Revisionism in Ethnic Minority Histories: A Case Study of Greek-Australians

ABSTRACT

This essay takes the history of Greek-Australians as a representative case for studying the revision of ethnic minority histories since the 1970s. Identifying three broad chronological and conceptual frameworks - structuralism and isolation, culturalism and surface culture, and inclusion and silence - it traces the trends in methodology (and content) that have attempted to contain or address the question of ethnic agency and their complication of an implausible and all-encompassing national narrative.

BIOGRAPHY

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Intellectual, social and political trends since the late 1970s have shaped the written histories of ethnic minorities in Australia. These trends can be analysed within the shifting paradigm of Australian national identity, which has been the preoccupation of many Australian histories since the post-war era. According to historians Richard White and Hsu Ming-Teo, Australian historians have a habit of seeing culture as explicable only in national terms. Ethn ic histories therefore present a number of problems for Australian histories. Primarily, they complicate the icons through which historians and other commentators construct and understand the nation. Various methodologies have been used to either suppress or address the complexities that ethnic histories present for the greater Australian narrative. These trends in methodology (and content) have also reflected a change in dealing with the question of ethnic agency—that is, the role of ethnic minorities as historical agents shaping this narrative, and, consequently, national identity.

In the context of this essay, the revision of ethnic agency and its relation to national identity in ethnic histories can be analysed within three broad chronological and conceptual frameworks. The first framework, beginning in the mid-1970s and ending in the early 1980s, may be labelled ‘structuralism and isolation’ and consists of social histories deeply suspicious of assimilationist principles. They fall short of defining cultural pluralism in favour of analysing the isolated structures of ethnic organisations. The second framework may be broadly labelled ‘culturalist,’ reflecting the emergence of post-structuralism in Australia, the demise of social history, and a new concentration on ethnic (surface) culture. Histories produced from the late 1980s can be analysed within this framework. They embrace multiculturalism, and with it the ambivalence at the heart of this social policy and ideology. Consequently, ethnic minorities figure as awkward bit-players hovering at the margins of the national narrative. The third framework, ‘The Inclusion,’ encapsulates the thematic approach of the late 1990s and 2000s, in which intercultural connections granted ethnic minorities some agency in the Australian narrative, but not without accompanying distortions of the historical record. Each framework gives adequate opportunity to explore the social, political and intellectual forces at play in the revision of ethnic histories. However, a representative case study of one particular ethnic group is required in order to offer a closer analysis and provide concrete examples. A case study of Greek-Australian histories is therefore proffered. The historical longevity of the Greek presence in Australia has resulted in a comparative wealth of histories. Furthermore, these histories encapsulate many historiographic trends, which cannot be separated from the broader social matrix.

The very emergence of ethnic histories in Australia provides one example of the impact of political and ideological changes on the writing of Australian history. Assimilation, as an ideology of ‘sameness’ in which migrants were encouraged to abandon their culture and conform to Australian ‘cultural norms’, evidently constricted the possibility of ethnic histories. Such histories would have been an anathema in a ‘monocultural’ society. By the late 1960s, however, policy makers and social commentators became aware that the policy of assimilation was failing, and, furthermore, that Australia’s migrant population was experiencing serious economic and social disadvantage. In 1973, the new Whitlam Labor Government officially promoted the development of a multicultural society: ‘cultural pluralism’ was actively promoted and special programs and funds were developed for migrant education and welfare. In the same year, Gillian Bottomley published a case study of the Greek Orthodox community of Melbourne. This study constitutes one of the earliest and most specific studies conducted on Greek-Australians and consequently reflects an increasing degree of cultural tolerance in Australian society. The 1975 Racial Discrimination Act worked to further undercut the fear of cultural difference that had pervaded Australia’s immigration policy since its inception in 1901. The final rejection of assimilationist principles is most perceptible in the Greek-Australian histories of the late 1970s, in which the maintenance of ethnic difference became the central and organising theme. Bottomley’s 1979 history After the Odyssey: A Study of Greek Australians aims to uncover ‘whether and how this distinctive Greekness has lasted in the face of Australian Anglo-conformism.’ Her methodology involves an analysis of the social structures that have maintained Greek institutions and organisations in isolation to the rest of Australian society. M.P Tsounis’ general history takes a similar approach. An increasing awareness of the structural inequalities of migrant groups is clearly perceptible in these histories—an awareness not only born by the death of assimilation, but also as a result of increasingly vocal and visible migrant communities. Notably, however, these histories, as social histories, contain limitations: ethnicity becomes exclusively related to socio-economic factors. Furthermore, Greek institutions and organisations are described as Greek transplants in a foreign context and ethnic culture is represented as a petrified spectacle, unchanging and archaic. This simplistic approach to culture ignores the mutual interaction and influences between Greek and ‘dominant’ culture, and ignores the broader Australian context in which ethnic cultures operated and developed.

This emphasis on the structural distinctiveness of ethnic minorities represents an intellectual response to the undesirable possibility of disappearing cultures. In 1973, the Minister for Immigration, Al Grassby, suggested
that assimilation would reduce migrant communities to a ‘non-people.’ The intellectual response was to emphasise the barriers (institutional, organisational and economic) that separate Greeks from the rest of Australian society. It was an argument for the maintenance of ethnic distinctions, though one which declined to define the concept of ‘cultural pluralism.’ Nevertheless, ‘structural pluralism,’ though an ideal disparaged by policy makers, is implicitly promoted in the very methodology of these histories. The contradiction and the confusion it reflects, is indicative of the confused intellectual attitude towards national identity during the 1970s. The economic recession of the late 1970s, the societal impacts of the Vietnam war and the rise and demise of the New Left, along with the rising demands of ethnic and other minorities, undermined the notion of the ‘Lucky Country’ and any previous consensus on national identity. Considerable attack from the New Left was directed towards the traditionally benign view of national identity, which focussed on representations of the white, middle-class male. The embrace of ethnic histories by academics constituted yet another assault on the notion of a homogenous and exclusionist national identity, which began to breakdown (without being necessarily replaced) under the new politics of differentiation. However, because Greek-Australians were treated as static and isolated communities these structuralist approaches did little to implicate Greek-Australians in any consequent (re)formation of national identity; they were not yet active agents.

The rise of post-structuralism and cultural history in the 1980s enabled a new approach. The constraints of social history fell as ethnic minorities began to be understood as ‘entities which are historically constituted through discourse.’ Most importantly, ethnic minority culture was analysed as a changing and evolving entity. This new school of thought also utilised a new terminology. The term ‘ethnic’ began to replace ‘migrant.’ The embrace of culturalist approaches allowed for the deeper exploration of Greek-Australian development within Australian society. This reflected the concerns of second-generation Greek-Australians, who showed an interest in histories that revealed their Australian as much as their Greek roots. Second-generation academics of non-English speaking background developed the field by addressing issues of adjustment and conflict. An edited work by mainly second-generation Greek-Australians, published in 1988, addressed these issues and consequently underlined the importance of intra-community conflicts in shaping the Greek-Australian community as it evolved in the Australian context. The focus on conflict in context implicitly undermined previous assumptions about ethnic solidarity and the isolated development of ethnic communities. Moreover, the histories produced by second-generation Greek-Australians presented further challenges to the national narrative. It was a process that mirrored political events—namely, the rise of the Greek Left in the union and labour movements, and the final ‘coming of political age’ of separate ethnic minorities. Paradoxically, while the embrace of multiculturalism made such histories possible, in some ways multiculturalism also subdued (or contained) their challenge to national identity. For example, the multicultural methodology perpetuated the deficiencies contained within multiculturalism by taking a superficial approach to culture and the question of ethnic ‘contribution.’ Admittedly, ethnic communities were no longer isolated and petrified spectacles but dynamic entities, developing within the Australian historical narrative. Yet this positive culturalist approach was not extended to include discussions of the two-way contributions between ethnic minorities and mainstream society. Their contributions remained on the level of surface culture—the benign public face of multiculturalism, which included dance, music, food and clothes. Ethnic histories remained, therefore, awkwardly placed within the greater Australian narrative, making ‘fleeting appearances’ in the mainstream. It was an ambivalent relationship with Australian ‘core’ culture that reflected the ambivalence contained within multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism, even during the height of its popularity, underwent a number of attacks. The most notable was the ‘Blainey debate’ of the early 1980s, initiated by Professor Geoffrey Blainey. The debate centred on the question of Asian immigration and its implications for the cohesion of Australian society. Blainey argued for a revision of the policy of multiculturalism and an end to Asian immigration. While his arguments were attacked and disparaged by his contemporaries, his concerns over the ‘forgotten mainstream’ (to borrow a more recent
term) have had many reverberations in consequent social and political commentary. Blainey’s arguments that ‘governments surrendered Australia to the interests of migrant minorities’ were echoed in Pauline Hanson’s maiden speech to Parliament in 1996. Indeed, the Australian Right have long viewed multiculturalism as a ‘radical conspiracy’ promoting the interests of ‘ethnics above Australian-born [sic.]’ Australian historians, since the 1960s and 1970s, largely left-wing, have (if superficially) embraced multiculturalism and all its ambivalence as a positive force in Australian society. Nevertheless, one might argue that the response of Australian historians to the question of ethnic agency was influenced by the change in mainstream political culture and policy in the late 1990s, which was in turn implicitly influenced by this idea of a ‘forgotten mainstream’ and the rejection of a ‘fragmented’ culture.

The end of multiculturalism has been variously dated from the late 1980s (as funds supporting ethnic programs ceased). In the context of this inquiry, former Prime Minister John Howard’s rejection of ‘multicultural nationalism’ and his promotion of an inclusive ‘citizenship’ signalled the end of (superficial) multiculturalism in Australian historiography. While Hanson inflamed ‘the grievances of old white Australia,’ Howard was able to garner that fervour in favour of his own remodelling of the national ideal: ethnicity as a basis for social identity was discouraged, and the ‘common Australian culture’ was said to be all embracing, with its ‘real roots’ in things like Gallipoli and Howard’s reading of ‘the tradition of mateship.’ Howard’s nationalism (or ‘citizenship’) solidified and greatly simplified the national narrative—particularly in his rejection of a fragmented Australian cultural milieu. For historiography, the Anglo-Celtic simply remained at the ‘core.’ In addition, however, Australian historians writing on Greek-Australians began to use the term ‘social integration,’ no longer afraid of or abhorrent to its use (unlike the historians of the 1970s, who were involved in dismantling the ideology of assimilation). Also, ethnic ‘distinctiveness’ was not overtly emphasised and the term ‘Greek-Australian’ became prevalent (as opposed to simply Greek or ethnic). In this sense, a more comprehensive inclusion of ethnic histories in the greater Australian narrative was enabled, a methodology that has its benefits and faults.

The thematic studies of this period emphasised intercultural connections very effectively, and thus ‘The Inclusion’ of ethnic minorities in the greater Australian narrative was made possible. Hugh Gilchrist’s three volume study, Greeks and Australians, was published over a twelve year period, starting in 1992. The latter two volumes (published in 1997 and 2004 respectively) take a thematic approach, dealing with a number of seminal events in Australia’s past in which Greeks were involved. A number of chapters take war and the wartime homefront as central organising themes. In the context of Howard’s new ‘citizenship’ (nationalism), which partly rested on a resurgent interest in the Anzac legend, this theme was particularly effective in including Greek-Australians in the greater Australian narrative. In 1996, Yiannis Dimitreas’ published Transplanting the Agora. His broad and systematic look at Greek-Australians brought new information to light, all of which stressed the involvement of Greek-Australians in Australian political and economic life. Furthermore, his analysis of the ‘pioneering myth’ in the historiography of early Greek-Australian settlers reflects the second-generation’s search for ‘deeper’ Australian histories for Greek-Australians. Dimitreas underlines the blending of ancient Greek mythologies (Odysseys’ adventures) with Australian frontier myths. The frontier theme was developed further by A.M Tamis’ study, published in 2005. Ultimately, Tamis makes more assertive claims about the involvement of Greek-Australians in early (and more recent) nation building. As a consequence, Tamis skits over the role of the Greek Left (a minority group in the Greek-Australian population, to which Dimitreas gives much attention) in Australian politics to concentrate instead on more prominent areas in which the Greeks are seen to have contributed to cultural life, though his analyses are not on the level of surface culture, as were those of the 1980s. Rather, his thematic approach—in analysing Greek-Australian involvement in literature, sport, music, theatre, welfare and business—allows him to closely assess the contributions of particular leaders or personalities, as well as organisations and committees. In doing so, Tamis is able to assert that the ‘rise of the second and third generation of Australian Greeks to commercial, professional and intellectual prominence is part of the contemporary Australian success story.’ There are faults contained within this framework and, indeed, within ‘The Inclusion.’

Recent ethnic histories present a story of hardships faced but overcome by a new brand of assimilated ‘battlers.’ They are thus incorporated into the narrative of immigration, a narrative which forms one ‘success story’ in the ‘great Australian success story.’ Sara Willis argues that ‘remembered’ histories of national belonging are not sufficiently broad enough to include a range of experiences, experiences which include the negative and which may go against the grain of a progressive and positive national narrative. That is not to say ethnic histories do not include the difficulties experienced by post-war migrants in adapting to Australia’s socio-political and economic context (Tamis and particularly Dimitreas include these narratives of hardship). These experiences are included but are overshadowed and reinterpreted by the perceived success of a ‘socially integrated’ second and third generation, a progression which is represented as inevitable. Tamis’ chapter “From Migrants to Citizens”
demonstrates the negative implications of such a framework. The present status of ethnic personalities, their contributions to Australian society, their ultimate inclusion, and their becoming ‘Australian,’ reinterprets the hardships of the previous generation, who become a brand of the original ‘Aussie battlers’ (to fit into an Australia idiom). Furthermore, Tamis’ ‘Australian success story’ framework results in an undue focus on the role of successfully integrated individuals—which prove to be businessmen—to the detriment of the mass of post-war migrants, who in many cases lived in poverty; their individual stories are not told. Evidently, Howard’s citizenship allows for the inclusion of ethnic histories but within a framework of a progressive and positive national narrative—a less diverse conception of the national narrative than was prevalent in the 1980s—that reinterprets and limits the history of ethnics in this country.

The representation of ethnic minorities in the greater Australian narrative has therefore experienced many revisions: Greek-Australians, as an example in point, have progressed from being represented as a petrified and isolated entity, to a changing and dynamic community at the borderlines of the cultural ‘core’, and finally to a group of ‘socially integrated’ and successful individuals, affected by and affecting the great Australian success story. Each framework has its limitations. Ultimately this points to the limits of the nation as an historical framework. In the current intellectual context, it is no longer desirable to attempt the construction on a single national identity, and the move towards ‘multi(ple)-cultural histories’ that stress cross-cultural relations, hybridity and cultural ferment might remedy many of the distortions and simplifications of previous frameworks, which have attempted to suppress or address ethnic history’s complication of the greater Australian narrative.

REFERENCES

1 Hsu-Ming Teo and Richard White (Eds.) Cultural History in Australia (Sydney: UNSW press, 2003), 18.
2 Greek-Australian histories have been taken as a representative case for these reasons. Nevertheless, some justification is required for their representativeness in regards to the histories of newer migrant groups. Inevitably, these groups—the Lebanese, Turkish, and various African and Arab minorities—have a different historical trajectory to Greek-Australians, having arrived in different political and social contexts and inducing different cultural responses. However, an analysis of any trends in their historiography would be, as yet, impossible. Few if any histories have been published. In regards to Indo-Chinese histories (a group arriving primarily in the late 1970s and 1980s), historiographic trends are linked to a series of specific socio-political events. For example, the histories of Australian-Vietnamese are informed by changing and often complex reinterpretations of our involvement in the Vietnam war, or, on another level, the changing nature of our attitudes to refugees (or the continuity of our attitudes to refugees).
4 Ibid., 228.
7 Gillian Bottomley, The Greek Orthodox Community in Melbourne (Melbourne: Fitzroy Ecunemical Centre, 1973).
11 Collins, 232.
14 Teo and White, (Eds.), 17.
Ibid., 12.


Ibid., 58.

Ibid., 53.


Rickard, x.


Kapardis and Tamis (Eds.).


Teo, “Multiculturalism and the Problem of Multicultural histories,” 143.


Collins, 227.

Teo, “Multiculturalism and the Problem of Multicultural histories,” 143.

Bottomley, Multiculturalism in Practice, 137.

Brett, 192.

Ibid.


Including, most notably, the involvement of Greek-Australians in both World Wars, and the occupation of Crete by Allied forces in WWII.

Dimitreas, 79–83.


Ibid., 171; Dimitreas, 198.

Tamis, The Greeks in Australia, 56.


Ibid., 73.


Ibid., 123-127, 40, 49; Collins, 10.