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Cypriot identity is born from the historical experiences of this place

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CYPRIOT identity remains, it seems, the unacknowledged reality of today in Cyprus, and perhaps the key to its future. Otherwise there would be no reason for the hysterics that various (otherwise) noble Greece-besotted and Turkey-besotted suffer from time to time over this ghost called "Neo-Cypriots," nor for the censorship (in the style of the Inquisition) that they impose from time to time on Cyprocentric views. It seems that, despite so many readings, many Hellenocentrics, who should know better, have not understood the verse of Vasilis Michaelides on the oppression of ideas and of cultural identity:

"The present, thinking it is eating the earth, eats the earth, but always it is the one that is being eaten, and the one that is consumed."

Cypriot identity is not going to disappear through oppression, censorship and disinformation. It will simply stay underground for a while. After all, they should not forget that one day of decisive conversion for many to Cyprocentrism was 15 July 1974, when certain others hoped that by imposing the blue-and-white flags by force they would erase the historical memory of this place.

Within this framework, Mr Kazamias's article (24-25/8/92), in which he responds to the views of the New Cyprus Association on education, was a pleasant surprise. First, the article had serious arguments, something the Hellenocentrics have not accustomed us to lately, as they seem to be satisfied with repeating slogans, anathemas and demands that only they should speak. And here lies the second surprise: that Mr Kazamias seeks dialogue.

I consider Mr Kazamias's arguments important beyond educational policy, which is why I will deliberately broaden the discussion. His arguments are a refined and analytically careful presentation of the Hellenocentric view of Cypriot identity: namely, that it is something "manufactured" (as opposed to something "natural," like the nation, say) which, if it becomes hegemonic, will be "imposed" on the population and will lead to "de-Hellenisation," and so on. Moreover, Mr Kazamias issues an open challenge that deserves an answer: "What is Cypriot identity?"

The article that follows attempts to do two things:

a) Because I consider Mr Kazamias's article one of the best expressions of the Hellenocentric view, I make an attempt to analyse it, that is, to analyse the concepts and the rhetorical techniques it uses, which lead to the misleading and intimidating view that Cypriot identity will be "imposed." The central point of my own argument is that the rhetorical counter-positions to Hellenocentric arguments rest on a vague concept that they permanently avoid defining: the concept of the nation. For if they were forced to define the nation as a cultural identity (with today's scientific data and not those of the 19th century), they would then be forced to admit exactly the opposite: it is the Greek and Turkish national identities that were imported and imposed on Cyprus, and it is these national identities that express

the state and power today. Cypriot identity, by contrast, is the offspring of the historical experiences of this place.

b) The second part of the article attempts to define Cypriot identity as composite and proposes a pluralist model of coexistence of cultural identities in Cyprus.

Sometimes the arguments that follow are written in a forceful style. The aim is not to offend anyone. These views are offered as an invitation to further dialogue. I sincerely believe that the war which Hellenocentric intellectuals have opened against Cypriot identity delays and complicates an inevitable dialogue that could be very creative for both sides. Salamis and Amathus coexisted in antiquity and will coexist in the future, when Hellenocentrism in Cyprus sheds the adolescent insecurities that compel it to see everything as uniform and blue-and-white. Life is far more complicated than the colours of a flag.

The fear of Cypriot identity

1. The rhetorical counter-positions: nation-state and “artificial” identities: After acknowledging that nationalist propaganda in education does not contribute to the peaceful coexistence of two communities with different languages and religions, Mr Kazamias puts on the table three conceptual issues, vague in his opinion, in the analysis of the New Cyprus Association:

a) What kind of state will support the institutional framework for the coexistence-cohabitation of the two communities.

b) What form of promotion (consensual or imposed) the creation and spread of a “Neo-Cypriot” identity must follow, assuming that this identity can help coexistence.

c) What content will this identity have?

Mr Kazamias says, characteristically:

“We therefore ask the Neo-Cypriots: what will be the non-Greek and, we would add, non-Turkish Cypro-centric “historical memory” that the newly established Cypriot state will seek to introduce and cultivate through the school and its other ideological mechanisms?”

These three arguments have an internal structural bond which leads to the question above. The aim, I think, is to show that Cypriot identity is something manufactured, which will be imposed by power (by a “technocratic state”). This aim is achieved through various rhetorical oppositions, familiar ones, I would say.

Let us then take the flow of Mr Kazamias’s arguments. Leaving the term nation vague (on his own part), as well as the historical formation of this phenomenon in Cyprus (that is, the fact that it is imported and was essentially imposed on the traditional Cypriot population of the 19th century), Mr Kazamias proceeds to formulate the position that the Cypriot state of Zurich, or of the federation to come (somehow-sometime), will be inter-ethnic. Since it will not be a nation-state, it will be technocratic-managerial, says Mr Kazamias. Here the first rhetorical opposition is attempted: the nation-state as an example of a natural-historical development, and the technocratic state as something foreign, unnatural, necessary. That is, back to the desirable and the feasible. This opposition is manufactured for two reasons:

a) He assumes that the nation-state is a normal (imposition-free) development, and appears to ignore

that the nation-state is the technocratic state par excellence.

b) He passes over in silence the fact that the nation is not the only (nor even the most democratic) form of expression of the collectivity of citizens in relation to a technocratic state. The concept of “the people” is both more democratic and more expressive of the Cypriot experience.

The unclarified way in which the term nation is used leads to the second rhetorical opposition:

How will a Cypriot identity be consolidated, Mr Kazamias asks, and he proposes two models of consolidation with two illustrative examples: the “consensual” one, with the USA, and the model of “imposition,” with Turkey as the example. The choice and the polarisation are of course not accidental. The desirable consensual model proved, Mr Kazamias tells us, utopian: in the end the USA does not have a consensual identity, as it proclaims, but a white-centric one that was imposed on the rest through various mechanisms.

Since that model is unworkable, then, we move on to the other one, that of imposition, and the example here (not at all accidental, of course) is Turkey: the violence with which the Young Turks and Attatürk shaped the Turkish nation out of the remnants of the Ottoman empire. And so, alongside the fear that a soulless technocratic state will create a counterfeit identity, there is now added the fear of “burning Smyrna.” For of course Mr Kazamias could have chosen any other example of imposition apart from Turkey. But the latter functions as a bogeyman of danger, of “de-Hellenisation,” and so on. Within this framework belongs also the misplaced remark that the “Neo-Cypriots” have a provocative name because they recall the term “Young Turks” [Neo-Turks in Greek]. Mr Kazamias surely knows that the addition of “neo” is a characteristic feature of modernism, and that the first to teach this in the region of the Eastern Mediterranean were the “Neo-Hellenes.” This logic and these devices-oppositions, in their more general form, are not at all unknown in recent years in Cypriot society. They express, I would say, neo-nationalism after the humiliation of its original form in 1974. Let us therefore examine more carefully the conceptual vagueness and the rhetorical structure.

2. **Nation and Imposition. Those who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones:** the point of taboo is also the key to investigating the false dilemmas – the nation.

The nation is not something self-evident, as Mr Kazamias presents it. The nation is a historically specific cultural identity that develops in the modern era (and particularly in the last two centuries) around a centralised state (or the desire to create, or to unite with, a state), and which creates the sense of an imagined community within a culture as homogeneous as possible. One could cite various kinds of definitions of the nation, but the three elements underlined above (a specific historical event, a real or imagined identification with a state, the homogenisation of culture) are historical facts which can no longer be disputed. There is, of course, also the mythology of the nations themselves: that they are biological communities with millennia of history, and so on, which are now accepted only with difficulty. Recent social research has shown quite clearly that even the historic nations of Europe, such as France (from where, after all, the idea of the nation as a cultural identity legitimising the modern nation-state began, barely 200 years ago), consist of at least a third descendants of foreigners[1], and that the transformation of the rural population from its linguistic, local and religious identities into the national identity of the “Frenchman” was a long process that covered the whole of the 19th century[2].

As Ernest Gellner aptly puts it:

“It is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round… The basic deception and self-deception practised by nationalism is this… nationalism is, essentially, the general imposition of a

high culture on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases of the totality, of the population. It means that generalized diffusion of a school-mediated, academy-supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of reason ably precise bureaucratic and technological communication. It is the establishment of an anonymous, impersonal society, with mutually substitutable atomized individuals, held together above all by a shared culture of this kind”[3].

Consequently, the nation-state is not only an artificial creation, but the nation is also the ideology par excellence of the technocratic state. I used this passage from Gellner because he is regarded today as one of the leading scholars in the field of nation formation. I could also have used Max Weber[4], who, observing the efforts of Germany and other European nations at the beginning of the century to constitute themselves as unified wholes, said the same things. Today, of course, we have data and research from almost all the social sciences that substantiate these views[5].

I MADE this relatively extensive reference in the hope of avoiding, in this dialogue, the absurdities of last spring (after the controversial “Without Frames” programme in which I appeared), when “sociologists” sprang up everywhere, who, in the comfort of the monologue afforded them by the censorship they demanded and enforced, labelled the main currents of social science “marginal” and historical facts “unhistorical views.”

Let us return to Mr Kazamias’s analysis, although the reference to the nationalist hysteria of last spring was not accidental. It was an example of how the nation works and (unfortunately for the history of the Greek nation) of how a section of the Greek intellectuals of Cyprus works.

The nation, then, is not a natural phenomenon. Mr Kazamias, after all, with his two references to the consolidation of national identities in the USA and Turkey, acknowledges that nations are made: people are not born with the nation in their genetic code. But if in France local identities had to be suppressed, or at least the national identity had to be imposed culturally, why should we deny that something analogous happened here? The Romioi[6] and the Muslims of 19th-century Cyprus learned, in the 20th century, two imported national identities (the Greek and the Turkish). And this separation was encouraged by the policy of the British colonialists, regardless of whether nationalists deny it today. It was colonialism that administratively converted the religious (not linguistic or biological) millets into national groups[7]. And in this it identified with the traditional institutions of power (e.g. the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the Muslim elite), which for their own reasons promoted the separation (as with the dissolution of the community of the Linobambaki, a sect that combined elements of both Christianity and Islam[8]). This separation, which appears today as “natural,” was a crime against Cyprus and the wealth of its historical and cultural tradition. The two national identities that were imported into Cyprus divided a population that had lived for centuries in mixed villages with intense cultural interaction, as basic elements of its culture bear witness: the cuisine, the vernacular architecture, daily habits, and even elements of religious tolerance and mutual respect. This was a population whose history of three centuries contains far more moments of common class struggles, regardless of religious divisions, against the elites (1765, 1804, 1833, 1948) than of inter-communal conflicts[9]. And the schools, as mechanisms for consolidating the imported national ideologies and for projecting the other community as the “age-old enemy,” played a decisive role in the separation[10].

Moreover, the imported national identities prevented the writing and codification of the Cypriot dialect (which could have developed into an autonomous Greek-derived language of both communities, since it was spoken by Christians and Muslims alike). And it is ironic that the Hellenocentrics today lament the search for, or use of, a third language (such as English), when their ideology is responsible for

destroying the possibility of developing a pan-Cypriot (indeed Greek-derived and Homeric) language for communication between the two communities. Of course, the saddest thing is the practical separation that was imposed after 1974, the roots of which go back to the lost opportunity for self-government in 1947 (before the inter-communal conflicts began) and to the undermining of Independence and the Republic from 1960 to 1974. And I consider it characteristic of the mentality that nationalism creates that not a single apology has been heard for everything this place suffered, not even for 15 July.

But we have reached the point we have reached. National identities are a fact in Cyprus. A century of national history and education cannot be written off, and if I have focused my analysis on criticism, I did so to balance the historical account, since nationalist hymnology is a daily litany. It would, of course, be an oversight not to mention also the positive, modernising elements that national identities offered, and in particular the anti-colonial struggle of Hellenocentrism in Cyprus, especially in the period 1940-1960.

3) The Concept of the “Cypriot People”: If we can divide recent Cypriot history into 3 periods, we could speak:

a) of the traditional era of coexistence, which ends with the beginning of this century;

b) of the period of the prevalence of the imported national visions, which covers the period up to 1960;

c) and of the period of independence and of the definitive formation of the modern Cypriot identity.

The Cyprocentric tendency attempts to express, in this last period, a unifying identity of two communities that have by now been separated by lines of blood and are pushed into worse confrontations by nationalism. Despite the continuous tragedies (the result of a schizophrenic situation in which nationalism continued to hold hegemony, with dreams from Athens and Ankara, over an independent society), the concept of the “Cypriot people” has been created, I believe, both as a term and as an identity. The “people” transcends the communities without eliminating them. The term “people” is a political term par excellence.

It refers to the collectivity of citizens, which is the source of sovereignty/power. The state administers this power, but the people are the judge of whether the social contract is being observed. By contrast, the nation can be used as an abstract concept, which defines the state as the source and the executor-implementer of power/sovereignty.

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