



IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE CYPRUS ISSUE

Demetra Demetriou

Identity politics has always lied at the core of the Cyprus issue. Formerly set on religion and ethnonationalism, ethnic identities on the island have rather morphed, in recent years, into mutual distrust, sense of insecurity and survival. Greek Cypriot nationalism, previously directed towards *enosis* (union with Greece) that spurred anxiety among the Turkish Cypriot community, today consists predominantly in affirming the island's culturally Hellenic identity within an independent state (Faustmann 2008, 20). Turkish Cypriot identity, on the other hand, originally based on Kemalist and Westernized values -and despite its cultural and other ties with the Turkish mainland-, is currently endangered by consistent colonization by Anatolian Turks (who acquire "citizenship" and "voting rights") and a forceful Islamization and Turkification of the occupied part, infused with AKP's ethno-religious propaganda (Djavit An 2018). Furthermore, a secular attitude of both communities toward religious practices attests to their respective rootedness in their own customs and traditions, rather than to divisive identity features, that aforesaid inflamed passions that led to intercommunal violence and bloodshed.

However, identity politics is currently the primary tool for both communities to attain respect and recognition and promote their interests in the negotiation process. As abstract and contingent any definition of identity may be -including conflicted views and claims to selfhood from within each side-, the two parties have shared distinctive -and mutually exclusive- lived experiences, territories, and political structures, which forged a strong sense of communal identity since the constitutional breakdown of 1963 and, most importantly, following the invasion of 1974. Ethnic segregation remains fundamental -if not structural- in constitutional arrangements for an agreed settlement based on a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation.

The physical divide of the island and its peoples has been introduced as a *sine qua non* principle by the Turkish Cypriot side, as against Greek Cypriot insistence on a unitary form of government, following the intercommunal clashes of 1963. This claim on behalf of the Turkish Cypriot community was deemed unrealizable at the time by UN Mediator, Galo Plaza, whose detailed report (para. 150) in 1965

highlighted the scattered distribution of Cypriot population by ethnic group, even after the creation of the Turkish Cypriot enclaves. Prior proposals by Lord Radcliffe in 1956 (paras 27-28) incorporated similar concerns, pointing at the ineffectiveness of a federal system of government, which would be disadvantageous for the people of Cyprus as a whole. In essence, colonial Britain's pledge for partition, so as to contain the national aspirations of the Greeks, instigated the Turkish policy of *taksim* (partition), designed by Turkish constitutionalist Nihat Erim and eventually sealed by the Turkish invasion of 1974, under the rule of force. Erim's report on Cyprus is being consistently followed by Turkey to this very day and the de facto partitioning of the island has practically normalized discussions of a negotiated territorial demarcation based on ethnicity.

Be that as it may, a growing sense of "Cypriotism" among primarily -though not exclusively- leftist circles of the Greek Cypriot community and, to a lesser extent, the Turkish Cypriot community, appears to promote a purely Cypriot (*qua* autochthonous) identity, deprived of cultural or historical indicators. This kind of narrative, informed in great part by a deconstructive substrate, might be misleading or even contradictory as far as the Cyprus issue is concerned. First, it appears to ignore the historical, cultural, and constitutional realities on the island and the very form of government that is being currently discussed. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, it displaces the Cyprus problem as an international case of invasion and occupation by minor concerns over an intercommunal (*qua* identarian) dispute.

Cypriotism against Identity Politics

The ideology of Cypriotism dates back to British Cyprus and the colonial apparatus, which sought to manipulate archaeological and historical evidence so as to "invent"¹ an indigenous Cypriot identity and combat Greek nationalism. As important British historian and diplomat Chris M. Woodhouse notes in the crucial years of the EOKA struggle: "One of the misfortunes of the present situation is that British policy has not succeeded in creating a Cypriot national consciousness, as distinct from a Greek or a Turkish national consciousness" (Woodhouse 1955/1956, 12).

In the years after the invasion, minority Greek Cypriot factions reverberated colonial ideas about an autochthonous "Cypriot nation" and organized around the so-called Neo-Cypriot Association (NCA), supported by the political left.² Although the NCA is not as active as it might have been in the 70s and the 80s, its core arguments now inform the left's public discourse and have mass appeal among leftist youth organizations, academics, and bi-communal activists. As Hubert Faustmann rightly observes, the very official state policy in the aftermath of the invasion "shifted towards the promotion of a distinct Cypriot identity as a sign of openness to the Turkish Cypriots as part of a policy change to enable reunification" (2008, 19). Although well-intentioned, Cypriotism as promoted by

¹ See Given 1998.

² See Thucidides 2015.

the left tends to be a-historical, isolationist, autistic, nativist, and most often permeated with hatred towards anything Hellenic or relating to the Greek state. Any claim to Greek nationalism (in terms of a culturally Hellenic identity, as defined above) or to the interests of the Greek Cypriot community in the negotiation process, is being wrongly understood as “anti-solution,” “chauvinist” or “fascist.” The populist lexicon employed is rather unfortunate, given that far-right nationalism on the part of the Greek Cypriots is significantly in decline compared to other European and Western democracies -against the grain of Turkey’s gradual shift in recent years toward autocracy, theocracy, and Neo-Ottomanism. In the same vein, Greece and Turkey (or the Greek and Turkish Cypriots) are presented to have an equal share of responsibility with regard to the Cyprus problem, which disregards both the emerging large-scale power-shift in our region and the current political realities that obstruct the negotiation process. The latest Ledra Street protests (March 2020) over checkpoint closures due to coronavirus security precautions is a case in point, which significantly disorients the public opinion and downplays the role of the true instigator and guarantor of *taksim*. The sole country that currently claims political and military control over the Republic of Cyprus *as a whole* is Turkey. In avoiding the blame-game, the discussion falls back on identity politics. And the weak suffer what they must.

Identity Politics and/or Deconstruction? A Paradox on the Left

Late-twentieth-century ideology of the Left marked a shift of focus on identity issues before its failure, as Francis Fukuyama (2018a) points out, to effectively bring about large-scale socioeconomic changes. Indeed, since the late 70s and the early 80s, a number of leftist intellectuals espoused multicultural and postcolonial approaches with regard to identity, which fall in a materialist framework of analysis and call for special recognition of undervalued and/or minority groups. Despite Fukuyama’s humanist/universalist perspective, which prompts for liberal democratic “unity” as against multicultural “diversity,” these theories remain fundamental in drawing attention to the silenced and the repressed and inspiring actions and policies against hegemony, imperialism and discrimination.

However, when it comes to Cypriot variants of the left, the tendency to highlight concerns around difference when it comes to immigrants, women, the LGBT community etc., appears to be incompatible with deconstructionist attempts in favour of Cypriotism. A further emphasis on the purported rights of the Turkish-Cypriot community as the minoritarian community, allegedly threatened by the majoritarian Greek Cypriot community, is further contradictory towards the promotion of deconstructive arguments regarding ethnicity. This form of minority politics rather exacerbates the distinctiveness of Turkish and Greek identities on the island and disregards the *ipso facto* constitutional protection of the rights of the Turkish Cypriot community by the Republic of Cyprus. It also falsely presents the Greek Cypriot community as a politically dominant player by virtue of its size, rather than a historically unprivileged community, deprived of its right to self-determination. Such an approach encapsulates Turkish nationalist arguments and

is un-democratic towards the perspectives and human rights of the Greek Cypriots as *individuals*, against plain communitarianism and mass violations by Turkey.

Cypriotism as a deconstructive narrative further conflicts with the very idea of bi-zonality, which lays the foundation for an agreed solution of the Cyprus issue. Premised on ethno-communal pillars, bi-zonality implies a territorial separation, along with restrictive ethnic quotas, so as to ensure that the two communities remain separate and racially homogeneous -as it were- in perpetuity. The parties are further bound by specific provisions to safeguard and mutually respect the distinct identity of the constituent parts, which makes any claim to a "Cypriot nation," a "Cypriot identity," or a "Cypriot consciousness" paradoxical, if not unconstitutional. By espousing both identity politics and deconstruction, Cypriotist ideology remains theoretically aporetic.

Cypriotism *qua* Identity Politics

The problem is exacerbated when the quest for a comprehensive identity merely based on nationality is coupled with a tendency to produce argumentation that denies its ideological locus. Cypriotism is expressed in great part by a revisionist attitude toward educational curricula that seeks to restore "objectivity" and "truth." Although poststructuralist theory is vaguely invoked, speculation about "absolute truths" and "pure knowledge" remains intact when it comes to "Cypriot identity." Post-Marxist academic circles provide theoretical support assumed to be objective that culminated, in recent years, in their adamant -and so far unsuccessful- attempt to institutionalize the Greek Cypriot dialect (the very word "Greek" is avoided in this context) as the official "language" of the state and education (as against standard Greek). A dis-identification process is at work through various technologies currently producing a forced and limited understanding of Cypriot identity in terms of a hybrid/creole product. An erstwhile co-existence between the Greeks and the Turks of the island (during the Ottoman and British rule) appears to translate into common heritage and traditions, or even language and literature (as suggested by recently published bi-communal dictionaries and anthologies), that the two communities supposedly share. Likewise, historical facts tend to be read as "narratives" and all kinds of "nationalisms" disappear into the melting pot of a nascent *tabula rasa* theory for Cypriots, by Cypriots. Above all, this new identity construct appears to emanate from a transcendental locus outside ideology, language, and political agendas, by reproducing the very metaphysics it purports to deconstruct.

A "Creedal Identity" for Cyprus?

In his recent visit to Cyprus (Jan. 30, 2020), Francis Fukuyama, lecturing on his new book about identity in the years of populism (see Fukuyama 2018b), advanced his ideas about a "creedal identity" for Cyprus, committed to the liberal democratic values of equality and a universal understanding of human dignity, beyond ethno-communal pillars (Theophanous 2020). However inscribed within a rigid Hegelian/universalist tradition, Fukuyama's argument remains pragmatic

for modern democratic states in a resolutely mitigated and globalized world order, which applies to the Republic of Cyprus (and the Republic of Cyprus upon reunification) in its capacity as a member state of the European Union. A shift away from the problematics of ethnic division towards the civic aspects of Cypriot identity might, indeed, be useful as a conceptual political framework in developing solutions for the Cyprus question which would allow the functionality of the state and fundamental organization of everyday life. By forging civic equality, common ends and political agendas, conflict accommodation would result not from forced mechanisms and ostensible international guarantees, but from allegiance to the state and commitment to a national democratic community. Although practical and technical adjustments prevail among negotiators, the focus on allegiance - most often dismissed as merely symbolic, and thus insignificant- may prove successful to provide original and, most importantly, lasting solutions for the Cyprus problem. As Fukuyama's analysis shows, the key role of identity in recent political developments, from Brexit to the rise of populism, testifies to the limits of liberal democracy to solve the people's everlasting need for recognition, unless modern states perceive themselves as political units with shared purpose and mutual obligation.

Investing on a "creedal" identity for Cyprus need not eradicate ethnic or narrower group identities in favour of Cypriotism. Before postmodern misinterpretations of Fukuyama's own statements about Cyprus that appeared in several local press briefings, the professor is careful enough to precise that a democratic community thus perceived "will [not] be an adequate substitute for narrower identities; rather, it will be a complement to them" (Fukuyama 2019, 169). A broad and integrative civic identity which would allow to see common ground and ensure the unity of Cyprus before a much feared state breakdown in the event of a solution requires, as Andreas Theophanous has argued in much of his work, a brave yet necessary paradigm shift for an agreed settlement: away from consociationalism and towards an integrationalist federal model.³ Younger generations appear more open to relate with their peers from the other side and their common European perspective might indeed be promising for the formation of a democratic and cohesive society of Cypriot citizens. However, provided that the chapter of government as currently discussed relies upon paralyzing veto rights and, most significantly, as long as Turkey pursues its agency as disruptor -if not as conqueror- in the Eastern Mediterranean, the constitution of a creedal identity for Cyprus is yet far to be perceived.

³ See, indicatively, Theophanous 2020.

Works Cited

- Djavit An, Ahmet. 2018. "The Turkish Cypriot Community in Historical Perspective and its Changes in Structure and Identity." *Policy Paper Series* (Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs), no. 2: 1-34.
- Faustmann, Hubert. 2008. "Aspects of Political Culture in Cyprus." In *The Government and Politics of Cyprus*, ed. by James Ker-Lindsay and Hubert Faustmann, 17-44. Bern et al.: Peter Lang.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 2018a. "Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy." *Foreign Affairs* 97 (5): 90-114.
- 2018b. *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- 2019. "Fukuyama Replies." *Foreign Affairs* 98 (2): 168-170.
- Given, Michael. 1998. "Inventing the Eteocypriots: Imperialist Archaeology and the Manipulation of Ethnic Identity." *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 11 (1): 3-29.
- Theophanous, Andreas. 2020. "Fukuyama on Identity and the Cyprus Issue" [in Greek]. *Phileleftheros*, February 22. Accessed March 8, 2020. <http://bit.ly/theophanous>.
- Thucidides, Thoukis. 2015. "The Course of the Neo-Cypriot Association: 40 Years of Life and Action" [in Greek]. *Neo-Cypriot Association*. April 4. Accessed March 8, 2020. <https://www.newcyprusassociation.org>.
- Woodhouse, C. M. 1955/1956. "Cyprus and the Middle Eastern Crisis." *International Journal* 11 (1): 1-15.