

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

September 27, 2005

Speaker: Yiorgos Anagnostou, Ohio State University

Topic: Popular Ethnography and the Making of Usable Pasts in Greek America

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

Rapporteur: Karen Emmerich, Columbia University

Attendees: Nikos Alexiou, Queens College; Ipek Celik, NYU; Stephane Charitos, Columbia University; Dan Georgakas, Queens College; Bill Koulopoulos, Columbia University; Mona Momescu, Columbia University; Karol Pacan, Columbia University (visiting); Neni Panourgia, Columbia University; Karen Van Dyck, Columbia University

Summary of Presentation:

At the opening of his presentation, Anagnostou raised two central questions to help frame his discussion: how is the past made significant in Greek America today, and what does the way in which these usable pasts are created tell us about white ethnicity? Anagnostou is interested in the specific negotiations of Greek Americans in the United States, but with an eye to transnational connections, and how host societies enable or constrain the development of ethnic communities. Who produces usable pasts, and for what purpose? This discussion also contains a political component: what do narratives about white ethnics tell us about race? Anagnostou's talk he tried to treat some of these questions by looking at popular ethnographies written by non-professional ethnographers. Ours is, he suggested, a historical moment when non-professional ethnographers are everywhere, inundating us with narratives. How do we manage the many texts that try to vie for a place in the textual field of popular ethnography? How do we sort out what to analytically include and what to exclude? Anagnostou adopts a meta-ethnographic stance toward this field, creating a system of strategic containment through a specific politics of knowledge and politics of inclusion. In his discussion, Anagnostou focused on the four examples of the work of Helen Papanikolas, George Veras's documentary *The Greek Americans*, Constance Callinicos's *American Aphrodite: Becoming Female in Greek America*, and Michael Kalafatas's *The Bellstone: The Greek Sponge Divers of the Aegean*.

Anagnostou first discussed the multi-faceted work of Helen Papanikolas. As an "insider" as well as a widely-respected ethnographer and folklorist, she examined and recorded the disappearance of folk culture in Greek America and the concomitant process of Americanization, documenting instances where traditions are suppressed or rejected. She spoke of the power of modernity to sweep away traditional culture, and collected oral narratives that she saw as disappearing, and in need of being recorded before that moment came. In his discussion, Anagnostou raised the notion, borrowing from James Clifford, that folklore or traditional culture disappears at the moment of inscription. He characterized Papanikolas's work as a kind of "salvage anthropology." What kind of authority does this confer on ethnographers when they are given the status of eye-witness

to a vanishing culture? And what role do arriving immigrants play if they are cast in the role of the disappearing?

Anagnostou then discussed George Veras's documentary *The Greek Americans*. He touched on issues concerning the status of the organic intellectual, how the state discourse of global Hellenism intersects with a discourse of diaspora, and how documentary might serve as a new form of assimilation. Veras establishes the Greek American narrative as one of struggle and success, the contemporary Horatio Alger starting at the bottom and working toward a "special place in the American dream scene." Anagnostou raised the issue of who speaks for Greek Americans in the documentary, calling attention to Veras's use of non-specialists—artists and writers, restaurant owners and actors, rather than historians or sociologists—to talk about ethnicity. He sees this as indicative of a trend towards generalized ethnography, in which everyone becomes "someone else's native": modern or postmodern space becomes one of ethnographic inscription. The documentary ultimately forms an idea of the Greek American community as a uniform, successful ethnic group that maintains itself through exclusion, an ethnoreligious, church-going, family-loving community with an idealized immigrant past. Generalized ethnography thus legitimizes several narratives: not only the rags-to-riches tale, but also the notion of an open American playing field, democratic and egalitarian, open to all races and creeds. While the documentary makes no explicit reference to other ethnic minorities, it implicitly stigmatizes racial poverty. It inserts Greek America into the domain of white ethnicity, supporting the idea that America works, that it offers a promise that other minorities of color have failed to make the most of. Racial minorities are thus indirectly blamed for their failure, while a discourse of moral perfection is used to explain the success of Greek Americans.

Callinicos's narrative, Anagnostou argued, provides exactly the narrative that Veras's documentary excludes: that of the social failure of Greek America. Her book presents a patriarchal society that stifled the lives of many Greek American women. Anagnostou presented Callinicos's book as participating in a politics of transgression and a politics of exposure; while the documentary celebrates ethnicity, in terms of positive stereotypes, Callinicos does the opposite, bringing Greek America's dirty laundry out to air. She writes from the point of view of an omniscient ethnographer, who witnesses the disjunction between the public appearance of assimilation and the behind-the-scenes reality of traditional transplantation, a disjunction which serves to undermine the patriarchal narrative of successful assimilation.

Anagnostou ended his discussion by focusing on Kalafatas's popular ethnography, *The Bellstone: The Greek Sponge Divers of the Aegean*, focusing on a poem by Kalafatas's grandfather dealing with the introduction of diving suits into the diving community on Symi and this technology's destruction of traditional methods of sponge diving. Anagnostou argued that Kalafatas treated fieldwork, in this book, as a kind of pilgrimage, a way of searching for roots with which to construct his own identity. In Kalafatas's book, the folk divers offered a moral model of and for modern life. Kalafatas, partaking in a kind of anthropological anti-modernism, posits the primitive as the key to redemption: an idealized folk community is presented in terms of the primitive, the tribal,

or the exotic, which highlights the white's sense of inauthenticity and remove from nature.

In conclusion, Anagnostou noted how through these several texts, Greek America emerges as a social field crisscrossed with ideological meanings, marked by a kind of interpretive heteroglossia: Greek Americans have been described as outside the bounds of whiteness, but also as the center of it; they have been represented as failed but also as archetypical assimilators.

Summary of Discussion:

Question: The poem Kalafatas focuses on seems contrary to reality; the diving suit brought to Florida actually allowed the Greek community to survive and become powerful. It is a community in which even fourth-generation members speak Greek, and this seems more real for thousands of individuals than the one isolated example presented in this poem. Why should we pay more attention to a poem of this nature than to a mass experience which would be more typical of what's happening in the Greek American consciousness?

Anagnostou responded by saying that he was looking at the book on how a specific identity is constructed through a meta-ethnographic analysis of only those historical routes of the diving suit traced by the author. He is not addressing all the aspects of the history of the sponge diving. Another seminar member pointed out that Anagnostou is looking at representations: he is interested not in what Greek America is, but in how it is represented. Anagnostou confirmed this, saying that he is interested why the author focused on the devastation brought by the diving suit in the Aegean and not on its function in the Tarpon Springs Greeks.

Question: Why study these popular ethnographies at all? The previous question was concerned with whether or not Kalafatas's text is an adequate representation of history; I am more concerned with the category of the "organic intellectual," and with the quality of the texts as such. Are these really texts that leave you thinking that they're presenting complicated, complex, interesting material? And if not, why study them?

Anagnostou responded by saying that the popular ethnographies he's dealing with, while perhaps some are of a lesser quality than some other texts he could choose to examine, have a kind of mass consumption that allows them to do a great deal of cultural work because they are accessible to wide audiences, it is through these texts that the public gets to know ethnicity; they are significant for that reason. With regard to a follow-up question, about the distribution of Veras's PBS documentary, Anagnostou said that he chose to write about it mostly because he responded to it with strong emotions because of the documentary's one dimensional representation of Greek America. It also represents a new phase when ethnicities use the mass media, new technologies, to disseminate information about ethnicity, and that Veras has since been extremely successful in getting

funds for two subsequent films about Greek Americans, and wields great cultural power. The PBS documentary conferred on Veras the role of major translator for Greek culture.

Question: Doesn't it seem like the question is not really *how* Greek America is presented, but *why* it is presented that way? What are the politics of the U.S., of the particular administrations, the local communities, the organized Greek American communities, and how do they all play a role in what gets shown and how, in this documentary as well as in other contexts?

Anagnostou acknowledges that this is an important element, and that in terms of the documentary, it negotiates Greek America's penchant for assimilation in the context of American multiculturalism, telling a story that also expresses loyalty to America, reinforcing the notion of America as natural topos of self-realization. It presents Greek Americans as "proper ethnics," churchgoing and family-centered, assimilating while also retaining the cultural capital of the *syrtaki* and Greek festivals.

Question: Can you draw parallels between the Greek American experience and the ways in which Greeks are negotiating their relationship to the rest of Europe, after the recent entrance of Greece into the European Union?

Anagnostou responded by saying he sees Greek America in terms of a collection of histories, which must take into consideration the enormous pressure the U.S. put on immigrants to assimilate and become loyal Americans. It will be interesting to see how Greeks try to retain their particularity while assimilating in Europe.

Question: I would like to return to Papanikolas, and the idea of traditions that were being lost. She never really spelled out the fact that what passed for "folk tradition" in the U.S. was actually a kind of invented Greek American folk tradition—invented precisely in order to bring together groups of people (Peloponnesians, Dodecanesians, Cretans, Roumeliots, etc.) who actually didn't share the same traditions.

Anagnostou points out that Kalafatas's book tells us precisely that, that the folk culture was not uniform at all, and early Greek America was (like Greece itself) fragmented by regional differences. The process of assimilation is thus a two-fold one, a consolidation into the kind of generalized folk tradition of which Papanikolas speaks, and then the lessening role of that tradition in subsequent generations' American life. Anagnostou points out that around this same time we also see the nationalization of folk culture, which creates a kind of unified cultural vocabulary as well.

Question: I would like to point out the importance of the church as a unifying force for the Greek American community perhaps even more than for communities in Greece, given what has been said about regional differences.

Anagnostou responded that the church both did and did not serve as a force of unification. Yes, it brought people together around a common religion and a determination to preserve the Greek language and Greek traditions. But there are also

examples of communities splitting on the basis of class as well as generation: often communities will have two churches, the immigrant church and the “ethnic” church, for assimilated members of subsequent generations. The church is a contested space as much as it is as uniform space; it is a gate-keeping institution, and doesn’t allow certain kinds of cultural expression to enter its borders. The popular ethnographies he’s looking at deal with this issue only peripherally.

Question: I would like to raise the issue of symbolic identity. If symbolic identity is based on the notion of ancestry, you can choose your ethnicity based on the multiple ancestry patterns given to you from your background. The notion of symbolic identity is one that suggests a methodological individualism, that each can choose his own way of portraying himself regardless of historical experience. Talking to second-generation Greek Americans now, you can see that so many of them know nothing about their society and culture, and choose to represent themselves as Greek on the basis of certain symbols, available on a popular level.

Anagnostou responds that there is undoubtedly an element of choice, of agency, but people are also by historical considerations: young people choose, for instance, what’s available to them, and trendy. The notion of symbolic ethnicity tells us nothing about how the choices were produced historically as “choices”: Kalafatas’s father turned to communism in his commitment to social equality, but Kalafatas turns to new age discourses rather than communism, and there are obviously discourses that mediate these choices. This response led to a discussion of whether or not the historical contingency and continuity of Greek American community is based on new waves of immigration, or finds itself in a moment of post-assimilationism, post-ethnic whiteness, one in which a particular individuals’ Greek Americanness could be part of a system of flexible cultural affiliations. Another seminar member pointed out that this schema could open up a space for philhellenes as the “new Greeks,” thus escaping the descent model. This, though, would be a hard move for Greek Americans to make, as it would mean giving up the rhetorical connection to the ancient Greeks.

Question: It’s clear here that you aren’t trying to tell a linear narrative: you present us with no dates, and the span of texts is one in which most of them are huddled in the present. And yet the narratives you present are themselves linear in one way or another, offering individual or communal narratives of progress, or even speaking of the death of the community as a whole. You seem to resist that, in the interests of genealogy and discontinuity, but isn’t this a dilemma when dealing with the telling of a story about this community?

Anagnostou says that he certainly is always interrogating dominant constructions of white ethnicity by sociologists in ways that resist this notion of linearity. As for the death of the community, he’s more interested in the rhetoric of decline. And if you see in ethnicity in terms of a relationship with an originary culture, we live in the decline of ethnicity, but if you see it as an exploration of roots, we live in a renaissance of ethnicity.