

Finis Graeciae or the Return of the Greeks?
State and Diaspora in the Context of Globalisation

George Prevelakis

WPTC-98-14

UFR de Géographie
Université de Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV)
191 rue Saint Jacques 75005 Paris

Finis Graeciae or the Return of the Greeks?
State and Diaspora in the Context of Globalisation¹

George Prevelakis, University of Paris-Sorbonne

At the end of the Cold War, Greece appeared as a very successful State. NATO and EU membership built the image of a "western" country, in spite of Geography. The distance separating Greece from her Balkan neighbours, as well as from her own recent past, seemed enormous. Although it did not take long for Greek foreign policy to entangle the country once again in Balkan politics, there can be no doubt that Greece profited enormously by her choice of the ultimately victorious camp at the beginning of the Cold War.

However, not all Greek intellectuals share this optimistic attitude. At the end of the 18th century, Greeks exercised together with Turks the leadership of one of the most powerful states: the Ottoman Empire. The Greek Church was an official and important imperial institution extending its rule over all the Orthodox Christians of the Empire, no matter what languages they spoke. Greek merchants and bankers were in control of important sectors of the economic life in Central and in Eastern Europe. Other Greeks occupied important military and political positions in the Russian Empire. As a Diaspora nation before the creation of the Greek State in 1829, Greeks played an important role in an area stretching from Vienna to Cappadocia and from Saint Petersburg to Alexandria.

The international role of Greece today appears rather meagre in comparison. Greece is one small State among many others in Eastern Europe. Certainly, she enjoys a higher rank than countries like Bulgaria or Rumania due to her membership of the EU and NATO. Her advantage seems therefore related much more to her dependency on the West, than to her own merit. From the EU viewpoint, Greece is often perceived as Europe's poor relation, always asking for more money, never contributing anything positive, a continuous nuisance because of problems with her neighbours: yesterday Macedonia, today Turkey, tomorrow who?

¹ Talk given in the seminar series 'Globalisation and the "Old" Diasporas' organised by the Transnational Communities Programme at the School of Geography, University of Oxford, 12 November 1998.

For Greeks not satisfied with prosperity in return for geopolitical dependency and denial of traditional Greek values, the present situation is quite humiliating. Spiritual, if not blood children, of the Ancients and of Byzantine and Ottoman elites, are Greeks now to be reduced to servants of second rate European tourists? Are they to abandon the use of their language (replaced by a simplified and anglicised version) and its alphabet on the altar of "modernisation"? Are they condemned to lose their identity based on Orthodox Christian tradition and to follow the West European model of (in reality or hypothetically) de-christianised political identities?

Behind such attitudes and fears can be found the historical experience of the last two centuries. Greeks, for long a stateless and diasporic nation, created a State during the first half of the 19th century. Since then, a fundamental dilemma has been introduced into their politics. The Greek State, organised according to western criteria, expressed the choice of modernity. Among its fundamental hypotheses was that Diasporas were condemned to extinction. What mattered therefore was state and nation-building. The only realistic way to recreate their past glory was through the *Megali Idea* (Great Idea), that is the conquest of the greatest possible number of Ottoman territories, and in particular Istanbul, which would become the new capital of Greece. The presence of Greeks in most parts of the Ottoman Empire was the major argument in favour of Greece's *Drang nach Osten*. On the other hand, the cosmopolitan Greeks of Alexandria, Constantinople (Istanbul) or Smyrna (Izmir) continued to defend the diasporic ideal. They were contemptuous of the Athenians, whom they regarded as provincial and dependent on the Western Powers. Why should Greeks abandon their privileged position inside a great Empire in order to embark on a utopian political project? To them, it seemed easier to conquer the Empire economically and politically from the inside, than by military force from the outside.

The "Ottomanist" political project proved however much more of a utopia than the *Megali Idea*. The typhoon of Nationalism shattered the traditional Mediterranean Diasporas and the territory of the Nation-State became valuable as a refuge. In comparison to Armenians and Jews, Greeks had the advantage of a Nation-State created early enough to receive and to efficiently protect the persecuted members of the Greek Diaspora.

However, the results of the state-nationalist strategy did not measure up to the expectations of the *Megali Idea*. Although more than doubled in territory and population after the Balkan and the First World Wars, Greece did not become "one of the strongest minor powers of Europe" as had been predicted at the end of the First World War². The military disaster of 1922 in Asia Minor frustrated all hopes of creating a State beyond the confines of the Balkans and put an end to three millennia of Greek presence in Asia³.

Without the phenomenon of the *New Greek Diaspora*, the pessimistic hypothesis of *Finis Graeciae* would be unquestionable. However, the destruction of the traditional hearths around the Mediterranean and the Black Sea did not put an end to the diasporic tendencies of the Greeks. From the end of the 19th century onwards, Greek migrations started to weave diasporic threads at a new geographical scale. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century the difficulties of life in Greece coupled with US policy in favour of southern European immigration, encouraged a steady flow of poor Greeks towards the USA. Many Greeks from Turkey were added to their numbers, both before but mostly after 1922. France also received many Greeks during and after the First World War. Immigrants from Cyprus, as well as Greek ship-owners, have systematically chosen Great Britain as their host-country. After the Second World War, Germany attracted a considerable number of Greek *Gastarbeiter*. During the same period, other Greeks turned to Australia or Africa to escape from unemployment. Just as the Civil War had entailed twenty years earlier, the dictatorship of 1967-74 also impelled many Greeks abroad. Finally, the end of the Cold War revealed an important but previously overlooked Greek presence in the former Soviet Union: the Pontic Greeks, deported by Stalin from the shores of the Black Sea to Central Asia⁴.

With the exception of the former Soviet Union, the map of the New Greek Diaspora has little resemblance with that of the Old. Just fewer than five million people of Greek descent live in Diaspora that is equivalent to between 40% and 50% of the Greeks of Greece and Cyprus combined. More than three million live in English-speaking countries: about two million in the USA, six to seven hundred thousand in Australia, less than half a million in Canada, two

²Isaiah Bowman, *The New World*, World Book Company, N. York, third edition, 1928, p. 404.

³ The defeat of the Greek army by Turkish forces under Mustafa Kemal led to the expulsion of Greeks from the whole of Turkey, apart from Istanbul.

⁴ Michel Bruneau (ed.), *Les Grecs pontiques. Diaspora, identité, territoires*, CNRS Editions, Paris, 1998.

hundred thousand in Great Britain (from mainland Greece and from Cyprus)⁵. Thus, the geography of the Greek Diaspora is characterised by its close links with the Anglo-American world. This is due to the role of the Greek merchant marine, to historical coincidence and to cultural affinities.

However, the world of the Greek Diaspora is still very diverse. In the English-speaking world, and especially in the USA and in Australia, Greeks follow an ascending social orbit. The first generation of often illiterate villagers worked hard in order to survive and to bring up their children. The second generation is already well off. The third generation occupies enviable positions in the intellectual elite, in liberal professions, in the business world. The situation differs in other countries. In Russia, Greeks are not necessarily members of the elite. In Germany, where there are about three hundred thousand Greeks, the children of *Gastarbeiters* did not always get a good education. In France and in Great Britain some very wealthy and cosmopolitan Greeks coexist with intellectuals and shopkeepers. In some African countries, Greek immigrants have become prosperous and very influential; now, however, they find themselves in difficulty because of changing political circumstances.

The diversity of the Greek Diaspora does not exclude a unity, expressed by the Greek-speaking Orthodox Church via the Patriarchate of Constantinople (Istanbul). The ecumenical character of the Patriarchate corresponds with and is well adapted to the global dimension of the New Greek Diaspora. Yet at the same time, the Greek State is often responsible for serious problems inside the communities of the Diaspora and sometimes between the Diaspora and the respective host-countries. The Greek State has recently tried to supplant the Patriarchate by founding in 1996 a Council of Greeks Abroad (the SAE), an instrument of "self-organisation and co-ordination" of the Greek Diaspora.

Until the creation of this Council, the Greek State took a mainly economic interest in Diaspora affairs. Even the term "Diaspora" started to be used only during the 1990s. Before then, Greek authorities referred to "Greeks Abroad", thus expressing the predominant image of a Greek presence outside Greece. It was as if they were "children of the homeland" away for professional reasons, who would sooner or later return. Those failing to do so would be assimilated by the host country and lost to Hellenism.

⁵ I. K. Hasiotis, *Episkopisi tis Istorias tis Neoellinikis Diasporas*, Vantias, Athens, 1993, p.169-170

Experience seemed to confirm this view. In fact, especially in the U.S., in which the first major studies of Greek emigration were conducted, Greeks anglicised their names even in the first generation: Papadopoulos became Papas, Anagnostopoulos became Agnew, etc. The second generation spoke little Greek and consequently had difficulty in following religious ceremonies. Mixed marriages reinforced assimilation. The American melting pot seemed to absorb them easily. The émigrés were therefore children of the Nation sacrificed on the altar of emigration. This human sacrifice was acceptable mainly because it decreased the effects of unemployment, as well as social and political strife. Soon however, the Greek State found out that emigration could also be quite profitable from an economic point of view. The remittances sent by émigrés to their families became a means to cover part of the chronic balance of payments deficit.

This perception of "Greeks Abroad", as a cow to be milked by the Greek State, acquired an additional political dimension after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974. Suddenly and unexpectedly, the amorphous mass of Greek-Americans became mobilised and intervened in the U.S. political arena in favour of the Greek-Cypriot cause. From that moment on, the Greek-American lobby became one of the major issues in the relationship between Greece, Turkey and the U.S.A. Although spectacular, the political mobilisation of the Greek-Americans is not the most significant fact of the emergence of a New Greek Diaspora. Other phenomena developed slowly but steadily. Thus, the third generation of Greek-Americans started to search for roots abandoned by their parents. Language, religion, folklore attracted the new generations which felt a strong urge to (re)define their identity. Greek-Americans changed their names to become Papadopouloi or Anagnostopouloi again. As a result, the visibility of the Greek Diaspora has grown. Greek names can be read among the list of actors at the end of the American TV serials, revealing the extent of the Greek presence in the world of the media.

Agreeably surprised at first at the re-appearance of what looked like a new political ally, little by little the Greek State started to feel awkward in the face of a phenomenon that could not be assessed and even less controlled. By contrast, the emergence of a New Diaspora is a blessing for the Greek Church, even if, at the same time, it represents a challenge for its administrative structures and traditions. Unlike the case of State institutions, the Diaspora and

Orthodox Christianity are not incompatible. The Church had functioned as the main institution of the traditional Greek Diaspora for many centuries.

How can one explain the return of the Greek Diaspora? Can this phenomenon be considered as stable? What does it mean for the Greek State? How is it related to the debate about the "End of Greece"?

The return of the Greek Diaspora is part of a general phenomenon observed in many other Diasporas, old or new⁶. Communities with diasporic traditions and cultures will obviously have more success in creating or recreating Diaspora networks. Among the various favourable factors is the spectacular development of transport and communication, which enables Diaspora communities dispersed around the world to keep in contact, both among themselves and with the homeland. More generally, the network world of Diasporas is favoured by the spectacular growth of *Circulation*, which is the major fact of the last decades of the 20th century. Circulation challenges topographical distance, the main obstacle to the unity - and therefore the survival - of Diasporas. A shrinking world does not necessarily mean that everything becomes less important. If territories are less crucial, by the same token, networks grow bigger and become more significant. Diasporas belong to the second category. They are enhanced by all the phenomena related to the Circulation Revolution of our times, usually called *Globalisation*.

However, the revolution in circulation is not the only factor to benefit Diasporas. As the French geographer Jean Gottmann showed in the early 1950s, evolution in the domain of circulation brings about changes in the complementary domain of *Iconographies*, which represent the self-defence mechanisms of human communities in the face of rapid change⁷. The factor of inertia is deeply rooted in cultural traditions, hence its capacity to resist forces of change that threaten the cohesion of the community. Thus, our era of circulation is also a period of the reinforcement, transformation and growing importance of iconographies. From this point of view, Diasporas, and especially the old ones, are in a strong position. In fact, what else are Diaspora cultures, if not strong iconographies, which have proved their capacity to survive through space and time? Thus, Diasporas have all the necessary

⁶See Michel Bruneau (ed.), *Diasporas*, Reclus, Montpellier, 1995 and George Prevelakis (ed.), *The Networks of Diasporas*, KYKEM, Nicosia, 1996.

⁷Jean Gottmann, *La politique des Etats et leur géographie*, Paris, A. Colin, 1952.

resources to profit from the opening up of the world by the processes of Globalisation, without risking either losing their unity or being dissolved inside a new universe of fluidity and change. The Greek Diaspora is following the same path. The informal and invisible networks that linked together Greek-Americans became activated with the challenge of the Cyprus crisis, felt as a major humiliation. Thus, a qualitative leap has been taken. Since then, there has been no comparable event of such significance. However, the growing pains of a new reality in the cultural and in the political expression of the Greek presence in the World are starting to be felt.

Globalisation favours Greeks but, at the same time, the crisis of the territorial Nation State weakens them. The Greek State, created according to models foreign to Greek traditions, has never managed to function properly, in spite of the efforts of great political leaders (Trikoupis, Venizelos or Karamanlis). At the end of the 20th century, Greeks struggle between two contradictory processes. The state and nation-building process, which helped them survive during the triumph of Nationalism, has led to a rather disappointing situation. The Greek State has to face threats like any other Nation State: the forces challenging the foundations of the territorial Nation State, and the end of the Westphalian World Order⁸. If France, with a millennium of state-building behind it, is in difficulty, what are the prospects of a weak and a handicapped State? Losing ground, the Greek State turns towards the dynamic elements of the Diaspora. However, as the recent experience of the Council of the Greeks Abroad has shown, these efforts are not fruitful. The State's effort to mobilise the Diaspora has not succeeded very well, and the subsidy to the Council has been minimised, suggesting that the State expects it to wither away. The embrace of the Greek State does create some problems for the Greek Diaspora. Nevertheless, the State, because of its inherent logic, can neither understand the functioning of the chaotic Diaspora networks nor submit them to its rigid structures.

The danger for the future of the Diaspora does not come directly from the policies of the Greek State itself, but rather from profound forces related to the nation-building process. For almost two centuries the Greek State tried to eradicate the diasporic dimensions from Greek culture, the basic substances

⁸Jean Gottmann, *The significance of territory*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1973.

permitting Greeks to create Diasporas. The whole logic of territorial nationalism, the foundation of the modern Nation State, goes against the diasporic ethos. Anti-elitism is a fundamental element of the official ideology of the Greek State. However, the traditional Diasporas are in fact elite communities inside oceans of less advantaged populations. The functioning of Greeks as elites is based on factors of vital importance like family, education, language, and religion. To a large extent, family structures and traditions explain the paths of social progress. Family solidarity and especially the parental determination to offer their offspring a better education than their own are a fundamental factor for the success of the Greeks. Education is also related to the life of the community. One of the major objectives of Greek communities has been to build schools. The Greek educational ideal is linked to the other fundamental factors of the diasporic identity: language and religion.

Through language and religion, Diaspora Greeks are distinguishable from their local environment. These two elements are closely related, since the Church liturgy is in the language of the Evangiles, i.e. Greek. Thus, knowing Greek is a requirement of the participation in the life of the Church, which, in its turn, reinforces the language by practising a variety of its forms (modern, hellenistic, etc.). Knowledge of Greek, on the other hand, is a strong intellectual instrument for education and research. The success of many Greeks in the scientific realm is not unrelated to the fact that the basic scientific concepts are expressed in their mother tongue. Surprisingly, the position of the Greek State on such questions - official and explicit or unofficial and implicit - is systematically in contradiction with those traditional values of Greek culture. Is it simply because western influence arrived in Greece with a time-lag of two to three decades or is it because there is something essentially contradictory between the spirit of the Nation State and the aspirations of the Diaspora?

In any case, during the last twenty years, the Greek national educational system has collapsed, the Greek language has been "simplified" again and again - thus losing a great part of its heritage - and finally, family structures have been "modernised", that is adapted to the more individualistic values of West European societies. Last but not least, the role of Orthodox religion is under fire in the context of the Europeanisation of the Greek society. The specifically oriental characteristics of the relationship between Religion and

Politics are to be replaced by the West European model (in fact the French model of the "laïcité").

How do these changes constitute a threat to the New Greek Diaspora? Although the present environment generally favours Diasporas, it is not possible to be part of the general trend if the specifically diasporic characteristics are lost or in decline. Until recently, those characteristics seemed to constitute a burden and a handicap. Thus, during the last two centuries a systematic effort to eradicate them was made. In the Greek case, this effort has been accelerated during the last few decades. The historical irony is that if this effort finally succeeds, Greeks will have destroyed their chances as a diasporic culture by their efforts to adapt to an antiquated nationalistic environment.

We live in a transition period during which the old and the new coexist. It is very difficult to predict which element will overpower the other. Will the dynamic of Diaspora impose its logic on the declining Greek State or will the Greek State, in its spasmodic endeavours to keep afloat, strangle the perspectives of the Diaspora? In the first case the world will witness the return of the Greeks, in the second it will observe the *Finis Graeciae* .