

The Next Wave of Modern Greek Studies

Vassilis Lambropoulos

Originally, this short essay was going to be called "A Generation that Squandered its Students" (paraphrasing the title of Roman Jakobson's famous paper on Russian modernist poets) and examine the disappointing fact that a generation gap of some 15-20 years seems to separate the Founding Fathers of the field from those who are today succeeding them in power. Many different explanations can be given for this lapse of time--institutional, logical, personal, political, etc. Still, as we look back, let's say, at the 1970's, we do not see a single Modern Greek Program in North America concentrating on graduate studies in any serious or systematic fashion. (As a matter of fact, the University of Birmingham was, in this regard, the only positive exception in the English-speaking world.) Peculiar as it may seem, the second wave in the field--people now in their early thirties to early forties--did not study with those who represented the first one but it came into the territory from disparate, although clearly identifiable, directions. A certain lack of mutual understanding between the two groups is, therefore, a natural difficulty one can expect in their collaboration. (I have analyzed the problem theoretically and politically in my "Modern Greek Studies at the Crossroads," Journal of Modern Greek Studies, vol. 7, 1989.) Instead of talking about the gap separating the first from the second wave of Neohellenists, however, I find it more constructive to offer a first brief assessment of the new wave, whose links with the previous generation are fortunately close and direct.

The national colloquium for graduate students and recent Ph.D.s "Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies: The Next Wave"--the first of its kind in the world--which was organized in October 1988 at the Ohio State University by its Modern Greek Program in collaboration with its Council on Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, provided an excellent opportunity to look into the emerging trend represented by a new generation of scholars in a variety of disciplines. This event, in combination with other available information about completed or on-going graduate projects (like the collection of original studies on Greek Modernism edited by Mary Layoun, forthcoming from Pella), allows us to form a tentative idea about the immediate future of the field, at least in terms of scholarly direction. I will try to outline the main elements of this picture.

First of all, it must be said explicitly that graduate studies has finally arrived. Although its institutional status has only marginally improved--as far as I know, the field has yet to establish its first specifically Modern Greek graduate degree--it has definitely gained attention and recognition: Departments, Centers, and other academic units and programs are increasingly willing to accommodate graduate study with concentration in this area. Not surprisingly, in most cases this has been happening in places not known for their Modern Greek Programs, and in general outside the mainstream (the dominant discourse and institutional sites of the field. (As I have implied above, such Programs and sites have been traditionally uninterested in graduate students.) In my view, the appearance of graduate work in Modern Greek may be the most important development over the 1980's (although the MGSA has not properly recognized it: students were not invited to speak at the 1988 Princeton 20th anniversary celebration nor are they represented on the Executive Committee).

A remarkable feature of next wave research is its interdisciplinary and comparativist character. People show the willingness and ability to cross boundaries of discipline, Department, language, or methodology, and explore larger territories. This makes for a better communication and interaction among specialists; it also promotes exchange with specialists in other fields who now may see that a common language and area of interests can be established.

This, of course, presupposes another characteristic, determined and disciplined emphasis on research. As the old-fashioned label and attitude of ethnic (as in community-inspired and/or -oriented) studies fades, Modern Greek in the hands of today's graduates becomes a legitimate and respectable area of Cultural Studies, which understands and observes high standards of academic quality. As the national professional and philosophical stakes in the human and social sciences have become higher, people have been able

to rise to the challenge, and even present papers or publish before graduation--an achievement still uncommon in many more advanced quarters. These students are above all fully aware of, and dedicated to the pursuit of scholarly excellence.

I propose here to call their brand of research, from the viewpoint of approach, discourse studies. The emphasis in their work falls less on individual figures, works, events, or phenomena, and much more on questions of language, representation, identity, ideology, and the politics of knowledge. Across a broad spectrum of disciplines, we see a growing interest not in evidence and data, but on what has been called the history of truth, as well as the local constitution of local realities. Here the contribution of diverse theories, from deconstruction to feminism and from Marxism to psychoanalysis, cannot be overestimated.

Finally, it should be noted that, as a corollary of this epistemological disposition, people are less and less eager to study famous names, historic events, or great values, let alone questions of national continuity, unity, purity, and pride. The Ohio State Colloquium was probably the first event of its kind that did not include papers on Seferis, Cavafy, the Language Question, or the Civil War. Instead, aspects of marginality, canonicity, hegemony, resistance, difference, and ideology were presented, discussed, and placed in relevant contexts of ethnographic specificity. Perhaps the authority of the established masters and mastercodes will not be that much inescapable once the languages of scholarly dialogue can rely on their own strength and credentials.

Thus it seems that overall the new wave in Modern Greek is going to distinguish itself in the arena of academic debate. It is certainly too early to draw conclusions about its course. (I cannot, for example, adequately support my sense that the Hellenic Diaspora is going to be a special focus of interest.) At this point we can only gladly acknowledge its widely-felt presence and substantial promise. Admittedly, my hasty survey, originally prepared as a series of notes toward a ten-minute conference presentation, cannot do justice to its diversity and vitality. It even runs the risk of attempting to appropriate it prematurely. What is more, it paints only a positive picture by omitting reference to certain, largely inherited, gaps, deficiencies, and inconsistencies that appear to persist. Everything is not bright. Nevertheless, my limited purpose here was only to indicate and give a first critical acclaim to an exciting development which should make all participants in the field proud. It is particularly gratifying to see that some chronological continuity is finally established in Modern Greek: those of us in the second wave who chose to break with the past and promote aggressively graduate study and research can take much satisfaction in the fact that a whole new generation has already responded to the invitation with rigor and enthusiasm (which should not necessarily be understood as agreement or imitation). Something new, fresh, interesting, even unpredictable is happening and evolving before our eyes, and can only mean a more productive future for Modern Greek as a field, a position, and a question.

Modern Greek Studies Association Bulletin 21:1,

Spring 1989