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Book Review

The Greek Community of New York City: Early Years to 1910 by Michael Contopoulos. Foreword by Constantine G. Hadzidimitriou. 1992, 323 pages. Available from Aristide D. Caratzas Publisher, New Rochelle, New York.

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The book deals with the origins of what is now the largest and most significant urban concentration of Greek Americans in the United States. The period the book covers is the time when mass transatlantic emigration from Greece began bringing thousands of Greeks to the United States and to New York especially. A century later, the New York Greek Americans would play an important role in the life of the Greek American community, itself not only a prominent ethnic group within the United States but also the most influential Greek diaspora community. The Greek immigrants who began arriving in New York in the late 19th and early 20th century were mainly farmers and agricultural laborers. These were not the first Greeks to settle there because there already was an older established Greek presence but it was made up of wealthy diaspora merchants. They were eventually eclipsed by the presence of the greater mass of lower class immigrants. So this book is also the story of a transitional phase in the history of the Greeks in New York.

The book is divided into twelve chapters and along with the short introductory and concluding chapters, the other ten deal with the demographic dimensions of the old and the new Greek presence, the nature of the old merchant community, the characteristics of the newcomers, their demographic size and origins, the newcomers' socio-economic profile, their ties with Greece and the ethnic organizations and institutions they established. The chapter devoted to the demographic profile of the Greeks residing in New York estimates that their numbers rose from under 100 in 1880 to about 13,000 in 1910—about twenty percent of the thirteen thousand originated from areas within the Ottoman Empire. Students of the Greek diaspora in the Eastern Mediterranean in the nineteenth century will recognize many of the names of the merchants who had established branches of their commercial houses in New York in the later part of that century. Contopoulos provides very comprehensive information about their presence, names, businesses and numbers, and examines their commercial activities briefly.

In the following chapter the author discusses the new immigrants who began arriving in the late 19th century in large numbers following an economic crisis in Greece. The causes of the emigration, the arrivals, the visit of Greece's Prince George and the social tension between the old and the new immigrants are the main points of this chapter.

The remaining chapters discuss aspects of the early immigrant experience. A chapter on their economic activities provides interesting details about the occupations these unskilled rural migrants chose to follow in New York. The most common occupations were those in the hotel and restaurant business; they also worked as fruit sellers and street vendors, florists and bootblacks. Aside from a number of furriers there were few Greeks in the manufacturing sector. In the chapter on the ties of the immigrants to their homeland Contopoulos discusses the mobilization of the New York Greeks over the Greco-Turkish War of 1897. A few thousand of them returned to Greece to fight as volunteers. The chapter details the efforts to raise money to send them, the disputes with the wealthier Greeks and the Consul who thought only aid should be sent back, the mostly pro-Greek sentiments of the city's press and Protestant clerics, and the anti-royalist reactions when Greece was defeated.

The remaining three chapters focus on the major organizations and institutions the new immigrants established. These were the fraternal associations, the Orthodox Church and the press. Several organizations are discussed under the rubric of fraternal associations, "brotherhoods" that functioned as mutual benefit societies, localist associations composed of persons from the same geographical origin in the homeland and specifically political/nationalist associations, such as the "Panhellenic Union." The first organization that was formed was the Brotherhood of Athena; it was founded in 1891 apparently at the suggestion of Prince George. Its purpose was to engage in philanthropic activities for the benefit of its members and fellow Greeks as well as to build a Church. The localist organizations were also involved in offering help to their members. In contrast, the Panhellenic Union was an explicitly political organization whose aims were to help the immigrants become better citizens in the United States, and more importantly to rally them to the cause of Greek nationalism. The organization's ties with Greece meant that the Greek Consul was an influential figure. The Consul's role was resented by the leaders of the new immigrants, among them Solon J. Vlastos, and there was a great deal of tension between the Consul and immigrant leaders even though they were sympathetic with the Panhellenic Union's principles. Vlastos and others felt that the organization was overlooking the everyday needs of the New York Greeks.

We should note parenthetically that this particular institutional structure was common to the earlier type of Greek diaspora merchant community found in Europe and in the Eastern Mediterranean. In those cases the merchants were usually wealthy enough to establish a "community" that dominated over all other

organizations and indeed was able to control the administration of the schools and the churches in a particular city and in many cases overshadow the importance of the Greek Consular authorities. However, in the case of the New York Greeks the merchants stayed away from those institutions and thus there was no single organization that could wield sufficient wealth and influence and overshadow the others. This would have important short and longer term effects on the organizational structure of the Greek American entity. The more immediate results were that there was no overarching hegemonic organization. Later on, this void was occupied successively by different organizations, the uniquely Greek American organization AHEPA (American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association) and then the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America.

The following two chapters deal with the establishment of the Church and the immigrant press. In the early twentieth century the Greek Orthodox Church was still being established and its influence was limited. The first church was founded on New York City's 72nd street in 1892, where it still stands and functions as the Archdiocese's Cathedral. Early in its existence the Church had to deal with the danger that it would fall under the jurisdiction of the older established Russian Orthodox Church in the United States. As far as the early New York Greek American press is concerned, the most important newspaper in that period was the first that was established, the Atlantis. Under the leadership of Solon Vlastos, its founder and publisher, the newspaper became the voice of the new immigrants, and thanks to a mixture of opinionated editorials, polemical articles, populism and nationalism its circulation increased steadily. By 1910 the Atlantis could claim it sold over 17,000 copies in New York and throughout the United States; it went from bi-weekly to becoming a daily newspaper. Indeed the Atlantis was one of the two leading Greek American dailies throughout the twentieth century through 1973, the year it closed down.

There is an important point to be made about this book prior to assessing its scholarly merits. The text is a doctoral dissertation submitted to New York University by his family after the author's death—the university awarded his doctoral degree posthumously. The exact circumstances are explained in the foreword written by Constantine Hadzimitriou, a New York-based historian and student of the Greek American experience. Hadzidimitriou also notes the impressive extent of research work that Contopoulos did in relation to his study. Indeed, considering there is no other similar work on this topic, all those interested in the history of the Greek American experience and of the immigrant worlds in turn of the century New York City will benefit enormously from the publication of this book, that was sponsored by the California-based Speros Basil Vryonis Center for the Study of Hellenism.

To be sure, the text is marked by the typical strengths and weaknesses of many dissertations. There is no clear overarching thesis and there is an emphasis on presenting extensive, and this case rich and informative empirical data rather than

shaping it around a particular problematic. Yet ironically this characteristic is to the book's advantage. Although we do not know what his dissertation committee or other readers would have advised him if Contopoulos had lived and had planned to publish it, we should bear in mind that the dominant orthodoxy at that time, immigrant "uprootedness" has been completely revised in the period that has elapsed. The theory of "uprootedness" that governed immigration history in the 1960s and the 1970s was the analytical twin of the sociological theories of assimilation and acculturation. In short, these approaches considered that the immigrants to the United States were completely cut off from their homelands and thus were inevitably absorbed into American society. Presently, this is no longer the accepted wisdom and immigration historians are taking into account the importance of homeland ties and homeland identity. Contopoulos' study is in many ways a good example of how indeed the homeland was significant, albeit at a time when most immigrants were foreign-born. Thus, a great deal of the material he presents is very useful in understanding Greek American history in the ways in which scholars are studying the immigrant experience currently.