MAINTENANCE AND TRANSMISSION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY:

THE CASE OF THE GREEKS IN CANADA

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National Europe Centre Paper 93

National Europe Centre
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to limit our discussion to ethnic identity as seen by the sociologists, myself included. Specifically, I will briefly touch on the following issues.

First: what pushed Canadian society to look into ethnic identity; and why has ethnic identity been of academic interest in Canada;

Second: what do sociologists in Canada refer to when they talk about ethnic identity;

Third: where does the Greek community in Canada stand on ethnic identity, its current status and its future.

First:

Sociologists and sociological studies usually reflect the happenings and interests of society at large. Before 1950, Canadian society—like Australia’s—reflected the dominance of the English colonial power structure. This was widely and strictly expressed in its immigration policies—that is, white and Anglo-Saxon, as well as in its social policies of Anglo-conformity.

The role of Canada during WWII and the pressure by its Allies to open up its doors to the destitute peoples of Europe opened up its immigration policies during the 50’s and the 60’s and brought millions of European refugees, displaced persons and economic immigrants to the Canadian shores to become the nation-builders of the country.

Canada, however, has two charter groups—English and French—which at this same period would be locked into a struggle of domination or separation, a conflict that will leave all other ethnic groups outside the mainstream. At the same time, however, they are free to develop and maintain their cultures and identities without obstruction. To avoid separation and splitting up the country, as well as to appease the “other” groups, the
Federal government, after a long debate, enacted the Multiculturalism Act in 1971. It declared Canada as a Bilingual (French-English) and Multicultural country with no cultural supremacy and stated the right of ethno-cultural communities to maintain their cultural and ethnic identities as they wished.

Thus, the decades of the 70’s and 80’s was the period of government approved and sponsored multiculturalism. It was also the period when ethnicity and ethnic identity studies became increasingly present in the sociological literature.

Works by many social scientists provided us with discussion of the definitions of ethnic identity and its component dimensions, whereas some further works expanded on the theoretical context of ethnicity as well as contributed research to suggested components and salience or importance of ethnic identity.

Furthermore, a number of works took a partial look at ethnic identity by exploring a limited number of characteristics, such as language and culture. Alternatively, they looked at the relationship of ethnic identity to achievement, equality and social class variables.

**Second: the sociologists’ perspective.**

Sociologists see ethnic identity as the product of group formation and experience. In multicultural societies, like Australia and Canada, sociologists suggest that such formation involves ethnic boundaries both of the dominant and of the minority groups. Incorporation becomes the result of factors and processes internal and external to the ethnic group or to the larger society.

**On the negative side**, ethnic social formations and boundaries can become obstacles or barriers to social integration of individual minority group members and hence entire groups. They can become the basis for inequity in the functioning of economic and
political institutions. They can be used for the maintenance of prejudice, racism and discrimination. In other words, they can marginalize the groups.

**On the positive side,** it has been argued that social formations may facilitate the process of becoming part of the larger society. They may provide the resources necessary to overcome the obstacle or barriers to participation in the society’s institutions. Social networks and collective action can be oriented to making gains for group members; to combating discrimination and racism; to overcoming the disadvantages generated by the policies and practices of individuals and organizations, whether public or private. In short, the cultural, social, economic and political resources of ethnic groups can be used to challenge entrenched systems of privileges, to open up the institutions of the larger society, and facilitate full participation in them on the part of minorities.

So what is the nature of ethnic identity? For most sociologists it is a psychological and a social variable.

Ethnic identity is a complex phenomenon, and it is usually associated with a way of life dictated by cultural traditions and social expectations. In a multicultural society, like Canada, it is that cultural way of life that gives a reference point, a point of orientation for both the individuals and others. It constitutes a social, psychological and cultural reference of self, history, roots, relations, values and feelings. In short, it affects the ways we see the world, how the world sees us, our judgment, evaluations and ideologies. It constitutes an anchor with our collective past and ethnic memories and provides for the blueprints of social and cultural future.

Ethnic identity can be conceived as a social-psychological phenomenon that derives from membership in an ethnic group. It is subjective phenomenon that gives to individuals a sense of belonging and to the community a sense of oneness and historical meaning and continuity.
Ethnic identity can thus be defined as a manner in which persons, on account of their ethnic origin, locate themselves psychologically, in relation to self and others.

However, locating oneself in relation to a community and society is not only a psychological phenomenon, but also a social phenomenon in the sense that the internal psychological states express themselves objectively in external behavior patterns that come to be shared by others. Individuals locate themselves in one or another community internally by states of mind and feelings, such as self-definitions or feelings of closeness, and externally by behaviors appropriate to these states of mind and feelings. Behavior according to cultural patterns is thus an expression of identity and is studied as an indication of its character.

Thus, sociologists usually distinguish between objective or structural and subjective or psychological aspects of ethnic identity.

In a culturally homogeneous society, ethnic identity is a global phenomenon in which generational changes reflect changes in the global concept rather than its components parts. When ethnic identity is exported to other societies through immigration, however, generational changes will reflect a progression from structural to cultural, to psychological and to cognitive dimensions. Thus immigrants will first change in terms of what language they speak, who they associate with, and how they behave, to how they feel about themselves and others in terms of group membership, with further changes in their values, attitudes, ideas and ideologies.

The effective transmission of ethnic identity is important for the ethnic group inasmuch as the future development and preservation of the group’s heritage depends upon the successful transmission of ethnic identity from the immigrant parent to the host-society born and raised children.
In the objective (or structural) aspects we usually refer to such variables—among others—as ethnic language, religion, practicing ethnic traditions, family and other primary relations, membership to ethnic and community organizations, etc.

In the subjective (or psychological) aspects of ethnic identity, we usually include variables associated with values, feelings, ideas, images of “self” and “others”, stereotypes, attachment, pride, sympathy and comfort that one associates with ethnic memberships, as well as the salience or importance of such feelings.

**Why do we bother with ethnic identity?**

The development of effective means for the transmission of ethnic identity is important for the individual because if may facilitate well-being and adjustment. It has been suggested, for example, that positive ethnic identity is related to higher self-esteem; positive self-evaluation; and better general identity development.

The effective transmission of ethnic identity is important for the ethnic group, inasmuch as the future development and preservation of the group’s heritage depends upon the successful transmission of ethnic identity from the immigrant parents to the host-society-born and raised children; the ethnic group will be assimilated if the second and third generations will not identify themselves as members of the ethnic group.

While the extent to which ethnic identity can be retained, as one is distancing oneself from the ethnic community, or whether the host country should allow individuals to try and retain their ethnic identity are highly debatable. Until recently, is has been the position, in Canada, that ethnic identity is something to be fostered and allowed to develop as fully as desired. That position, however, has been under reassessment and rejection since the beginning of the 90’s.

Finally, the social benefits of facilitating the successful transmission of ethnic identity to the members of ethnic groups include the development of healthy personalities and well
adjusted citizens. It has been proposed that individuals of minority cultural origin who have not formed a sound ethnic identity tend to do poorly academically and socially; have trouble with the law; and remain in the lower end of socio-economic development.

Third: Let us turn now to the Greeks in Canada.

In 1996, Statistics Canada reported 203,345 individuals of Greek and 2,540 of Cypriot ethnic origin of whom 56% resided in Ontario, 28% in Quebec and 16% in the rest of Canada, mainly in British Columbia, Nova Scotia and Manitoba.

After the family, the single most important agent for the maintenance an transmission of Greek identity and Hellenism, especially for the young, has undoubtedly been the Greek school.

Since the beginning, wherever a critical mass of Greeks settled, the primary group concern was to build a church and establish a Greek school to serve their existential rights of birth, marriage and death in their own church and language. Such settings gave them a sense of self and “peoplehood” and provided the younger generation their links to Hellenism and Greece, giving them roots and history.

By 1976, dozens of churches, community and private schools were established across Canada, supported by the Federal Multicultural policy on heritage languages and by the communities themselves. They operated after regular school classes, and in the public schools, where qualified--and “not-so-qualified”--Greek teachers taught Greek language, religion, history, geography and culture. At their peak (late 70’s and early 80’s) around 80 such heritage schools operated in Toronto and more than 60 in Montreal. Thousands of young Greeks—the young adults of today—were exposed to Hellenic language, history, culture and ethnic identity.

Since 1990, however federal funding has ceased. In addition, the children of the immigrants have grown up and have other family priorities; the birth rate is low; and new
immigration from Greece has come to an end. Thus today, the number of such schools has radically been decreased. The Hellenic school system now reaches fewer than 10 per cent of the Greek children. And at the higher level of education, Greek studies are very limited.

Greeks are still one of the most institutionally developed ethnic groups in Canada, more so in Montreal than in any other part of the country. Recency of immigration, residential concentration, size and leadership led to an unprecedented organizational development of the community. A favorable multicultural ideology and policies on minorities together with government support contributed to this growth. In 1981, Greeks had the second highest intra-community marriage rate (90% in Quebec, 89% in Ontario, 88% in Canada as a whole). Recent church registers, however, suggest that this rate has drastically fallen in the 1990’s. In Ontario, it is reported that in the 90’s, almost 50% of the marriages performed in the Greek Church were mixed.

During the 1980’s Greeks were among the groups with the highest retention of ethnic identity. The adults still read Greek; visited other Greeks; were married to Greeks; and would have preferred their children to marry Greeks; they attended mostly Greek social events; ate Greek food often; listened to Greek radio programs; watched Greek television; and expected a non-Greek spouse to convert into Orthodoxy. They considered language as the most important vehicle for the maintenance and transmission of their culture and traditions. (Objective/structural ethnic identity)

However, for the new generation ethnicity and ethnic identity seemed to be more of a feeling and a reference point, rather than a way of life. They have no problem referring to themselves as Greek and more than half (55%) identified themselves as hyphenated Greek-Canadians. They speak English with their friends, although those friends are in their majority Greek. Dual identity is no problem. (subjective / psychological ethnic identity).
The Hellenic school system itself, however, seems to foster a strong ethnic identity. In a study of ethnic identity, self-esteem and academic achievement in 1993, students (N=731) exhibited strong ethnic identity and pride in it. They are proud of their heritage as well as been Canadians. They, too, consider the Greek language to be the single most important factor in maintaining Hellenism in Diaspora, followed by the importance of having Greek friends (24%) and Greek holidays (21%).

Thus, integration over time, however, has taken its toll in the use and retention of the Greek language. In the 1991 census statistics we see a significant drop in Language Spoken at Home across Canada—more so in Toronto than in Montreal. In Toronto more than half (54%) speak only English at home as compared to 38% who speak Greek, while in Quebec the numbers are still a little higher with 59% speaking Greek at home. Across Canada, only 42% speak Greek at Home. And the 2001 census figures are not in yet.

When one looks at Mother Tongue among children of 15 and less, however, we still have high percentages declaring Greek as the first tongue they learned and still know: 76% in Ontario, 88% in Quebec and 79% across Canada.

The key question, however, that is being asked by many Greeks today is “what of the future”? Will the Greek communities in Canada mature in their organizational structures and effectiveness and succeed in passing their ethnic language, culture and identity on to the young—mostly Canadian-born—generations, or as acculturation progresses will the young opt for full memberships in the larger society’s culture and structures?

Immigration from Greece has virtually come to an end. As early as 1981, there were only 287 new immigrants coming to Canada from Greece, whereas Greek statistics report 2,719 returning to Greece permanently from overseas in 1975, 3,425 in 1976 and an estimated 20,000 since then, most of who return from Canada and Australia.

The Greek ethnic identity and its definition therefore, will have to depend on subsequent generations, born and raised in Canada, as well as on the strength of their community
schools and organizations. In addition, it will depend on the parents and of the community’s ability to communicate with their children, and make “Hellenism” meaningful, attractive and available; and most importantly, it will depend on the availability of Greek studies and education, and on the ability of the ethnic organizations to attract new generations. Otherwise, the ethnic organizations will become an immigrant characteristic that will disappear along with the immigrant generation. Finally, the role of Greece is a significant factor in the maintenance of Greek identity in Diaspora.

Transfusions of “Greekness” will continue, somehow, through frequent contact with Greece. As the group advances financially, and traveling, telecommunications and the internet become more and more accessible to larger numbers of Greeks, there will be an umbilical cord attaching them to the mother culture. But would that be enough? Greece needs to take an active role in supporting educational and cultural efforts in Diaspora.

Changes in the receiving societies—for example, in attitudes to inter-ethnic relations, changes in the Charter of Rights and in the constitutional structure of Quebec—the decline or extinction of other ethnic institutions—including the English in Quebec—and changes in the public’s attitudes toward minorities, will all affect the ethnic communities in Canada. Greeks are rapidly adopting English as their mother tongue—in Quebec a bit slower.

As long as forces inside or outside the ethnic group do not threaten the use and preservation of the Greek language and culture—something that seems impossible at the moment—the group may maintain some institutional strength and cohesion.

However, things do not stand still. The linguistic ability of the group has gradually been reduced, more in the other provinces than in Quebec. Community language schools, at present, reach less than 10% of the Greek school children, and the majority of the community organizations rarely see among their members any Greek below the age of 30. Greek culture goes beyond the bouzouki and souvlaki and such expressions of ethnicity are most ephemeral. It is only this year that the Frixos Papachristides Chair in
Neo Hellenic Studies at McGill University and an Inter-University Centre for Hellenic Studies in Montreal (McGill University, Concordia and Universite de Montreal) will start functioning, which, along with the Chair of Hellenic Studies as Simon Fraser University in British Columbia and the Centre for Hellenic Studies at the University of Manitoba go some way to making Hellenism part of Canadian institutions. And unless Hellenic studies and Hellenism become embedded in the Canadian institutional structure, maintaining Hellenism in Diaspora will be a hopeful dream.

Assimilation, however, is not an inevitable process, and dual identity is possible in a multicultural society. It should also be stressed that no specific individual or organization can dictate the absolute and definitive definition of what constitutes Greek ethnic identity. Such definitions come out of group living and personal experience. Greece has also realized that the maintenance of Greek identity in Diaspora is important, and at times crucial, to its own welfare, and thus has taken an active interest in helping the efforts of maintaining their cultural heritage.

The Greek immigrants in Canada have survived the scars of many brutal wars; the pain of dislocation; the harshness of a strange culture; a severe climate, poverty, discrimination and isolation. And they have faced their challenges. They survived and succeeded in raising families; in helping Greece and relatives; in educating their children and in establishing communities and institutions that help them re-affirm their right to maintain whatever they consider important of their culture, their language and religion. They had no formal education or urban skills, and they did the best they could.

Finally, adaptation to the host society is of great importance if the primary reasons for immigration—those for a better and successful life—are to be realized and the Greeks and their children do not become outsiders to the social and power structures of the Canadian society. However, maintaining Hellenism is possible, acceptable and will make them richer in knowledge and humanity and better citizens of the world.