Report on the Phoenix AAA Session on Balkan Communities in North America

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A session entitled "Balkan Communities in North America: European Connections and American Adaptation" was presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Phoenix last November. Sponsored officially by the Society for the Anthropology of Europe and co-sponsored unofficially by the East European Anthropology Group, the session consisted of the following papers: "Greek and Greek-American Women: Continuity and Change," Janeen Costa, University of Utah; "Macedonians in Canada: Adaptation Through Continuity of Tradition," Harry Herman, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada; "Romanians in North America: Assimilation and Ethnic Revitalization," G. James Patterson, Eastern Oregon State College; "The Transylvanian Saxons in North America," Glynn Custred, California State University-Hayward. Discussion was by Linda Bennett of Memphis State University. I was the organizer and chair.

The session was significant because of the scant attention heretofore paid by anthropologists and other scholars to the groups under discussion, and the fact that there were papers on groups seldom considered at academic conferences in North America, including the AAA. It was also useful to hear of the commonalities, as well as differences, of the groups considered, to listen to discussions of their European connections, and to analyze theoretical concepts which were presented.

Of the four peoples discussed, the Greeks in North American have been the most studied, and even they are not well known as an immigrant culture. An indication of the paucity of scholarship about this most studied of the four groups is the fact that at the Theodore Saloutos Conference on the Greek American Experience at the immigration History Research Center of the University of Minnesota in May 1989, about thirty scholars ranging from graduate students to senior faculty from several disciplines were in attendance, and only one of these was an anthropologist. To my knowledge only two anthropologists - Sam Beck and I - have conducted research among Romanians in North America, and I also believe that Herman's paper on
Macedonians and Custred's on Saxons in North America were the first ever presented on these groups at an AAA meeting.

Commonalities of the cultures include of course their Balkan heritage, though some Greek immigrants came from Asia Minor, and some Saxons from Hungary. The Macedonians came from Greece, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia.

A similarity in immigration patterns was the predominance of males among the initial arrivals, and the custom of later importing brides from the homeland. All four of the groups had peasant origins and most settled in urban industrial settings in the U. S. and Canada; the one exception to this was the Romanians who homesteaded on the Canadian prairies. Three of the four groups were mostly Eastern Orthodox Christians (though some Romanian-speaking Bukovinian Jews settled alongside the Romanian Orthodox farmers in Saskatchewan); the Saxons were Lutheran.

More specifically, Costa's paper evaluated and compared the public and private roles of women in two rural Greek villages and in Salt Lake City, Utah. Greeks made a major contribution to the of settling of the West, working in the coal mines of Carbon County, Utah, and establishing businesses in Salt Lake City. Costa's study was the first anthropological work on Utah Greeks, and the first to look at changes in the roles of women in any Greek community in Western North America. She presented a public/private polarization and examined this in the context of the family, church activities and assimilation strategies.

Herman's study viewed the Macedonian pecalbars (sojourn workers) in Toronto. He looked at the use of the traditional pecalba as a mechanism for adaptation in the New World, and focused on the predominance of restaurant workers among the Macedonians and other aspects of their culture in urban Canada.

My paper traced the history of Romanians in the U.S. and Canada, from the Prairie homesteaders in Canada to the factory workers in Cleveland and Detroit in the early days, to the present middle class communities in Ontario and Montreal and the U.S. Sunbelt. I offered "middle range" theory about the continuation of white ethnicity in spite of pressures to assimilate.

Custred discussed Saxon communities in Ohio and Ontario and their formal and informal institutions, including mutual aid societies, which sustained ethnic identity in North America. He
discussed the continuation of the German language and Lutheran heritage as important factors in
cultural continuity.

All four papers, in varying degrees, touched on pressures in the host culture for
adaptation, change and assimilation, and the dogged persistence, at least by "core ethnics," of
homeland patterns, however altered and diluted in the North American setting. Often this
alteration produces what I refer to as a "Third Culture," neither fully Greek, Macedonian,
Romanian or Saxon, nor fully North American, but an amalgam of the two, with specific North
American adaptations. Much assimilation, especially as measured by exogamy and loss of
language, has occurred in all four groups, as it has among other white ethnic groups in North
America. But cultural maintenance also continues, especially in those communities which have a
steady supply of new arrivals which reinforces homeland cultural patterns. It is this cultural
persistence which interests anthropologists, causes revisions of previously held positions about
assimilation, and continues to stimulate study and discussion of relatively unknown Balkan
groups living out their lives across North America.