

Nations and Identities

– The Case of Greeks and Turks

Index

Preface

History Textbooks in Greece and Turkey

The Contrasting Images of Greeks in Turkish Literature: Fiction versus Memoirs

Tourkokratia: History and the Image of Turks in Greek Literature

Greek-Turkish Conflict and Arsonist Firemen

History Writing among the Greeks and Turks: Imagining the Self and the Other

Ethnic Identity and Nation Building: On Byzantine and Ottoman Historical Legacy

Perceptions of Conflict: Greeks and Turks in each other's mirrors

Non-muslim Minorities in the Historiography of Republican Turkey: The Greek case

Constructing Memories of 'Multiculturalism' and Identities in the Turkish Novels

The Imagined 'Other' as National Identity - Greeks and Turks

Epilogue

Preface

(H. Millas)

Nationalism, national identity, national stereotypes and prejudices are issues of academic interest for many; for me they are also phenomena that shaped my life. I was born as a member of an ethnic minority - a Greek in Istanbul - and ethnic issues rang our doorbell when I was a boy. In the streets where I played with my peers I felt what later I came to identify as “being the other”. The contradictions between what I heard at home on one hand and what the wider society propagated on the other caused my curiosity; later these controversial discourses became disturbing and then matters to be investigated.

I got my first degree as a civil engineer in 1965 and lived in Turkey until 1971. I got married, I served in the Turkish army, worked as an engineer and we had our first son in Turkey. I was active in the wider society: I took part in the Turkish leftist movement in the sixties as a member of TIP (Turkish Workers Party); I participated in the Turkish varsity team being a champion in 100 meters running. Most of my friends were my Turkish class mates. All these were the centripetal forces that helped my integration. There were however, centrifugal forces, too: The racist Income Tax of 1942 against the minorities, the riots of 1955, the expulsions of the Greeks in 1964 and some other “minor” xenophobic practices which effected seriously our family. When I served I was deprived the right to become an officer, as all males with high education did and I served under unpleasant conditions. After 1971 I moved to Athens.

In the seventies and eighties I worked as an engineer and as a contractor in various countries and mainly in Saudi Arabia. I was bilingual and I made use of this advantage translating and publishing mostly Greek and Turkish poetry. This was a new hobby. At my 48, I decided to leave engineering. In the years 1990-1994 I worked at Ankara University establishing the Modern Greek Department. During these years I taught Greek literature and history and I started my PhD degree in political science at the same university. My dissertation was on the images of Turks and Greeks *vis-à-vis* the “other” as these appear in literary texts. Later I taught Turkish language, history and literature in Greek Universities for nine years.

My field of interest is Greek-Turkish relations, history and national perceptions as expressed in literary texts, in textbooks and in historiography. I approached the issues comparatively. Teaching, however, for me was not so much a way of “enlightening” the students but rather a means to understand my immediate environment, myself and basically the dominant ideology of our time: nationalism. In a way, I wanted to peep in the social dynamics which determined my life. My communication with my young audience was a test area where I tried to cope with nationalist understanding. I tried, I suspect in most cases unconsciously, not only to demonstrate nationalistic phenomena which I perceived as unconstructive and harmful, but I also expected that my students would follow my understanding and transcend nationalist ideology. Indisputably, I do not perceive myself as an impartial agent but an active factor in the current dispute of “national identity”.

Teaching nationalism

This book is comprised of some of my publications in English which had appeared in various forms and which I used at Işık and at Bilgi Universities (in Istanbul) where I taught as a visiting instructor during the academic year 2009-2010. My main concern was to do something more than “offering information” about nationalism and its consequences: I rather stressed the stereotypes, the prejudices and xenophobia which lead not only to tense international relations but also to ethnic strife within the countries. My conviction is that the traditional approach in teaching nationalism, where the history and the present status of nationalism are presented chronologically has limited results. I noticed two tendencies in the students who study nations and nationalism:

- a) They are under the impression that they are studying a social phenomenon detached from themselves. They rarely suspect that the subject is also about their being, their own attitudes and their way of thinking. They “learn” what is being taught but they do not associate nationalism with their beliefs and understanding.
- b) Those who see that the course is about their identity and their related behavior often react by developing defense mechanisms; they defend nationalist discourse and they do not internalize the modern understanding of nation. In short they do not abandon the nationalist paradigm. They develop a tendency to attribute all negative aspects of nationalism to the “nationalism of the other” and perceive “our” nationalism as just and positive, or at least an unavoidable reaction. This attitude is not necessarily voiced openly but is preserved in the back of their mind.

In fact, the difficulty in teaching nationalism is that this study encompasses the students and quite often the instructors, too. It is not about “something” but also about “us”. My experience with my Turkish and Greek students has taught me some lessons:

- a) The students were very receptive when I demonstrated the contradictions, the shortcoming, the myths, the conjectural and negative nature of nationalism of the “other”. As long as my examples were chosen from the Turkish case as I spoke to the Greeks and/or from the Greek case when I spoke to the Turks there was no problem. But the parties were not ready to accept “criticism against their part”. I refrained, therefore, to exert this “criticism”, until they were ready for it. The parties seem ready to accept a “criticism against their part” provided this does not have a personal character (is not directed solely to “our” nation) but it is a universal one.
- b) So comparative approach seemed to be the first answer to the difficulty. Once the students were familiarized with the nationalism of the “other” and having understood the mechanism of nation-building (of the “other”) the shift to “our” case was quite easy.
- c) One additional component helped. During the first lectures I concentrated in showing the relativity of (national) convictions: each nation has its own truth. So how can we be sure of our own? My teaching started with questioning the receptors of the course. Are we in a position to understand (and judge) the ideology which has formed our way of judging? This problematic proved an efficient stimulus.

About the essays in this volume

I arranged the articles in a way to compose a comprehensive and functional unity. I started the course with an article on the textbooks used in the primary schools in Greece and Turkey in the decade of 1990 (“History Textbooks in Greece and Turkey”). I explained to my students that the idea of this study came to me when I noticed that our son who had started school in Athens began to express strange and negative views against the Turks. The textbooks have changed substantially in the following years; however the basic conclusion and questions are of great importance. Why did the two states produce such one-sided, biased and fanatical books? What kind of citizens did they intend to have? Can citizens who are brought up with this kind of an education think without prejudices about the “other”? How can we trust our judgment about the “other” if our related education has been of this kind the last decades? What can we say about our nation-states judging this educational approach?

The second article (“The Contrasting Images of Greeks in Turkish Literature: Fiction versus Memoirs”) also gives an insight of how “we” as persons conceive problematically our environment. National images and stereotypes limit our capability in judging the “other” and consequently “ourselves”. This shortcoming may be associated with the textbooks and the central educational system of nation-states, as was shown in the previous article. Literary texts on one hand, reflect the way the authors and/or the society think but on the other hand, how they “educate” the nation, too. This can be seen as an additional characteristic of the nation and the nation-state.

The third article (“Tourkokratia: History and the Image of Turks in Greek Literature”) shows the relationship between national myths, historiography and national identity. Greek national identity is heavily based on the negative image of the “other” - an image which was also met in the textbooks and in the literary texts. The myths are internalized and taught as “history” even though an unbiased approach would show the shortcomings of these approaches.

With the fourth article (“Greek-Turkish Conflict and Arsonist Firemen”), which shows how national identity limits and misleads our judgment, the introductory session of the course is completed. In this article I showed that to be an academic and/or a specialist in a profession does not rule out the possibility of being prejudiced and a victim of socially imposed stereotypes.

The purpose of the first four articles is to prepare the students to face and understand the modern interpretation of nationhood and which I believe to be the hardest-to-accept-finding related to nations and national identity. The core of nationalist thinking is based, and this belief is shared by the majority of the citizens of Greece and Turkey, on the “eternal nature” of the nations – “our nation started in antiquity and will last to eternity” is the sacred belief. The modern view of a national identity and of nation-state which appeared only the last centuries is met with profound disbelief. Normally the students respond to the test questions as it is expected from them, but they rarely internalize this “information”. These introductory articles, therefore, show how modern citizens are

conditioned to think in a certain “national” manner and how “we” should free ourselves from stereotypes and prejudices in order to be able to understand modern historians and academics, say E. Gellner, B. Anderson, and others.¹

The fifth article (“History Writing among the Greeks and Turks: Imagining the Self and the Other”) is about historiography and the founding of the grand national narratives. Nation-building is mostly the task of the historians which were very influential at the dawn of nation states. Students already familiarized with the “purpose” of textbooks and the generalizations of literary texts are able to follow the reasoning of the efforts of these historians. This article is factual. The theoretical background has been set up in the previous articles.

The sixth article (“Ethnic Identity and Nation Building: On Byzantine and Ottoman Historical Legacy”) is about a typical practice of nation-building: inventing tradition, creating imaginary national cultures and national identities, at the same time ignoring and silencing purposely legacies which remained us the “other”. These are actions which as a consequence set fictitious barriers between groups of people. The examples are chosen from familiar everyday practices in Greece and Turkey.

The seventh article (“Perceptions of Conflict: Greeks and Turks in each other’s mirrors”), like the last article, are the most political ones. It approaches bilateral political issues, however, not as an independent sphere of “national interests” and of calm evaluations of interests, but as by-products of the above: of controversial identities, conflicting interpretation of the past, prejudices and images of the “other”. The students at this stage is able to see that the arguments of the parties are influenced, even determined by an ideology which is deeply rooted in their environment.

The eighth and ninth articles (“Non-muslim Minorities in the Historiography of Republican Turkey: The Greek case” and “Constructing Memories of Multiculturalism and Identities in the Turkish Novels”) are about minorities and ethnic groups *vis-à-vis* nationalist understanding. The stress is on how national groups are xenophobic against what they consider foreign and against the “other”. Intricate situations where the “other” is invented as a scapegoat or as a reference for self-identity or where he/she is imagined in order to rationalize national history are studied in these articles.

The tenth and final text is the longest. It is the outcome of three workshops with Greeks and Turks and it is about the way each group perceives the “other”. Here I try to describe the way national identity and nationalism operate in practice and at the level of judging and evaluating the “other”. Also the perceptions and complaints of the Greeks and the Turks which they presently voice and experience are presented in this article.

¹ I usually ask my students to comment on the course. Here are two typical answers:

Student A: We looked first at the individual before studying the society. We looked at the way we are educated in our families, at school; what is the role of the state and the media in our formation. We tried to answer these questions. We saw that the attitudes, the thinking and the perceptions of people are the outcome of their upbringing.

Student B: We carry all through our lives the ideas (right or wrong) which we obtain during our education. Our worldviews are rooted unconsciously deep inside us.