

# Is Demogra

By Steve Frangos

**C**harles C. Moskos has said on occasion that he wants his epitaph to read: "Demography is Destiny." On one level, Dr. Moskos, an internationally recognized sociologist, is absolutely serious. In part, he is stressing that whatever else may be true in the world, the number of people that are physically alive at any given moment in history has a great deal of bearing on local, national and international events. There is no question that in this specific sense, Dr. Moskos, is absolutely correct.

Between 1880 and 1924 the largest wave of migration out of Greece in modern history occurred. The overwhelming majority of these individuals came to the United States of America. Yet, according to demographers, the Greek community in the United States is decreasing -- at an alarming rate.

Few would deny the pivotal role these Greek immigrants have played in the economic, political and social conditions of Greece since the 1880s. Curiously, while more Greek immigrants and persons of Greek descent occupy American university positions than at any other time in the history, few are concentrating their work on their compatriots.

Addressing questions of Greek American demographics can help us understand the current conditions of our ethnic group in relationship to the wider issues that are facing America in the late 1990s. Becoming familiar with numbers can also help us see that perhaps the Greeks have a way of beating the odds.

## By the Numbers

The exact number of Greeks to immigrate to North America will never be known. Con-



Between 1900 and 1917, 450,000 Greeks arrived in America, but by 1917, the number had dropped to 1,790.

United States immigration reports. Prior to the Second World War, Italy held the Dodecanese Islands, with its predominately Greek population. Greeks immigrating to North America from these islands as "Italians" between 1880 and 1947 have been overlooked in statistical studies.

This issue of Greek populations arriving under another nationality has not escaped academic notice. Talat Sait Halman, writing the "Turks" entry in the Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups, reports that "(o)f about 360,000 immigrants from Ottoman Turkey in the period 1820-1950 probably less than 10 percent were Turks" (1980). Those immigrants, and their descendants, "consider themselves Greeks or Jews or Armenians or something other than Turkish."

This is not simply an isolated historical instance restricted to a special period. Today, individuals from Cyprus are still cited as a separate category. The only reprise is that in the 1990s, with the increased awareness of cultural complexities, immigrants, for example, from Israel, who designate themselves as

unions under Ottoman rule were such that individuals and collectivities with a Greek self-identity were to be found across the Balkans, throughout North Africa, scattered in the Middle East and all the way to the borders of India. This is especially relevant for Greek American studies, since US immigration policy initially designated that the country of emigration, rather than ethnic identity, determined an individual's nationality.

Even with this orientation, between 1900 and 1917 450,000 Greeks arrived in North America, averaging approximately 25,000 per year. Between 1918 and 1924, when Greek immigrants also had one of the highest return rates -- fourth among all groups -- 70,000 Greeks arrived, averaging approximately 10,000 per year. Then, with the installation of new immigration laws, between 1922-1924 all immigration to America was restricted for nearly two decades. Between 1925 and 1946 only some 30,000 Greeks gained admittance, approximately 1,300 annually.

#### **Unredeemed Greeks**

Aside from those individuals who may have entered the United States illegally, specific Greek populations were not included in

Greeks and Armenians, are noted as such.

#### **Post Second World War**

Between 1947 and 1965, with the enactment of the Displaced Persons Act, approximately 70,000 Greeks came to the United States, averaging around 4,000 annually. With the advent of revised immigration laws between 1966 and 1979, over 160,000 Greeks arrived. In 1980 up until the present, however, immigration from Greece has dropped dramatically. Only 25,000 Greeks came to the United States during the 1980s. Complicating the issue is the fact that the annual average during this decade of 2,500 returnees resulted in an annual gain of only approximately 1,500 per year. The 1980 Census reported the number of persons with a single Greek ancestry at 615,882 and those with multiple ancestry at only 343,974.

Interestingly, this census noted where self-identifying Greeks live. The counties with the largest concentrations of population with Greek ancestry were New York City at 82,313; Cook (Illinois) at 47,031; Los Angeles at 18,903; Middlesex (Massachusetts) at 17,786; and Nassau (New York) at 12,532. Counties with the highest percentage of

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ed in North America; by 1992, the figure

Greek ancestry in the overall population were Essex (Massachusetts) at 1.77%; Carbon (Utah) at 1.64%; Hillsborough (New Hampshire) at 1.47%; White Pine (Nevada) at 1.42%; and Middlesex (Massachusetts) at 1.30%. After 1982, the documented numbers of Greeks entering the United States was: 1983 (3,020); 1984 (2,865); 1985 (2,579); 1986 (2,512); 1987 (2,653); 1988 (2,458); 1989 (2,157); 1990 (2,742); 1991 (1,760); and 1992 (1,790).

The 1990 census figure for Americans claiming at least one ancestor as Greek was 1,110,373, of which 189,267 are foreign born. This means Greeks constitute only 44/100 of one percent of the total United States population of 248,709,873. While there are some accounts that suggest this figure may be too low, this still means that Greeks number less than one and a half million (6/10 of one percent) and no higher than one and a quarter-million (1/2 of one percent). Factoring in the annual deaths and return rates, the yearly growth in terms of real numbers is zero.

Given all the available public documents

perspective, the image of Greeks Americans hold is more telling than any US census report. In this light we can begin to think about "influence" in entirely new ways.

Just for the sake of argument, let us just quickly review Greeks involved in the American art scene. Among the noted modern painters are William A. Baziotes (1912-1963), Theodore Constant (b. 1892), Nassos Daphnis (b. 1914), and Theodoros Stamos (1922-1996). Varda Mavromichali Chryssa (b. 1933) is one of several influential Greek American artists involved in mixed media sculptures. Lucas Samaras (b. 1933) is a unique sculptor and experimental artist. Helen Kontes is a sought-after portrait sculptor. Theodora Skipitares is an internationally respected performance artist who uses her own constructions and human-size puppets in her productions. Leading authorities in American folk art often mention the work of Drossos P. Skyllas (1912-1973). In point of fact, John W. Perates (1894-1970) is lauded by Jay Johnson and William C. Ketchum in *American Folk Art of the Twentieth Century* as "probably the most important religious carver of the 20th Century" (Rizzoli, 1983). Constantine Manos is a Greek American photographer with an international reputation. With that said, two other Greek American photographers of renown include Nick Diamondidis and Todd Papageorge. In cinema Elia Kazan (b. 1909) and John Cassavetes (1929-1989) are the two filmmakers most commonly known. In classical music and opera, Dimitri Mitropoulos (1896-1960) and Maria Callas (1923-1977) both retain a world wide audience. Many other such individuals could be cited.

Are all these people just an expected segment of the bell-shaped curve? These individuals come from both the first and second generation. Accomplished third generation

there are approximately 800,000 self-identified ethnic Greeks in this country with 700,000 who identify themselves as Greek Orthodox. With the overwhelming percentage of mixed marriages and a sharp decline in immigration, many predict the inevitable assimilation of Greeks into the wider American panorama is not far off.

### **Beyond Measure**

But can we truly measure the influence of modern Greeks on Western culture simply by the sheer numbers of individuals? Have Greek Americans ever influenced ideas and events in North America? In coffeehouse slang, President Clinton is known as the *Planetarchis*, e.g. the Ruler of the Planet. From this point of view, having influence in North America can potentially determine much of what goes on in the Balkans and Mediterranean.

But how do we judge influence? Is it only in terms of bringing in the "votes" or lobbying the president of the United States? I would argue that American notions of "Greeks" come from those of us they meet on a daily basis and/or the persona they read about or see on television. Taken from this

artists could also be cited. Is it just natural that a predictable fragment of the overall Greek population in North America is so unabashedly successful? A similar list could as easily be gathered from the social worlds of business, government, academia or really any segment of the wider society one would care to name. The important question, which can not be asked by any US Census survey is, "why is this taking place?"

Behind the demographic survey on Greeks in the United States are two contrary trends in the community. First we are few in number and losing ground. Then, against all odds, somehow we are also a significant factor in an exceedingly wide array of cultural, social and economic areas.

This is far from yet another vacuous exercise in ethnic selfcongratulations. These two areas of everyday life, demography and fundamental accomplishments in the social world, have not been systematically examined. Before all the experts write us off as inconsequential due to our low demographic numbers, or before community leaders admonish us for not doing enough to ensure our presence, it would be good to better understand who we are and what we are actually accomplishing in *Ameriki*.