

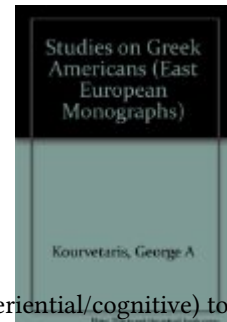
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



George A. Kourvetaris. *Studies on Greek Americans*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. x + 282 p. \$42.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-377-1.

Reviewed by K. S. Brown (University of Wales-Lampeter)
Published on H-Ethnic (March, 1998)



This 1997 collection of twelve essays represents thirty years of scholarly engagement by the author, from a master's thesis at Roosevelt University (Chapter 2) to a chapter based on fieldwork conducted in the Bahamas in 1994, in the course of a family vacation, in which the author acknowledges the co-authorship of his three children.

The topics represented in the chapters come from across the spectrum of sociological staples, but could be argued to focus around three main theoretical concerns in the study of migration to the USA: intergenerational developments and differences; the nature of ethnic solidarity; and economic mobility. The groups under study range from the Bahamian Greek community, already noted, to an Orthodox singles organization (Chapter 3), professional and entrepreneurial populations recorded in statistical sources (Chapter 10), and three different "ethno-religious groups" in an Midwest community (chapter 7). Elsewhere, though, the presumed community under study is the Greek-American, apparently regarded as homogenous for the purposes of study. Outside this main current is only chapter 8, an informative theoretically-framed synthesis of material on historical Greek communities in Asia Minor and Egypt.

In his introduction Kourvetaris seeks to encompass the diversity of approaches and data groups in the book chapters under the rubric of interest in the "Greek-American experience." The model he deploys here draws on the Nietzschean dichotomy between "Apollonian" and "Dionysian" aspects of culture, and represents, for the author, a duality which is "an ideal type of value orientations, cultural, and ideological modalities" (12). These are then documented in a table which lists a set of polarities, granting geographical force (East/West, South/North) to what appear as metaphors derived from the language of

psychology (affective/rational, experiential/cognitive) to account for the ways in which people make meaning, interpret the world, and interact with others. The Greek-American experience is taken to be a field in which this tension works itself out, as a community with its historical roots in the "new immigration" of the late 19th and early 20th century pays homage to some kind of "tradition," the authenticity of which must never be challenged, while at the same time embracing the imagined "modernity" of the United States.

The terms in quotation marks in the preceding paragraph are not part of the table that Kourvetaris has produced. My use of the terms here perhaps erodes part of the nuance of his argument regarding what he calls ethno-cultural patterns, since part of his argument appears to be that the oppositional poles are eternally present in any culture, "two sides of the same coin." However, by linking his duality to those proposed by Tonnies and Durkheim, and by explicitly incorporating "West/East" as part of the model, Kourvetaris is making the structural categories historical. This marking he compounds by putting the cultures "brought" by two separate large-scale migration movements, from North European in the mid-nineteenth century, and from South-East Europe around 1890-1914, at opposite poles.

I inject a time-line into the categories because that aspect to their juxtaposition seems critical. For what appears to be at stake for the author is the comprehension of what is almost a hundred years of history as collective cultural continuity and simultaneously as triumphant individual advancement. Social phenomena such as language and religion, once realms in which all partook, lose some of their central force where individuals may achieve secular success without them. The author seems

to want to move beyond a model in which Greek institutions are viewed as expressive only, and their enthusiastic embrace therefore seen as some form of obstacle to progress. Instead, so far as I can tell, his project is to reinvigorate a notion of Greek ethnic (or cultural) identity which encompasses more than token adherence to what he appears to consider “surface” phenomena.

The fervor of the author is unsettling at times, as papers run the gamut of partisanship, policy recommendation, and near-sermonizing (the essay on the Greek “brain drain” being an example of this). The book’s language at times reads uncomfortably like the discourse of Greek nationalism, in which for example, Greece appears as “the land of the forefathers” in Chapter 9, and the Macedonian film “Before the Rain” is accused unjustly of promoting a false picture of Alexander the Great’s identity (273). The declarative style at times appears under-nuanced, and the use of “laundry-lists” enumerating sources, characteristics, or features sometimes

seem over-simplified. Another aspect which sits oddly for an anthropologist reading is the enthusiasm for the Apollonian-Dionysian axis, familiar from the 1930s work of Ruth Benedict but either obsolete or in the very vanguard of revisionist approaches in the 1990s.

Despite these objections, the book presents a rich set of quantitative data regarding Greek-Americans, as well as an ambitious attempt to utilize what might be thought of as traditional, objectivist social scientific theory and methods to deal with a field that has seen much interest and innovation in recent years. The author is no doubt aware of the irony whereby his own work can be read as demonstrating the enduring force of the chasm between scholarship and sentiment.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-ethnic>

Citation: K. S. Brown. Review of Kourvetaris, George A., *Studies on Greek Americans*. H-Ethnic, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1814>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.