

Rethinking Greek American Scholarships: Hellenism Beyond Ethnicity

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In its 2018 Midwestern Regional Banquet, held in Columbus, Ohio, the American Hellenic Progressive Association (AHEPA), observed its long-standing definition of Hellenism by awarding *The AHEPA Excellence in Classical Studies Award* to an educator devoted to teaching College Modern Greek. The deep significance of this recognition is twofold. First, AHEPA asserted its mission of supporting the Modern Greek language in the United States, and second, that the recipient was not of Greek descent was most significant, as AHEPA's definition of Hellenism includes all those who contribute to Greek learning, regardless of their ancestry.

Through this award, AHEPA once again acted in line with its understanding of Hellenism as *paideia*—education and cultivation of Greek letters—affirming Hellenism as an expansive community open to those who partake in and enhance its culture, irrespective of descent. Let us call this membership “post-ethnic,” as it is not restricted to ethnic Greeks.

Notably, a post-ethnic Greek identity is increasingly embraced by a significant sector of Greek America. In fact, one might say, it is currently in full swing, as Greek Americans are acknowledging non-ethnic Greeks as Greek in public. A highly visible example captures this direction: The community embraces the NBA star Giannis Antetokounmpo “who makes us all so proud.”¹ This claim brings to mind the oft-quoted phrase by Isocrates: “The name Hellenes is given rather to those who share our *paideia* than to those who share our blood.” Though this definition occasionally surfaces in community life, it is currently becoming a substantive, collective force, altering common sense views of who may count as a Greek.

Expanding the boundaries of identity in this inclusive manner is of profound significance to me as an educator. One of my most awkward moments in the classroom

is when I announce the generous scholarships that Greek American organizations make available annually to college students. The source of my anxiety—and embarrassment—is the exclusion that most of these scholarships require Greek descent as a prerequisite for the application. Deserving students who devote themselves to Greek learning, and who may also be majoring or minoring in Modern Greek studies, are denied because of a biological criterion, the lacking of Greek heritage, which is outside their control. How to look these students straight in the eye during the announcement? I mumble an apology as a bitter taste burns my tongue. While the scholarship motivates qualified students of Greek heritage, it obviously blocks the potential of others to a much-needed contribution to Greek *paideia*.

The criterion of descent works against the principle of an open, post-ethnic Hellenism. But besides its narrowness, this criterion is also counterproductive in a practical sense. It limits our collective self-understanding and cultural empowerment both in the United States and globally. For instance, consider the statement by the President of the Hellenic Heritage Foundation, a Canadian-born individual of Greek heritage, who speaks about a personal moment of epiphany concerning the value of Modern Greek *paideia*:

For me, the a-ha moment has been becoming an adult and realizing how important culture and heritage are. Growing up as a child of Greek immigrants, my parents tried to impress that on me—they took me to Greek school, but I resisted it. I resisted learning the language and didn't really embrace the culture as a kid because I didn't appreciate its importance. But now in my adulthood, I understand the importance and the beauty.²

This recognition dovetails with the perspectives of the Greek American students who take classes in our Modern Greek Program. They often underline, both in private and in public, the relevance of learning about Modern Greece and Greek America as a route for self-understanding. A novel, a poem, a film, or an anthropological analysis of a tradition creates the a-ha moment in which a student makes sense of personal experiences, of what, say, parents and grandparents said or did. An education in the humanities and the social sciences in the context of Modern Greek programs offers yet another value. It exposes students to a wide variety of Greek cultural worlds and offers the tools to understand and appreciate them. Students realize that their personal understanding of modern Hellenism is only a fraction of the broader spectrum of Neohellenic heritage and culture. This educational angle not only fosters critical thinking

but also enriches a person's life, encouraging an understanding of one's place in the world as well as that of others.

Greek America is, relatively speaking, a small demographic in the United States. The professional priorities of its youth are well established. Statistically, the majority of Greek American students gravitate toward law, medical sciences, engineering, business, and other non-humanities professions. We do honor, rightly, distinguished scientists, such as George Papanikolaou, for their contributions to society. But the number of professionals that might explore and explain Modern Greek heritage to us and the wider American public is not as robust as we would like. It is a fact that the work of journalists, artists, filmmakers, fiction writers, folklorists, anthropologists, historians, and political scientists is crucial for enriching Greek self-understanding as well as for maximizing Greek cultural visibility everywhere. High-quality journalism, scholarship, and the arts offer venues of self-reflection for Greek Americans as well as the means to explain ourselves and the community's issues to the American people and beyond. High caliber art and scholarship about Modern Greek worlds, both in Greece and abroad, constitute the community's "soft power" to profoundly stir emotions, engage with ideas, move the imagination, and steer the cultural direction of the nation. They decisively define Greek Americans as a group that contributes to the intellectual life of the country.

Given this prospective cultural impact, the time is ripe to rethink Greek American scholarships. Opening up these scholarships to students majoring in the humanities and the social sciences in Modern Greek studies offers itself as a strategy for empowerment. Rewarding promising students and harnessing their talents, irrespective of their descent, is a win-win situation, representing an inclusive practice true to the principle of Hellenism as *paideia*. It constitutes a cultural and political investment that diversifies the pool of journalists, authors, essayists, filmmakers, policy makers, and scholars who sustain and further produce modern Greek culture and heritage.

Greek leaders in North America recognize the significance of this course of action, embracing it as educational policy. Tony Lourakis, the President of Canada's Hellenic Heritage Foundation (HHF), an organization that supports Greek Canadian studies at the University level, puts it in this manner: "One of the things we're most proud of at HHF is the number of students taking Hellenic Studies classes who aren't of Greek descent."³

The identity of Greek as learning is a matter of consent, not dissent. It expands the boundaries of who can count as productive members of the community. It diversifies the range of perspectives and angles of inquiry. A new generation of qualified cultural producers, post-ethnic and ethnic, will be in position to circulate responsible knowledge

about Modern Greek worlds in a variety of contexts. This generation will amplify a diverse Greek cultural presence in the United States and across the globe. A number of educational institutions such as Fulbright Greece and the Modern Greek Studies Association (MGSA) practice post-ethnic modern Hellenism, with impressive results. Thanks to this openness we enjoy a fascinating accessibility to the wider public corpus of work on Greek folk poetry, urban music, food culture, architecture, religious pilgrimages, and heritage, as well as Greek American spiritual kinship and cultural citizenship, among other benefits. For the small Greek American demographic in need of greater cultural representation, expanding scholarships in the humanities and the social sciences beyond descent represents a necessary investment for the future.

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1. Antonis Diamataris, "Giannis' Glory to Greece and Himself." *The National Herald*, March 28, 2018.
 2. "Munk School Meets Tony Lourakis." Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto. <https://munkschool.utoronto.ca/feature/munk-school-meets-tony-lourakis/> March 26, 2018.
 3. Ibid.

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