

Stranger in a Melting Pot : 7th February 2018 : Thomas Svolos

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“Stranger in a Melting Pot”

Thomas Svolos

I live in the United States, in Omaha, Nebraska. All my grandparents emigrated to the United States, about one hundred years ago, from Greece. While up to that point, the United States was largely settled by Northern Europeans (especially British, Scots, Dutch, Germans and later Scandinavians and Irish), the turn of the century marked the moment of Southern European emigration to the US, from Italy and Greece.

The dominant story of immigration in the United States has always been that of the melting pot, in which people from diverse countries assimilate into the society and culture of the United States. This was first articulated by J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur in his Letters from an American Farmer, where he wrote, in 1782, that “What attachment can a poor European emigrant have for a country where he had nothing? The knowledge of the language, the love of a few kindred as poor as himself, were the only cords that tied him; his country is now that which gives him his land, bread, protection, and consequence; Ubi panis ibi patria is the motto of all emigrants. What, then, is the American, this new man? He is either an European or the descendant of an European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.”

By all accounts, two generations after my grandparents arrived, in most ways, I was rather fully melted into the United States. And, yet, for me, I have always felt myself, in a subtle way, something of a stranger in the United States. Perhaps that did not have to do with my heritage as a Greek. After all, to be a stranger can manifest itself in many ways, above all the sense in which a speaking being may be a stranger to himself (“Struggling with confusion, disillusionment too; Can turn a man into a shadow, crying out from pain; Through his nightmare vision, he sees nothing, only well; Blind with the beggar's mind, he's but a stranger; But a stranger to himself.”

John Barleycorn Must Die, Traffic, 1970). Indeed, further, I recall well in a course I took in college on T. S. Elliot and the French Symbolist poets encountering this line from Rimbaud's May 13, 1871, letter to Georges Izambard, that resonated with me: "Je est un autre," [I is an other], an evocative sentence that pre-figures, in a sense, the Unconscious itself (as Lacan put it in Seminar 2, regarding Rimbaud's sentence: "poets, as is well known, don't know what they're saying, yet they still manage to say things before anyone else."). I recall especially the shock of the linguistic form that Rimbaud used—the use of the third person conjugation of "to be" instead of the first person form—which now in retrospect for me is an allusion to the great theme of Otherness (e.g, strangeness) that Freud borrowed from Gustav Fechner for his concept of the Unconscious and that Jacques-Alain Miller refined in his elucidation of Lacan's notion of extimacy, or, the way in which that which is most intimate for the speaking being is in fact what might be most external, strange, and foreign to him or her.

Yet, that said: there is a way in which this sense of strangeness will get figured for any speaking being, or, the way in which the strangeness will draw upon the history of any speaking being—including that of his or her parents and grandparents. And, indeed, I recall from my youth that while my familial ancestors were able to make it in the US, there were allusions to struggles and difficulties that they faced as a function of being strangers and the way in which they were seen as somehow lesser people due to their Greek heritage. I recall particularly one memorable conversation from many years ago, around the time that I—who grew up on the East Coast—moved to Omaha. I was talking with a family friend who worked as a United States Senate staffer, a Greek American well connected in the Greek American diaspora. He made an allusion to the fact that Omaha was a historically dangerous place for Greeks to move to, but did not elaborate further and the conversation quickly moved on.

Having lived in Omaha now for twenty years, I must say that I feel no burden or mistreatment as a Greek American at all. (Though, interestingly, as someone raised in the more dynamic and intense conversational style of the East Coast, I have had to make some adjustment to the Midwestern discursive style—more polite, less emotional or aggressive, as it were. This speaks to an issue perhaps particular to the United States, namely that "strangeness" may have as much to do with regionality or even individual State identifications as ethnic background.) So, no sense of strangeness for me as a Greek. And yet, researching this many years later, I learned of the very particular position of Omaha as one of the historically important sites of Hellenophobia in the United States (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Greek_sentiment and also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_Town_riot for specific information on Omaha as references for the account below). The situation in Omaha was as follows: in February, 1909, a Greek man was taking English lessons from a woman who was not Greek. The man and the woman were arrested, and, in the course of the arrest, the Greek shot and killed the officer. A series of meetings were organized by local politicians, one politician allegedly stating that "The blood of an American is on the hands of these Greeks and some method should be adopted to avenge his death and rid the city of this class of persons." (See also "South Omaha Mob Wars on the Greeks," New York Times, Feb 22, 1909, page 1). A mob of several thousand people formed and attacked Greek Town in South Omaha, beating the Greek Americans, burning their homes and businesses, and allegedly killing one Greek American boy. At the time, there were several thousand Greek Americans in Omaha and most all left the city. Some of the language about the Greeks refers to them as

living in “unsanitary” conditions and as having “insulted” women. I will come back to this issue of “dirtiness” later. But, another key to the whole incident is the context for the riot. At the time, the railroads and meatpacking were major industries in Omaha, and several thousand Greeks came to Omaha pursuing that work. The packinghouses were largely unionized with workers who were not Greek and the owners hired Greeks to break some strikes that were ongoing at the time. So, there were two issues at stake here—one relating to the contact between a Greek man and a woman who was not Greek—the stranger threatening to take away the woman—and the second relating to the Greek as stranger taking away the livelihood of the non-Greek.

What is interesting about the Omaha riot against the Greeks is that it prefigures a later riot, in 1919. At the time, with the Greeks largely gone, the meatpacking plants had taken to hiring African-Americans as strikebreakers. There were significant labor actions in many places in the United States in 1919, and Omaha was no exception. In September, 1919, an African American man, Will Brown, was alleged to have raped a white woman. (See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omaha_race_riot_of_1919 for this account.) The evidence was apparently weak, but nonetheless, a mob formed and stormed the Courthouse, demanding the release of the Brown to the mob. Unable to get him initially, they set to burning the Courthouse and they also took custody of and lynched the Omaha Mayor (hung on a lamp post), who was eventually saved. The mob was set on destroying the Courthouse and all the officials and officers within, and the officials eventually turned over Will Brown to the mob, who killed him brutally. The similarities to the Greek riots are striking. In both cases, a group of people (Greek Americans, African Americans) are identified as strangers, come to Omaha for work. Ethic and racial tension develop as the strangers walk the line of striking meat packers. An allegation is made of sexual contact between a male stranger and a female non-stranger, leading to mob violence.

It is in the context of this personal background and this heritage of mine from which I heard the comments alleged to have been made by the current American President about the desirability of certain Northern European immigrants and the undesirability of others, allegedly those from “shithole” countries. I immediately recognized that for some in the United States, that is how my ancestors—my grandparents and my other relatives—were seen; that is how the Greek Americans in Omaha were seen a century ago, as dirty and unsanitary. But, in addition to this signification of the other, the stranger, as unsanitary or shitty, it must be noted as well a sense of fear that underlies the naming—the semblant—assigned to the stranger. It is a fear of loss—loss of the woman to the stranger, as we saw in the Omaha riots against both the Greek and African Americans, and also loss of livelihood, jobs, access to money. I suppose sometimes the ingredients in the melting pot just don’t always mix.

I wonder further how much this might play into the current plight of the Greeks in Europe. Certainly, the characterization of contemporary European Greeks as lazy, corrupt, and willing to live in lesser (unsanitary?) conditions has been a part of the way in which events of the last decade have been constructed in public discourse (always in contrast to the industrious and hard working Germans). But, as Yannis Varoufakis has argued in his recent memoir of his brief period as the Greek Finance Minister, *Adults in the Room*, the culprit, in a sense, may be less the Greeks than the establishment financial institutions (European Central Bank, International Monetary Fund) who exhibited poor decision-making in their loans to Greece and, at a certain

point, very conscious decisions about granting loans which would likely never get repaid, but which, as institutions “too big to fail,” as we say of Wall Street, led to the brutal regime of austerity on the Greeks. One of the interesting conclusions of Varoufakis, however, is that the Greeks themselves may have been innocent bystanders, the formal recipients of a message that was really intended for Spain, Portugal and ultimately France.