greek migrants could also serve to ground the development of an internal practice of democratic self-management. Within the historical circumstances of their ascribed social position GOC members took it upon themselves to organise their collective affairs democratically. Indeed, from the critical vantage to which awareness of dynamic ethnicity gives rise we can argue that the enduring basis for GOC members’ unity was not their common ethnicity — understood in the static sense — but their constitution as participants in processes of democratic self-management. The democratic character of the constitution of the GOCs always distinguished these forms of organisation from other conservative community institutions such as the Church. Whereas both responded to the dominant Anglophone discourses by adopting a foreigner discourse, within these limits the GOCs also instituted an ideal of democratic self-management.

Of course, we are speaking here of a constitutionally affirmed ideal of democratic self-management rather than an actual practice which may have often fallen far short of this ideal. Still, from this perspective we can read the historical battles between conservatives and progressives amongst the GOC members (Tsounis, 1971) in terms of the operation of competing ideals of the GOCs’ genuine universal ground. Whereas conservatives who acted in conformity with their foreigner position relied on a static model of ethnicity, progressives typically supported actions that reinforced the GOCs’ potential for collective democratic control over all dimensions of community life. This is why it has always been within the GOCs’ constitutional powers to repre-
sent Greek-Australians’ opposition to dictatorships; to support social movements for world peace and co-operation; and to promote other campaigns traditionally shied away from by the conservatives within the communities. We can defend such actions against the charge that they politicised the GOCs beyond their legitimate spokesperson role by noting that they remain within the limits of the recognisably universal ground of members’ unity, namely democratic participation in community affairs.

With this understanding of their inherent spokesperson potential, we can conclude that the conservatively run GOCs promoted an unnecessarily narrow idea of collective organisation. This was restricted to participation in ethnic associations whose activities concentrated on the insular life of the community and, at best, on the promotion of its “good image” to the Australian people and authorities through the representation of the Greek migrant as a submissive foreigner (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, in press b).

The workers leagues alternative

The Greek workers leagues represented an alternative ground for Greek migrants’ unity. On their own, neither shared ethnicity nor an abstract commitment to democratic decision-making procedures was enough to unite the members of the Greek workers leagues. Instead, as we have shown elsewhere (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2001; id., in press c) league members’ collective identity was mediated by the internationalist ideal of solidarity that informed the outlook of the Australian left more generally. Living in the conditions of Australia’s capitalist system of exploitation, league members translated this ideal as workers’ solidarity and so the constitution of the workers leagues reflected a basic commitment to Greek migrants’ commitment to Australian working class unity on the basis of shared interests.

Thus, the workers leagues represented a left perspective that directly challenged the idea that ethnic unity might play a constitutive role in
the organisational institution of the communities. As Kakakios and van der Velden (1984:157) maintain, the “stress on unity and solidarity with the Australian working class movement […] was an attempt to undermine the foundations of ideologies based on ethnic concerns”. These authors also rightly note that within the communities the left and conservative perspectives offered rival definitions of the role of Greek migrants in Australia. But they suggest that the left gave priority to working class unity over ethnic concerns. The view that it was in the interests of Greek migrant workers to position themselves as an integral part of the Australian working class movement did not, however, entail a rejection of the organisation of migrant workers along the lines of ethnicity. Indeed, as Greek migrant organisations, the reality of the workers leagues was never so rigidly understood.

To be sure, the preservation of Greek culture was not represented as a central aim of the workers leagues. From the very beginning their program of activities sought to organise workers in the interests of the Australian labour movement. So, their Greekness was by no means the basis for positioning themselves alongside their compatriots as foreigners. Rather, they represent themselves as Australian workers and citizens and their discourse of solidarity enabled them to take on convictions and attitudes to life that they encountered amongst other Australians irrespective of national origins. The commitment to bringing about democracy, equality and social justice, the maintenance of a firm stand against racism and the struggle for world peace all extended beyond national origins or ethnic ties (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, in press c).

Still, an important part of the workers leagues’ political program supported Greek community efforts to promote Greek culture in the Australian context. As we suggested in the previous section, through their dynamic understanding of ethnicity they could draw upon cultural symbols to convey their universal values. So, whilst ethnicity alone did not constitute the ground of their unity, neither did the abstract recognition of their position as Australian workers. Characteristics of ethnicity and class, like the commitment to the universal values of


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democracy and freedom, came together to inform and give concrete substance to their unifying ideal of socialist internationalism.

Moreover, this positioned the Greek workers leagues to represent their communities’ inherent potential to reject their foreigner designation and to claim their members’ rights as equal citizens (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2001). In this respect the workers leagues played a special role in the twentieth-century history of the Greek-Australian communities.

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