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The Southeastern Aegean and the World: Premodern Roots of a Postmodern Cultural and Economic Coastal Network

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This paper deals with the role of the southeastern Aegean's inhabitants in the development of an elaborate network of seaports at a global scale. Since ancient times, population movement flows have been one of the main characteristics of the Mediterranean world. At the end of the Ottoman era, diverse manifestations of trans-Mediterranean mobilities formed a dynamic and coherent network of port-cities, extended from Istanbul and Salonica to Port Said and Alexandria, and from Alexandretta, Haifa, and Gaza to Marseille. The Empire's collapse and the emergence of modernity increased the need for exploring new destinations, capable of providing economic opportunities for employment and trade. To this end, Mediterranean port-cities have started to interconnect with seaports in the United States, Australia, France, and the Caribbean through people in motion bringing wide-ranging socio-political changes to host societies while maintaining vivid links with their homelands. In this perspective, the geohistorical trajectory of the Dodecanese islands' population constitutes an interesting case-study. Incorporated into the Greek State in 1947, the archipelago has been subject to various geopolitical antagonisms that affected its demographics, but also shaped the conditions of its future dynamics and performance. The existence of a large cluster of Dodecanesian communities abroad -linking the southeastern Aegean region to the world- underlines the importance of tangible and intangible connections between coastal cities in the context of Globalization, while challenging established interpretational concepts that tend to separate postmodernity from its premodern counterpart.

Introduction

Before the emergence of the Greek State, Greeks were a part of an important nexus that linked homeland attachments, hostland localities, and geopolitical circumstances through a variety of economic ties and cultural affinities. As imperial subjects (Byzantium, Ottoman Empire), their identity rested largely

on language, religion, and on a nimble handling of imperial space (Gondicas & Issawi 1999; Bruneau 2000; Prevelakis 2006; Clogg 2013; Georgikopoulos 2017). In this context, the seagoing activity of Greek Orthodox merchants shaped a communal sense of their geospatial relationship to the world and promoted the creation of a commercial Diaspora settled in towns that had easy access to the sea. Due to the multiple connectivities and the emotional and mental openness facilitated by the maritime context, Orthodox islanders have been the most familiar with this (re)settlement pattern. Firm connection between coastal cities (homeland and hostland) served the twofold purpose of economic independence and the smooth transplantation of the islanders' distinctive ways of life (localism, regionalism, dialects, religion, customs and traditions) to their new habitat. In this endeavor, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (Istanbul) and the firm structure of nuclear family units have played a crucial role by becoming the main institutions through which the cultural and spiritual dimensions of the diasporic identity have been preserved both in international and communal self-serving terms.

Spatial interaction across networks, along with important developments in the geopolitical setting, have been actively at work in creating new spatialities affiliated with broader categories, such as cosmopolitanism, exposure to foreign influence, and diasporic lobbying, thus offering an alternative set of alliances. This was particularly evident in the Diaspora's mobilization during the Greek War of Independence and the nation-building process, as well as throughout the negotiations resulting in the territorial expansion of the Greek State after the Balkan and the two World Wars.

However, despite the key role of the Greek Diaspora in shaping and conditioning Greece's destiny, the choice of modernity -as expressed by the creation of the Greek State (1829), the *Megali Idea* (Great Idea) project[1], and the country's Western-oriented strategic outlook (NATO and EEC/EU membership)- has shifted the emphasis away from cultural legacies toward a more territorial approach. As Agnew puts it (2015: 43), the territorial state was perceived as the exclusive type of the spatiality of power, with disregard to "the significance of other spatial modalities such as networks/flows and place making for understanding its organization".

As a result, the difference between space and territory became blurred

1 The nationalist aspiration that, between 1843 and 1922, envisaged the conquest of an important number of Ottoman territories and the restoration of the Orthodox Christian Byzantine Empire. The project ended with the defeat of the Greek troops by Turkish forces in Asia Minor (1922) and the expulsion of Greek Orthodox populations from the Turkish territory, apart from Istanbul.

(Sassen 2013) and the relationship between the diasporic and the stato-national Greek realities proved more competitive than cooperative. To further its pursuit in building socio-economic and political networks of influence, the Greek Diaspora tried to escape the confinement of the forces related to statecraft process. This fact introduced an important contradiction: the perception of a geopolitically and financially profitable Greek presence outside Greece vs. the image of a source of anomaly challenging the established principle of political legitimacy by escaping rigid structures and controls. The former was mainly the case until the early 1980s: Greeks abroad were seen as a socio-economic extension of the internal community. But the apparent triumph of the territorialized organization, supported by European funding, engendered the diffusion of an ethno-nationalist sentiment and a general distrust vis-à-vis socio-political spaces calling into question the clear-cut allegiance to the defined geo-symbolic perimeter of the Greek State.

This was in complete harmony with broader tendencies affecting the post-war Western world: geopolitical representations were gradually curling up towards the conservative and stable framework of continental values and shaped around the two pillars of security and prosperity. At the end of the Cold War, modern continental visions continued to gain ground in the European thought and overpower premodern maritime values. In addition, the great opportunities for financial and strategic expansion offered by the context of Globalization, in its social, economic, and technological dimensions, as well as the positive developments in Greece's immediate neighborhood[2] (Lesser 2005) were perceived as a contribution to an unbalanced territorial development and a means to exploit internal schisms that limited the scope of Greek foreign policy, rather than as an instrument for boosting connectivity between the marginal maritime territories and the continental ones. According to the prevailing representation of the territorial structure of Europe, the role of the surrounding cities (especially Mediterranean countries) has been emphasized for decades in shaping the center-periphery vision (Kresl & Ietri 2016) in which other important actors, such as Diasporas, lagged behind.

Recently, the economic (2010) then the socio-political (2015) breakdown exposed the system's weaknesses. The end of the Westphalian World Order (Gottmann 1973), as expressed by the ongoing crisis that challenges the foundations of the territorial Nation State, is calling for a change of paradigm. Faced with widespread geopolitical instability, should the post-modern West-

2 Such as the opening-up of eastern European markets and the post-1996 Greek-Turkish détente.

ern world continue, in its spasmodic attempts to revive an outdated project, to turn inwards or should it look historically back and geographically around to regain touch with its maritime-oriented cultural origins? In a changing world, innovation, access to information, openness, and moral cohesion before risk-taking actions tend to become important assets in tackling threats and discovering new geopolitical perspectives. In this regard, studying the networks of the Greek maritime Diasporas, and especially the Dodecanesian one, may provide useful insights in this direction.

Scattered abroad: From trading posts to a connect-the-dots cultural network

Although the number of Greeks residing permanently outside the Greek State is difficult to compute, there can be little doubt that Hellenism has always been a source for international human mobility. From the early long-distance seafarers to the Greek Orthodox traders of the Ottoman Empire, Diaspora networks came to establish commercial outposts and line the shores of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea (Hall 2016; Halaftis 2005). In the 19th century, the conspicuous Greek presence in Smyrna, Constantinople and Odessa, and in the trade centers of the Black Sea, the Balkans, Central Europe and southern France facilitated the introduction of the Enlightment and revolutionary ideas in the Balkan Peninsula, which resulted in the emergence of a strong ethnic group consciousness and eventually in the creation of the Greek State (Koliopoulos & Veremis 2002).

However, behind the unity, the world of the Greek Diaspora remained very diverse and constantly changing. The Greek merchants of the Mediterranean basin were compelled to abandon their host-countries and return to Greece whereas a great number of Epirotes, bankrupt Peloponnesian currant-growers[3], and many Orthodox islanders under Italian rule (Dodecanesian Greeks of Kasos, Symi, Castellorizo, Chalki, and Kalymnos who lived from shipping and sponge-fishing) emigrated to the United States, Canada, South America, and Australia between 1890 and 1930 (Kasperson 1966; Campbell & Sherrard 1968; Shinn 1986; Bruneau 2000). This new network took the form of an *archipelago* of micro-units, ready to play a significant role in their hostlands without losing sight neither of their local and regional cultural background nor of the geopolitical necessities of an imagined national unity consciousness. In this context, the politico-economic influence of Epirotic societies

3 Due to the collapse of the European markets for vine products.

in the United States set the ground for the 1913 incorporation of southern Epirus into the Greek State, while the pro-integration lobbying activities of the *Dodecanesian League of America* (1934) then the *National Dodecanesian Council* (1940) -under the highly-skilled leadership of N. G. Mavris- contributed tremendously to the inclusion of the island group within the Greek territorial limits (1947).

The latter case constitutes a great example of the potentialities of a regional maritime Diaspora in the articulation between space and place-making, territoriality, and the forces of Globalization. Settled in coastal cities like Sidney, Melbourne, Perth, New York, Chicago, Boston, Tarpon Springs, Panama City, Nassau (in the Bahamas), San Fransisco, Toronto and Montreal, but also in Montevideo and Buenos Aires, the Dodecanesian Diaspora of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was the result of the various geopolitical shifts that affected nearly all aspects of island life. The constant changing of political sovereignty (Latin and Ottoman rule, Italian possession) and the fluidity of the larger geopolitical environment (nationalisms, inter-state antagonisms, armed conflicts) have influenced the islanders' economic and social status and led many of them to emigrate.

Unlike the Dodecanesian merchants of the Mediterranean and Black Sea, this tide of migration contained the seeds of what is called "mobilized diaspora" -communities with occupational and communication skills that manage to have access to the decision-making process (Armstrong 1976)- which allowed the rise of a "power-elite" (Mills 2000). Combined with the transition from a regional to a national consciousness (as expressed by the renaming of the *Dodecanesian League of America* to *National Dodecanesian Council*) and supported by a cultural identity threaded through imperial, pre-national, and national structures, this characteristic gave the Diaspora the "motive, opportunity, and means" to exert influence (Shain & Barth 2003: 463)[4], as well as the ability to acquire an additional geopolitical dimension and work in favor of the Dodecanesian cause.

4 "In order for a diaspora to exert influence on a homeland's foreign policy, there should exist motive, opportunity, and means (i.e., a diaspora should both want to exert influence and have the capacity to do so). This capacity depends on the ability to organize members of the kin community as an influential group (which depends in part of the nature of the hostland regime) and on the receptivity of the homeland's political system to diasporic influence. Thus, the factors affecting the efficacy of diasporic influence include the degree of diasporic motivation, the social-political of both the hostland and the homeland, and the balance of power between the diaspora and the homeland. All these factors are interconnected."

However, after the diplomatic triumph of 1947 (incorporation of the archipelago into the Greek State), the active Greek Dodecanesian Diaspora started to abolish its dynamic character and buckle under the weight of the predominant image of "Greeks abroad" whose role was to be limited to the remittances flowing into the Greek economy as a means to improve the chronic balance of payment deficit (Koliopoulos & Veremis 2002).

From 1950 to the late 1970s, a great number of young and unmarried Dodecanesians, attracted to lands with an existing stock of their fellow compatriots, replenished the Greek communities of Western Europe (the UK, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy), Australia, and the Americas for pursuing graduate studies (the basis of the later intellectual Diaspora) or employment (proletarian Diaspora). Along with the first and the second generation already in place, they had been quickly integrated into the host-countries' civic associations, social circles, and entrepreneurial life, before they were acculturated to the norms and customs of the new societies: "the discrepancy between this early assimilation and delayed acculturation may explain why a distinct ethnic identity has survived" among these communities (Moskos 1989: 149). This diasporic ethnic identity was soon to be translated into a potential resource by the Greek State: after a long period of parallel strategies, the territorial-dendritic organization managed to overpower the reticular-galactic one (Prevelakis 1996) and the importance of the cultural variables unique to Greek diasporic maritime-oriented communities was minimized.

Nevertheless, the pressures of Globalization and the unpredictable geopolitical context are once again calling for new adaptation strategies. The simultaneous and often contradictory, yet interrelated, ongoing processes of reemerging ethno-nationalism, Nation State crisis, glocalization, and regionalization, make identity a key issue in the post-modern geopolitics (Dempsey & Nardini 2017; Prevelakis 2017). This fact requires serious consideration of the cultural origins and variables, specific to each socio-political combination of connections, in order to develop a common ground and discover new perspectives. What seems to be at stake is to profit from the continuous opening up of the world without risking abolishing key elements of identity that maintain unity inside a rapidly changing universe. In this process, the -until recently marginal- Mediterranean context regains its potency and impact as a balancer for the networking of continental and maritime European territories, as well as a container of preserved traditional resources projected into the contemporary era.

After a long period of introversion, new strategies of distinction at a local scale and a newfound regionalism among the Dodecanesians in Greece and

abroad (Riak 2011; Georgikopoulos 2016) seem to reaffirm the significance of cultural heritage in the reshaping and evolution of the *psychosomatic device* that is territory (Gottmann 1973). Moreover, the connect-the-dots cultural network of Greek-Dodecanesian communities abroad, linking the southeastern Aegean region to a worldwide web of coastal cities, could provide useful indicators as to how to regain access to maritime values by understanding the geopolitical importance of premodern loyalties in a post-modern context of ceaseless change and fragmentation.

The role of modern constructions, such as national identity and supranational structures (such as the EU), in this process is not negligible. In fact, what might seem contradictory could in reality prove complementary. Nowadays, regional and national identification patterns exist concomitantly and interact with cosmopolitan localism (Appadurai 1996), multilevel governance, and Stato-national Globalization (Astiz et al. 2002; Foucher 2013) phenomena. In addition, the 21st century is witnessing a spectacular development of easy transportation and very active, dynamic, and sophisticated multimedia, which make it possible for Diasporas to be closely connected to their psychological/imagined or remembered homelands and other communities at a global scale. Finding the link between connectivity and cohesion, transformation and stability, as well as between diversity and unity requires to make the leap away from purely Ethnocentric and Eurocentric approaches by adapting their dynamic elements to the challenges of the new multipolar world. In this endeavour, the *chaordic* insular character of the Dodecanesian Diaspora could provide some input.

Cultural amphibians[5]: The articulation between areal and reticular territory in the context of Globalization

What remains today of the premodern maritime diasporic identity of the Dodecanesian communities and how can it be used in the current context? To what extend and in which way could the inherent contradictions and antagonisms between concepts and practices turn into durable and well-balanced complementarities?

Based on structures like family, education, language, and religion, the organization of the Greek southeastern Aegean diaspora managed to adapt to new environments early on. Today, what seems to link the Mediterranean littoral, Black Sea, Balkan, and Central Europe Ottoman Greek merchants to the New Greek Diaspora of the 20th and 21st century is the resilient nature of

5 Retrieved from Hall 2016: 3.

this nuclear networked organization. Indeed, despite certain adaptations to changing circumstances, the interlinking network of insular communal institutions (local clergy, locally-elected administrative councils known as *Demogeronties*), Dodecanesian trade Diaspora, and the Greek-speaking Orthodox Church (Ecumenical Patriarchate) has little difference with the contemporary web of cosmopolitan, religious, and entrepreneurial networks of the maritime-oriented Greek Diaspora.

Attachment to the land of the forebears, family, a common commercial culture, and religion constitute important factors that create the ties that bind the members of a moral community at various geographical scales. The Dodecanesian Diaspora in the United States, Canada, Africa, Europe, and Australia expresses its global dimension through deep-rooted traditional values that are linked, since the Ottoman era, with Greek national consciousness and Orthodox Christianity. The return of an ethno-regional patriotism and the growing politico-economic influence of these communities abroad have an impact on the host-countries' foreign policy (Cohen 1996; Bruneau 2000; Sheffer 2003) towards issues of Greek and European concern, as the crucial mediation efforts of the Obama administration during the 2015 Greek political crisis (danger of *Grexit*) have shown. Furthermore, third and fourth generation diasporic Dodecanesians organize regular family tourism visits to their ancestral homelands to discover or renew their local and regional attachments.

As in sea, the insular Greek Diaspora has also succeeded in land. Concrete or symbolic ties with the ancestral homeland continue to be an essential element for the Dodecanesian Diaspora and an important promoter of regional identity. By establishing and maintaining international, trans-state, and trans-local networks, these communities enable exchanges of significant political, economic and cultural resources, and contribute to the promotion of *glocal* strategies that accord with the current post-modern stakes.

The return of maritime-focused mental maps appears as an alternative to the continental cast of mind that shaped Europe's political and economic organization. The reemergence of maritime values, such as liberty, risk-taker mentality, thirst for discovery and innovation, competence, resourcefulness, and a strong will for interconnection paves the way for a change of paradigm in lasting ways. The specificity of the Greek Dodecanesian diasporic identity could help build bridges between various geographical and geopolitical scales, going from local and regional to national, European, and global levels, by using its multifaceted historic experience.

However, getting to the universal through a specific cultural history is not as simple as it may seem. Adapting to constant change through cultural

resources implicates a redefinition or eviction of multiple well-established convictions, habits, and attitudes that used to create the illusion of a secure environment. Struggling with stress that derives from a continuously modified context, groups that lack the means to adjust tend to revert to their previous situation or state of mind, which often reemerge with a minimum of conscious effort. This is the case of the return of xenophobia, introversion and nationalist sentiments throughout Europe and the United States: seeing the current challenges of an interconnected world as external threats results in spasmodic reversals towards antiquated yet solid socio-political constructions. An alternative would be to change current risk perceptions by going further back in space and time: exploring the premodern roots of maritime values -as expressed by the Aegean-oriented economic and cultural coastal networks of the Greek Diaspora- and introducing them to post-modern identity-making could be the key element in this direction.

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