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# The Greek diaspora in a globalised world

## Abstract

The term *diaspora*, carrying a sense of displacement as a result of emigration, has become a key word in today's globalised world and it represents, semantically and conceptually, a quite complex and fluid notion. Especially in post-World War II times it has experienced more expansion and in the past two decades it has proliferated in a range of directions to accommodate political, cultural and even interdisciplinary agendas.

Within this context, the present article aims at providing a cohesive account of the dynamics of the Greek diaspora, both as a historical and immigrant phenomenon. For a comprehensive picture, this article reflects on the energy, character, demographic situation, causes and community organisations of the Greek diaspora in its transnational frame of reference.

## Preamble

The term *diaspora*, like that of *migration*, has become a key word in today's globalized society. It originated in Hellenistic times, with its earliest usages encountered in the *Septuagint* with reference to the Jewish diaspora (*Deuteronomy* ch. XXVIII, line 25, *Jeremiah*, XV: 7, *Psalms*, 147: 2 etc.) after the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, but also later, as in the end of the first century AD in John's gospel (VII: 35) and Plutarch's *Moralia* (II: 1105A).

The first recorded use in the English language of this term appeared much later in 1876, with reference to the '[Moravian body's] extensive

diaspora work (as it is termed) of evangelizing among the National Protestant Churches on the continent' ('diaspora' in the *Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. 1, 1971), while in this language it became more widely used by the mid-1950s.

During the 1970s, with integration and assimilation demonstrating fallibility in different countries, intensified by the gradual appearance of multiculturalism and more social tolerance, the notion of diaspora progressively acquired a new dimension, more and more reflecting on people displaced from their native homelands, residing in a host country and maintaining their ethnic identity, whereas in the past these people were generally expected to drop their ethnic identity and assimilate to the social norms of the receiving country.

From the 1980s the term diaspora rapidly experienced more expansions, with the result that since the 1990s the use of the term has proliferated and its meaning has 'dispersed' in a range of directions to accommodate political, cultural and even interdisciplinary agendas, and extends beyond them to the media, the web, and even popular culture. Today, with multiple transnational migrations, the semantic domain of diaspora has broadened so much that it includes a whole spectrum of words, such as immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, et cetera.

As a result of this proliferation of the term diaspora and its extension into so many different directions semantically and conceptually, as well as into different scholarly fields, various theorists have been inspired to propose a number of typologies to describe them. For example, among others, Michel Bruneau (2010: 39–41), based on organisational structure, defines four major types of diasporas: the entrepreneurial (Chinese, Indians and Lebanese), the religious (Jews, Greeks, Armenians and Assyro-Chaldeans), the political (Palestinians and Tibetans), and the racial-cultural (black diaspora). While Robin Cohen (2003: 312, 314), based on empirical observations, proposes five types: refugee/persecution (Jews, Armenians, Irish or Palestinians), colonial/imperial (Ancient Greeks, British or Dutch), labour (Chinese, Japanese or Indians), trade/professional (Chinese, Venetians or Lebanese), and cultural (Caribbean). Similarly, employing comparative criteria, J.A. Armstrong (1976: 393–408) distinguishes world diaspora into 'mobilized diaspora', that is, the ethnic groups of which functioned basically within the context of the nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial empires and used their

abilities (linguistic, professional, etc.) to modernize and mobilize the host countries, and into 'proletarian diaspora', that is, the ethnic groups of which remained an unskilled labour force with limited communication abilities and little scope for social mobility in their advanced industrialized host countries mainly from the early twentieth century years.

However, no matter which notion of diaspora appeals more to us, the fact is that all cases of diaspora exhibit several of the following constitutive elements:

- immigration (either forced or voluntary), one of the most significant phenomena of our times
- displacement from the national land, frequently in a traumatic way
- dispersion from a homeland (today the most widely recognizable element of diaspora) either in search of work or as merchants or colonists
- nostalgia and maintenance of strong personal and collective memory of the homeland (although for the second and later generations these sentimental ties become symbolic and non-territorial in particular), even idealized as a significant source of value, identity and loyalty
- orientation to a real or imagined homeland with a hope for return at some point (if it still exists), although the returnees realize that the real homeland is no longer the one they dreamed of
- deliberate preservation of a distinctive identity in the host society and a strong and continuing ethnic group consciousness
- problematic relationship with the host country because of the immigrants' fears of not getting integrated into the new society and therefore not being accepted and feeling inferior
- sense of solidarity with persons of the same national descent residing in the same or other host countries
- maintenance of contacts with relatives and friends in the homeland
- hope and possibility for a better life in the host countries (cf. Cohen 2003: 315–25; Brubaker 2005: 5–6).

Needless to say, all these elements strengthen resistance to language change and to the abandonment of traditional cultural and religious customs and practice.

In addition, we also realize more and more that, apart from the various cases of world diaspora, the diaspora's course, type and rhythm become more deeply influenced and interrelated by the contemporary phenomena of globalisation and transnationalism. Globalisation and transnationalism through their critical aspects such as the global economy, forms of international immigration, development of global cities, et cetera, contribute significantly to the study of the various cases of diaspora in the world. A result of this link between diaspora and globalisation, two essentially different phenomena, is that both contribute to and influence each other.

Consequently, the diaspora does not remain the same but keeps changing as the times and societies change. It is deeply affected by aspects and situations of the host societies, and therefore, is by nature changeable both as a global diaspora and as partial diasporas in the various host countries. After all, this also happens with the immigrants' multidimensional expressions of ethnocultural identity, under the new linguistic, sociocultural, economic and political environments of the different countries.

### The dynamics of the Greek diaspora Character

Very few nations have been as dispersed, both in numbers and across classes from ancient times until now, as the Greeks. In reality, the Greeks since antiquity, like the Jews, the Armenians and other peoples, have been a nation of diaspora.

Today the Greek nation consists first of the Metropolitan Centre, that is the Greeks of Greece and Cyprus, and second, the Greeks of the diaspora, together embodying the concept of cultural *Ecumenical Hellenism*. In fact this dualism of the Greek nation is a very representative characteristic of Hellenism and its history, and it can be argued that it is reflected correspondingly in the dualism of the state and the communities of the diaspora. These two aspects of the Greek nation are interlinked and interdependent. This means that not only does diasporic Hellenism need the homeland, among other reasons, to prevent extinction and total assimilation, but the homeland also needs the diaspora particularly in matters of foreign policy, mobilisation of world opinion, economic crises, et cetera. Therefore, it is in the interest of both partners to maintain and promote a strong, cohesive

and mutually supportive body of Hellenism throughout the world (see also Psomiades 1993: 145).

Despite, however, this obvious interdependence of the Greek Metropolitan Centre and the diasporic communities, what is not clearly defined even today, and therefore, not generally accepted is the extent of their interrelationship. The most widely proposed models of this are the *tree* and the *galaxy*. The model of the tree symbolically illustrates the vital interconnectedness of the Metropolitan Centre (the trunk) with its diasporic communities (the branches). In comparison, the galaxy model indicates, on the one hand, the existing relationship between the diasporic communities and the Metropolitan Centre, while on the other hand emphasizing their simultaneous autonomous situation, leads naturally to the notion of Ecumenical Hellenism.

It could be argued, however, that this lack of clarity of definition is also due somewhat to the fact that there has been inadequate knowledge of the achievements and progress of the diasporic Greeks and their descendants in the various disciplines, arts, professions, et cetera, as well as of effective interlinking between the Metropolitan Centre and the global diaspora. As a result, quite frequently, the achievements of diasporic Greeks and their descendants are recognized and honoured by other countries but remain relatively or virtually unknown in the Metropolitan Centre.

In terms of economic, sociocultural, and especially historical criteria, the period of the modern Greek diaspora can be subdivided into the *historical diaspora*, focused on the Mediterranean and the Black Sea especially from the fall of Constantinople (mid-fifteenth century) mainly to the Asia Minor Catastrophe (1922), resulting from historical events and developments and the *immigrant diaspora* (late nineteenth century until now) due to population movements basically for economic reasons from Greece and the areas of the historical diaspora (Constantinides 2004: 46, 2008: 14–39; Damanakis 2005: 30–32).

Geographically, in modern times (1830 onwards) the Greek diaspora spread in two main directions: one within Europe and another transoceanic from the Old to the New World. The Greeks moved north and northeast to Austria, Ukraine, Romania, southern Russia and the Black Sea (Georgia and elsewhere), while merchant families also went to Mediterranean trading centres, such as Marseilles in France, Livorno, Calabria and Bari in Italy,

Alexandria in Egypt, as well as north to London, Manchester and Liverpool in Britain, and elsewhere. After World War II the Greeks dispersed to Germany, Belgium, Holland, Sweden and other North and West European countries, south to Egypt (although the Greek presence existed there from Hellenistic times), Ethiopia, Sudan and other African countries. Finally, again especially after World War II, the Greek Civil War (1946–1949) and the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, in successive waves they crossed the oceans and went to even more remote immigrant host lands of different continents, such as the United States of America, Canada, the South American countries, Australia and New Zealand, while, mainly after the Greek Civil War, many left wing activists moved with their families to the Communist countries of Europe, such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Russia and elsewhere for political reasons.

Among a range of adverse factors (intermarriages, decline or even loss of the Greek language, etc.), another noticeable one, since the end of the 1960s, and especially after 1973, has been the drastic decline of Greek emigration from the Metropolitan Centre due to its significant socio-economic improvement from post-World War II hardships and internal upheavals, as well as to the increase in repatriation. Indicative examples include Greek emigration to Australia, which since 1971 has seen the arrival of new Greek immigrants fall markedly to the extent that in the 1990s, it decreased to about 100 persons from Greece or even fewer annually (Kanarakis 2003; 72 fn. 31). However, there seems to be the possibility of another change on the way in light of the recent economic events in Greece over the last two years, although it is too early to determine what the impact will be and there is considerable debate already in the media.

### Demographic situation

Indicatively, during the one hundred and fifty-six year period starting in 1821 (1821–1977) Greece lost 1,815,944 persons who emigrated both to Europe and to transoceanic countries (Kassimati 1984: 15, 16 Table 1), a number extremely impressive in relation to its total population. Among the transoceanic countries Australia had the highest Greek intake in 1955–1976 (174,603 people) compared with 139,841 for the USA and 85,759 for Canada according to the Archives of the National Statistical Service of Greece.

It must be noted, however, that the estimates do not include the students overseas, nor the 130,000 political refugees in the aftermath of the

Greek Civil War (1946–1949), the majority of whom had moved to socialist countries of central Eastern Europe and most to the Soviet Union.

The waves of emigration from Greece, particularly in the first three post-World War II decades were so huge that it changed the population profile of Greece, especially with the massive emigration from rural areas to big cities on the one hand (internal immigration), and on the other hand, towards Europe and the New World (external immigration).

As mentioned earlier, emigration from Greece started diminishing from 1973, with a noticeable decline in the period 1977–1995, although it marked a sign of recovery after the beginning of 1980 due to the establishment of free movement among the countries of the European Union (Kontis 1997: 67).

Regarding Greek Cypriot emigration, creating a diaspora within the greater Greek diaspora, the noticeable wave started from the mid-1950s (during the struggle for liberation of the island) and reached its peak after the Turkish invasion in 1974, with over 200,000 persons having settled just in the United Kingdom at the beginning of the 1980s, with the Greek Cypriot community there today having reached 230,000, most residing in Greater London (Hassiotis et al. 2006: 96–97). At present thousands of Greek Cypriots live in Australia, USA, Canada, England, Africa and elsewhere.

The scholarly demographic estimates of the entire Greek diaspora at the end of the twentieth century ranged broadly: from between 2.5 and 3 million (Bombas 1992: 18–22) to even ‘7 million and more’ claimed by the Council of Hellenes Abroad (SAE) (Niotis 2000: 5, 21). It must be kept in mind that these estimates, often derived from ambassadorial and consular authorities and Greek community organisations, are usually unsubstantiated and often exaggerated.

In my view, the most reasonable estimates for the Greeks of the global diaspora (excepting the Greek Cypriots), based on the National Statistical Service of Greece, are those provided by Bombas (1992) of 2.5–3 million, and the minimum figure of 2,700,000 in the minimum-maximum range supported by Hassiotis and colleagues (Hassiotis 1993: 168–75; Hassiotis et al. 2006: 13). Now if we compare these estimates with the 11,171,740 population for Greece itself in the April 2008 estimate of the population of Greece for January 1, 2007 provided by the National Statistical Service of Greece, then the Greeks of the diaspora are equivalent to about 25% of the population of Greece, a considerably significant number or about 30% if we add 613,600

(5.5%) for the Greek Cypriots of the Cypriot Democracy (Statistical Service of the Republic of Cyprus 2008).

### Causes

The causes of the Greek diaspora have been determined mainly by three broad factors: geo-economic, socio-economic and politico-military or their combination.

Of the geo- and socio-economic causes the most decidedly crucial and most common have been: the dowry system (particularly strong in the past but still existing in some rural areas and islands); the poverty of the large family; the small rural lots caused by the division of the land among the children of the family frequently resulting in uneconomic and insufficiently productive allotments; the low income level in comparison with other European countries; the lack of industrialisation especially before the Second World War, a factor that aggravated unemployment in the country; the unequal division of the national wealth, the shortage and poverty of the predominantly mountainous Greek land, as well as the hope for greater opportunities to acquire wealth.

Politico-military causes, which constitute a perennial factor in the history of the Greek diaspora, include the atrocious Ottoman oppression which caused massive expatriation, especially during its domination in the mid-fifteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries, the fear of the outbreak of war and of wars themselves, such as World Wars I and II, other internal upheavals, such as the Civil War (and the state of insecurity which followed), as well as national catastrophes such as that in Asia Minor in 1922 and the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus, both of which caused significant emigration, especially the former which sent waves of immigrants to the USA, Canada and Australia.

In the decades of the 1950s and 1960s thousands of people left Greece looking for a better life elsewhere in Europe, in Australia, Canada and the United States. During the 1980s and 1990s when the economy was quite healthy and after Greece had joined the European Union, many repatriated. Additionally, the euphoria and pride generated by the Athens Olympic Games in 2004 combined with the growing economy inspired thousands more Greeks to return home.

Finally, scholars await the new developments in emigration that are anticipated in our globalised world and in Greece and its diaspora in particular,



as the impact of the world economy gradually unfolds, with young university graduates at the forefront of a new wave of emigration.

### Concluding remarks

In conclusion, one of the interesting characteristics of the Greek diaspora in general is that despite its historical and ideological interrelationship with the Metropolitan Centre (Greece and Cyprus), it also exhibits its own socio-cultural history and maintains its own character in the host countries of residence. This also allows the Greek diaspora, as a phenomenon within each individual country, to be examined as separate entities because of their particular personalities influenced by the socio-political, geographical and historical conditions of these countries. Considering the Greek diaspora from this bipolar vantage point, we realise that it functions interlinked with both the country of origin and the country of reception, a fact which enables a broader perspective, not just from the Greece and Cyprus-centred one.

Unfortunately, the Greek diaspora with its long, multidimensional and rich existence in different host countries, particularly in the past, had not attracted the attention that it deserved from the Metropolitan Centre. As the years pass, however, such research is being carried out now with increasing interest in a variety of disciplines (sociology, history, education, literature, etc.) within and out of the Metropolitan Centre. This interest has been further inspired by the dynamic energy which is one of the Greek diaspora's vital characteristics and the continuously expanding transnational activity of the immigrant communities.

Apart from the scholarly benefit of this increasing interest, this is also a vindication of the struggles, survival and successes of the Greeks in the diaspora, and it helps to fulfil a national obligation to all those Greeks and their descendants in the host countries of the diaspora, who together with the Greeks of Greece and Cyprus, constitute what is widely accepted as *Ecumenical Hellenism*.

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