

WIESŁAW KRAJKA  
Lublin

## NATIONALISM AND SEXUALITY: CRISES OF IDENTITY

The Hellenic Association of American Studies organized its 2nd international conference at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, between May 18-21, 1995. About 100 academics and students participated in this conference; 60 papers in either English or Greek were read by scholars from USA, Greece, Great Britain, Poland, Spain, Bulgaria, Portugal, France, Rumania, Italy, Canada and Hungary. The theme of the conference was: *Nationalism and Sexuality: Crises of Identity*; the papers considered these questions mostly in the fields of the literature and culture of America, but also of the Carribean, Greece and Central-Eastern Europe.

The question of American national identity was addressed by Joel Lockard (University of California at Berkeley, USA/Kibbutz Teachers College, Tel Aviv, Israel) who focussed on M. Griffith's sentimentalized treatment of racial injustice, on her portrayal of the fracturing of American national identity during the 1850s - under stress from the paradigm of racial separatism that characterized American national modernization after the Civil War. Konstantinos Blatanis (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece) viewed S. Shepard's play *States of Shock* as portraying its American protagonists' national self-identity, formed during their participation in the Gulf War. Bohdan Szklarski (Warsaw University, Poland) argued about the crisis of contemporary American identity, the process of the "disuniting of America", and about a danger of dissection of America into ethnic groups, brought about by dramatic crises of national loyalty among minorities.

A few papers addressed questions of nationalism in non-American contexts. Marina Catzaras (Al Andar, Athens, Greece) dealt with the formation of the new national identity of the Spanish Carribean region



as deriving from the culture of African slaves functioning in symbiosis and antinomy with those of whites and mulattoes. Other presentations focussed on issues of nationality in contemporary Greece and the Balkans. Mary Leontsini's (Columbia University at New York, USA) discussion of the process of nation building, of redefinition of national identity through literature in the 19th century Greece concentrated on the symbolic short story, "The Homesick Wife", by Alexandros Papadiamantis. Demetrius Floudas (University of Cambridge, USA) approached the conflict over the national identity and symbols between Greek Macedonia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: he mainly examined questions of the formation of ethnic culture in post-Yugoslav Macedonia and the process of ethnogenesis around the northern border of Greece. A broader context for his considerations was outlined by George A. Kourvetaris (Northern Illinois University, USA) who conducted an analysis of ethnic sub-nationalism in the former Yugoslavia: he surveyed its cultural, ethno-religious, political and socio-economic indices. The question of Greek national identity was addressed most directly by Domna Pastourmatzi (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece) who explored ideological foundations and political implications of the cultural construct of "Greekness" as defined and projected by the official history textbooks (primary determinants of collective identity) distributed to the country's high schools.

A group of papers yoked questions of nationality with those of ethnicity. Some of them discussed nationalism as interconnected with ways of constructing ethnic identity in the pluralist culture of contemporary America. Anna Brzozowska-Krajka (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, Poland) depicted the national/ethnic hybridity of the community of Polish American Tatra Highlanders as expressed in their journal *The Tatra Eagle*: she stressed that ethnicity predominates over nationality in their collective consciousness, that the strength and permanence of their ethnic identity leads to petrification of the liminal phase in the process of their immigratory rite of passage. Wiesław Krajka (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Lublin/University of Wrocław Poland) interpreted *The Painted Bird* by Jerzy Kosiński in terms of the sociology of the alien: the Eastern villagers display scorn and lack of interest for the alien individual and his culture, they react aggressively to this transplant from another milieu and evaluate negatively both his axiology and the unknown outside world from which he comes (*orbis exterior*). Rossitsa Terzieva (University of Veliko Turnovo, Bulgaria) examined Philip Roth's novels as depicting the complex integration of the modern



Jew in American society at the cost of devastation of some traditional Jewish familial modes of life. Dominic Williams (Liverpool Institute of Higher Education, Great Britain) discussed explorations of origins and paths towards national and ethnic identity in Philip Roth and Maxine Hong Kingston. Jill B. Gidmark (University of Minnesota, USA) considered the question of national/ethnic hybridity in D. Walcott's *Omeros*: the mythic elements that illuminate the union of two racial, social and geographic strains in this epic – the common life of the Caribbean and the grandeur of the Aegean.

During the conference, particular attention was given to Greek-American intercultural encounter and to interculturality viewed from a Greek perspective. Gayle G. Yates (University of Minnesota, USA) dealt with American perceptions of nationalism and sexuality in Greece and argued that public behaviour of Americans and Greeks (representing respectively the West and the East) around both sexuality and nationalism must be interpreted as an interlocking expression of spirituality, sexuality and nationalism. Patricia Moyer (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA) analysed two translations of *Ion* by Eurypides: by Hilda Doolittle and Wole Soyinka – both being significant new readings of the Greek original, centred on crises of identity of its protagonists. Nicole Ollier (University Michel de Montaigne, France) viewed the plight of Greek emigrants in America, presented in Elia Kazan's writings, as poised between mechanisms of attraction, fascination, imitation and ostracism, intolerance, rejection. Barbara Ozieblo (University of Malaga, Spain) opposed the emigration of two Americans – George Cram Cook and his wife Susan Glaspell – to Greece in search of identity: her isolation and difficulties of adapting to the new environment turned fruitful artistically, whereas his easy adaptation to the Greek reality did not bring such beneficial results. Savas Patsalidis (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece) dealt with the shift in contemporary Greek drama from realistic writing to international and intercultural concerns.

Issues of sexuality and gender were the focus of a great number of papers. Some of them dealt with the 19th century and earlier ways of expressing sexual identity in American culture and literature. Lee Quinby (Hobart and William Smith Colleges, USA) juxtaposed William Bradford's and Nathaniel Hawthorne's depictions of sexuality in the colonies in the 1640s to demonstrate how punitive action toward sexuality construed as transgressive gave way to normalization of sexuality for the "good of the nation". Marina Catzaras touched upon the question of sexual exploitation of Afro-Caribbean women slaves in sugar plantations



of the Spanish Caribbean. Nancy Koppelman (Emory University, USA) pointed out that in H. Alger's Jr. novel *Ragged Dick* (1867) male clothing functions as a sign of status, a gendered syntax for the construction of respectability.

Other papers concerned expressions of sexual identity in American literature. Adrienne Kalfopoulo (Athens, Greece) traced Hawthornian (*The Scarlet Letter*) patterns of female sexuality and discourse of desire in Gertrude Stein's *Melanctha* and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*: she demonstrated how the introduction (by women writers) of powerful discourses articulating female marginality questioned the value structures of male-privileged notions of communal order. Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos (University of New Brunswick, Canada) discussed Ezra Pound's poetry as revealing his masculinist sexual politics, his use of the female as a vehicle that allows the male to create and discover his own potential: he emphasized Pound's use of sexual motifs taken from Greek mythology. Papers by Zbigniew Białas (University of Silesia, Poland/University of Essen, Germany) and Theodora Tsimpouki (University of Athens, Greece) examined issues of sexuality in *The Painted Bird* by Jerzy Kosiński (along with the aforementioned paper by Wiesław Krajka, they formed a panel on this novel). Tsimpouki interpreted the sexuality of Stupid Ludmila in terms of monstrosity, perversion and an externally intruded disease to be fended off by a community, and Białas's discussion of the Kalmuk rapers in this novel exemplified how the perception of some forms of nationalism and some representations of sexuality grow into a distorted entity resulting in global, mythified ideologies of sexual politics.

A considerable portion of papers presented at the conference dealt with constructions of homosexual identity in American culture and literature. Anthony G. Barthelemy (University of Miami, USA) examined artistic ways of presentation of male nudes by W. von Gloeden (arcadian, expressive of the classical ideal and the golden age nostalgia) and R. Mapplethorpe (somasochistic, expressive of the grotesque and abnormal desire), as revealing both mainstreamed and marginalized homosexuality in the late twentieth century America. Steve Bottoms (University of Glasgow, Scotland) discussed Roy Cohn's legacy in contemporary American homosexual culture and literature, as well as two opposed strategies of gay identity-formation: underground anonymity (J. Smith) vs. open articulation (T. Kushner).

A search for homosexual identity was also investigated in literary works by some contemporary American writers. Katerina Andriotis-



Baitinger (University of Athens, Greece/Monmouth College, USA) demonstrated W. Whitman's and O. Elytis's (two advocates of American sexual revolution) use of sexual themes to aid the self in its transcendence to a higher state. John Howard (Emory University, USA) revealed how different places depicted by J. Baldwin in *Giovanni's Room* foster different levels of tolerance of homosexuality and varied capacities for sexual expression and revelation on the part of the main character. Robert Martin (University of Montreal, Canada) placed H. Crane's poetry in the tradition of minoritarian discourse of the sexual outsider as well as of the universalist discourse which viewed homosexuality as part of all human life and desire, whereas David Roessel (Princeton University, USA) explored this poet's use of the myth of Hero and Leander to express artistically his own sexual orientation. On the other hand, Michalis Chryssanthopoulos (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece) examined the meaning of "transvestism" - as a way of gaining insight into the other's point of view - as expressed in a number of Modern Greek prose writers. In papers by Bottoms, Brinkmeyer, Covi, Jenkins (University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria) and Mehuron emphasis was laid on political-social-cultural contexts of sexuality/homosexuality. Some presentations dealt with questions of sexual identity in areas outside America: Kathleen M. Sands (Arizona State University, USA) discussed the roles of aristocratic daughters of brave and potent hacendados in Mexican culture; Kate Mehuron (Eastern Michigan University, USA) conducted a study of the effect of US foreign policy and economic practices on the inception and management of the Cuban, Haitian and North American AIDS epidemics; Christiana Lambrinidou (Athens, Greece) dealt with the archetypal mother-daughter pair in Greek female subtexts.

A section of papers within the broad frame of sexuality and gender considered the position of women in America. Zoe Detsi (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece) discussed Julia Ward Howe's protest play *Leonora* as reflecting the image of a woman in transition from the social and cultural inheritance of repression and denial to independence and self-definition. Patrick C. Jobes's (University of Bucharest, Rumania) sociological case study of a provincial community in America proved that although women are significantly more likely to be civil administrators than educational or legal administrators, there occurs apparent discrimination between the sexes as far as allocation of administrative positions in small rural towns in Montana is concerned. Contemporary manifestations of discrimination against women were highlighted by Alice Scourby (Long Island University, USA) who claimed that in



America they have been excluded from the center of planning and implementation of social policy, that power and political behaviour have been seen as masculine endeavours, that (as reflected in a recent UN report) in all ethnic categories and cultures women continue to be a global underclass with virtually no voice in government. She was seconded by Zacharoula Kechri and Maria Kanata of UNICEF Athens who claimed that discrimination against women and foreigners is practised in both developed and developing countries in the realms of employment, education and other fundamental rights, and she advocated a possibility of change of this situation through implementation of the Education for Development program.

Issues of nationalism and sexuality were combined in a number of ways during the conference. Some academics viewed this interrelationship in 19th century literature: Patrick Brancaccio (Colby College, USA) explored the connections between the intensely antisemitic feelings Hawthorne recorded in his English journal, his homoerotic attraction to the sculpture of the Faun, and his retreat into the apparent safety of New England respectability. Ludmilla Kostova's (University of Veliko Turnovo, Bulgaria) interpretation of Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok* viewed intermarriage as a means of national integration, a solution to America's racial and sexual contradictions, as a transgression of sexual and racial taboos.

Three papers explicitly connected sexuality with racial attitudes. Robert H. Brinkmeyer (University of Mississippi, USA) proved the existence of a fundamental connection between racial politics and attitudes toward the body and sexual practices in the American South: she postulated a profound psychological-sexual reorientation in this region. Avra Sidiropoulou (King's College, Great Britain) examined Adrienne Kennedy's drama as evidencing the loss of cultural fixities in contemporary America and the vacillating position of the Black woman within the social and emotional premises of the White Establishment; the author connected multi-culturalism with personal struggle for self-identification. James S. Moy (University of Wisconsin at Madison, USA) discussed various manifestations of sexual exploitation of Asian women in America in both 19th and 20th century.

The keynote paper to the understanding of the interrelationship between nationalism and sexuality in contemporary America was presented by Epifanio San Juan (University of Connecticut/Bowling Green State University, USA) who viewed the construction of American national identity (derived from the patriarchal model rooted in myths of the



Western frontier and American "exceptional" destiny) to be displaced today by such signifiers as family values, with motherhood as the normative ideal, and hostility to sexual perversions ascribed to aliens, immigrants and deviants. Sexuality and gender are used to sublimate the issues of class and race to project an "American" essence dominant over "Others" in a world system of transnational competition for recognition, wealth and power. Attilio Favorini (University of Pittsburgh, USA) examined both race and gender as signs of the American national character – revealed in Anna Deveare Smith's epic performance series.

Interrelationship between nationalism and sexuality was also viewed in the perspective of American cultural plurality. Nicole Ollier interpreted sexuality in Elia Kazan's essays on Greek immigrants in America as a powerful touchstone, a dividing-line combining the gender boundary with the ethnic boundary between immigrants and the mainstream wasps; Kazan demonstrated how gender roles in premarital life and in the household vary according to the different ethnic groups. Anastasia Anastasiadou (University of Birmingham, Great Britain) examined the ways in which Olga Broumas, a lesbian Greek-American poet, resists the tendency for homogeneity and sexual and ethnic assimilation by undermining the middle-class concept of respectability which is an inherent element of nationalism and bourgeois social order. Rhona Justice-Malloy (University of Georgia, USA) explored the ways in which modern drama (especially Arthur Miller's *Broken Glass* and Barbara Lebow's *A Shayna Maidel*) developed, established and supported the sexual and national identity of Jewish-American women. Margaret Simmons (University of Craiova, Rumania) viewed language as reflecting national, ethnic, gender and sexual identities.

Discussions of interconnections between nationalism and sexuality concerned not only the American scene. Georgios Angelopoulos (University of Cambridge, Great Britain) explored the interdependence of gender and ethnicity in rural Greek Macedonia during the first decades of the 20th century. And Domna Pastourmatzi emphasized how Greek history textbooks were dominated by a masculinist view, extolling male achievement.

An interesting perspective was offered by those papers which considered nationalism and sexuality in the context of American cultural neo-imperialism. Donald Mengay (Baruch College, CUNY, USA) explored the conflation of national and sexual identity as portrayed in the works of Lafcadio Hearn, in whose life the political reinscribed itself as Western-imperialist in the homoerotic possibilities presented by traditional



domesticity. Giovanna Covi (Inniversty degli Studi di Trento, Italy) discussed the novel *Dog eaters* by Jessica Hagedorn, a contemporary Filipino-American writer, whose characters personify decolonialized subjectivity, a specific geopolitical reality; its narrative figures the Other of sexual and national identity as catachresis rather than as a metaphor of a real referent. William V. Spanos (State University of New York at Binghamton, USA) pointed to the importance of the Vietnam war experience for de-centering the Occidental subject and postulated the retrieval of the de-centered subject as the right identity politics to deal with hitherto marginalized or oppressed constituencies of the public sphere.

The theoretical-methodological framework predominated in the paper presented by Ann R. Cacoullos (University of Athens, Greece) who discussed some conceptual problematics of hybridity in national and sexual identity: especially those of the conjunction between nationalism, and sexuality, of hybrid identity, of possibilities to define identity. And Jirina Smejkalova (Collegium Budapest Institute for Advanced Study) analysed reasons for the lack of popularity of American feminism in the post-communist countries of Central Europe.

The above report concerns only the most significant of the papers presented at this conference. It depicts a complex landscape of national, ethnic and sexual identity in the contemporary world (mostly in America and Greece, but also in some other geographical-cultural areas); it discusses nationalism and sexuality as the two most important ways of identity formation in the contemporary world. The conference displayed the necessity for intense theoretical-methodological reflection leading to the construction of a set of subtle concepts for characterizing literary expressions of homosexual identity; for large-scale comparative investigations into manifestations of the ethnic self in contemporary multicultural America; for a reassessment of the role of the feminist approach in American and European investigations of culture and literature.