Smoke and Mirrors: Greek Self and Turkish Other

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Abstract: This paper explores the theme of alien Otherness in the context of the minority Turkish Muslims of Western Thrace, Greece and their majority Greek Orthodox counterparts. Offering a view of the Turkish Other through the often contradictory gaze of a majority Self, it describes the confusions inherent in the co-existence of historical foes within the same national boundaries. The author draws upon Ricoeur's theory regarding the relational nature of identity, Kristeva's work on alterity, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, and her own fieldwork in Greece to examine the fear and hostility with which many in the Greek majority receive their Turkish Other. The paper considers as well the risks of social belonging from the point of view of the Turkish Other, including fear of the loss of identity that assimilation may imply. Sharing personal narratives of the author's Greek and Turkish informants, including stories of forgiveness and 'letting go,' this paper also considers courses of ethical action that might guide both sides toward new worlds of possibility. All views expressed in this paper are the author's and not those of the United States Department of Defense or the Defense Language Institute where she serves as associate professor.

Key Words: Thrace; Greece; Turkey; Muslim; Self; Other; hermeneutics

1. Introduction

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne closed the chapter on Greece's *megali idea*, the "great idea" behind its catastrophic attempt in 1921 to reclaim lost territories in Asia Minor. This legendary misadventure had resulted in the swift and violent expulsion by Turkey of between 900,000 and 1.3 million Greeks who had been living in Turkish-held territories for centuries. The terms of the peace stipulated a population exchange between the approximately 188,000 Greeks still remaining in Turkey for the 350,000 to 500,000 Turkish-speaking Muslims still in Greece. Exempted from this exchange were two groups that formed the remnants of the Ottoman empire: the roughly 120,000 *Rum* Greeks residing in Istanbul/Constantinople and the 86,000 Turks living in Thrace. These groups stayed behind under the protection of their respective kin states, worshipping according to their faith, attending their own schools, and otherwise maintaining their traditional way of life. For the Turkophone Muslim minority in Western Thrace, this meant resuming their hardscrabble agrarian existence. They remain a fixed point in

a region of historically receding national boundaries, their kinship with Greece's primordial foe making them a standing reminder of suffering and loss. They are a deeply distrusted Other at the margins of the Greek Self.

There is no mitigating the ambivalence with which Turkey has been held in Greek popular consciousness. Traditional characterizations of the Turks as "the 'eternal danger from the East,'. . .threatening, brash, ready to assault and hurt us at any opportunity" are preserved in school textbooks, advanced in the media, and argued in Parliament.[1] Respect for history and living memory rightly forbid downplaying the brutalities Turkey has inflicted over the centuries upon the Greek people, yet Turks can rarely expect unqualified acknowledgement of reciprocal injuries—the massacre of 2,000 Muslims during the 1821 Greek siege of Tripoli, for example—that Greece has inflicted upon them. Turk-hating has so long endured as a model attitude that it seems to have become intrinsic to what it means to be Greek.

The majority's fear and distrust of all things Turkish is matched by the minorities' anxieties about the future, particularly their own marginal position in a rapidly changing society. The Greek Supreme Court's January 2005 decision to uphold the ban on the official use of the word, "Turkish," to designate minority organisations has been received as confirmation of the Greek establishment's persistent hostility, or at least its disregard for the facts of their social existence.[2] This disappointment, grafted onto communal memories of only recently lifted discriminatory practises, perpetuates the tendency of the minority to look to the motherland for protection rather than work within the Greek system to improve their lot. This historical pattern of behaviour is particularly frightening to majority Greeks, for whom the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus—ostensibly to protect the island's Turkish minority—remains an open wound.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Protocol

This discussion takes up the problem of Greek Self and Turkish Other as a matter best apprehended in the hermeneutic or interpretive mode. In practical terms, this means testing Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity in the context of a rigid *us versus them* construction, here the apparently dichotomous Greek Orthodox and Turkish Muslim communities. Ricoeur's hermeneutic sensibility rejects such dichotomies, favoring instead the subordination of "two heterogeneous notions to an encompassing notion of which they would be partial components."[3] Since identity itself—who and what one *is*—is lived and felt in relation to who and what one is *not*, Otherness is a necessary component to the Self's understanding of its own being. Otherness is not, as Ricoeur argues, "added on to selfhood from

outside. . .but. . .belongs instead to the tenor of meaning and to the ontological constitution of selfhood."[4]

It follows, then, that an exploration of minority Otherness should begin at this point of interdependency and admit the Greek Self into the center of the inquiry. Yet in regarding the Turkish Other through the defensive and often contradictory gaze of the Greek Self, one finds evidence of a self-held-in-common that undermines the notion of the "unbridgeable gap" so cherished by nationalist schools. Suggesting that Greek and Turkish difference is a fiction is risky, but in such a proposal lies a world of possibilities not seriously entertained by the mainstream of either side. This paper presumes to replace the "unbridgeable gap" with a new metaphor, "smoke and mirrors," that captures the confusions and revelations inherent in the Self's encounter with the Other and steers the conversation to an alternative framing of Otherness.

Philosophers and poets thankfully provide the language to express the visceral loathing for the Other that the discourse of reconciliation typically elides, but their metaphors have real-time analogues in the lives of real people. Any serious discussion of Otherness and Sameness has to factor in personal narratives as part of a general "working through" the psychic barricades constructed by memory and tradition. Accordingly, the field research from which this discussion draws has followed a participatory hermeneutic research protocol as advanced by Herda,[5] which engages the so-called subjects as active partners whose perspectives are integral to the research process. The medium for this inquiry is conversation, during which participants' respective narratives of history and culture, identity, and dreams of future possibilities are offered for analysis, critique, and, finally, an avenue toward new understandings.

3. The Other as Self—Complications and Limitations

Marios Stratigopoulos, lifelong Athenian, musician, linguist, and raconteur, was an imaginative and wickedly funny conversation partner. Characteristically, the childhood images of the "terrible Turk" he shared during our recorded conversation were exaggerations bordering on the comic: "From the time we were small, they told us that the Turks were the bad guys, always. Always, the Turks were presented as animals, without teeth, you know, something like pirates, razor blades that cut off heads."[6]

He cooled his rhetoric to describe another image, a vivid memory of a picture he had seen in his school textbooks, that of a woman wearing

> a white gown who was supposed to be 'Greece.' This is the picture I have in my mind, either Cyprus or Greece, whatever. . .*Greek,* anyway. It was always a woman, slender, with a long

> white gown, like an ancient Greek woman's. . .and behind her some *thing* that had blood on it, and a monster beside her, with a huge sword. [Everywhere] was dripping blood and [she]. . raised her hand, she was being sacrificed. In other words, Rwanda. Tutsi and Hutu![7]

It was not until he reached early adulthood, Mr. Stratigopoulos said, that he encountered an alternative image of the Turkish Other. Recalling a train journey from Stockholm to Athens when he was cash-strapped and hungry, Mr. Stratigopoulos described the procession of Northern European passengers coming in and out of his compartment, eating, drinking, and otherwise enjoying the company of their own compatriots, all ignoring him. Finally a pair of men, "with mustaches and dark skin," came into the compartment, carrying

> a roast chicken, and [one of them] cuts off a leg and says to me, without knowing who I am, 'Take some,' because I was inside the train with him. . .And I was stunned. And later he says to me, 'Where are you from?' and I tell him, 'From Athens. Yourself?' And he says, 'From Constantinople.' He says, 'I'm a sailor,' he says, 'and our governments make us quarrel. Greeks and Turks have a lot of things in common.'[8]

The man's generosity resonated with Mr. Stratigopoulos, who was amazed to see that such an act of hospitality and care—deep-seated values of his own Greek culture—had come so easily to one who should have been his antithesis. His "stunned" reaction reflected the tradition into which he had been born, the dogmatism of Turk-hating that defined the Ottoman Other as the embodiment of barbarism and evil. As we talked more about such unexpectedly pleasant encounters, he agreed that the discovery that the "enemy" could be recognized as a man who shared a nature with himself was a "powerful" moment.

Yet the tendency within Greek popular imagination to maintain a strict dichotomy of Self and Other remains very strong, though that dichotomy may be gently expressed. During my conversation with Frosso Arvanitaki, an educator and co-founder of an Athenian publishing company who was born and raised in Istanbul's Greek community, I told her about an earlier visit to Istanbul, and how much it had reminded me of Athens. Mrs. Arvanitaki put in, quickly, that the two cities—and by extension, the two cultures—were

> [c]ommon and different. . .There are many differences. I'd have to think a little to tell you what they are. The commonalities are that there is, I don't know. . .they have their cuisines in common. Certain songs, some games. But the mentality I think is different. . . . [b]ecause of religion, yes. Maybe because. . .the Greek was a little closer to Europe, always. And now he has moved even closer, and the average Greek moves in that direction and sees different things. The average Turk has stayed somehow inside the East. . . .It's a different mentality. We're not exactly the same things.[9]

Food, songs, games—these, she seems to suggest, are superficial similarities. What matters more to her are the different "mentalities" of Greek and Turk, though her tentativeness in defining the difference—in fact, she does not define it—reveals how fugitive a notion it is, even for a Constantinopolitan Greek who lived in Turkey until young adulthood.

A suggestion of the real nature of this difference is seen in Mrs. Arvanitaki's guarded explanation that Greece, having "moved even closer" to Europe, has experienced an evolution in its vision, whereas the "average Turk" has developed along another course. She stops short of positing this difference as cultural superiority, although such a suggestion could be promptly taken up by the general public, for whom the notion of a Turkish "mentality" radically distinct from theirs is taken for granted. In any case, implicit in her observation is a Turkish Other so opposed to the Greek Self that even the "commonalities" of food, music, dances, and games—expressions of culture and tradition that would ordinarily constitute kinship ties of these two peoples—are neutralized.

Mrs. Arvanitaki does not mention the commonality of language, the countless Turkish words and phrases embedded in the Modern Greek vernacular. Although these words are usually associated with the so-called lower, even criminal classes, they are often used among educated people as expressions of anger or distress; "it shows," says Marios Stratigopoulos, "how the Turkish language exercises an emotional power upon. . .the Greeks."[10] This is very near the point that Gadamer makes when he describes "linguistic tradition" as "tradition in the proper sense of the word—i.e., something handed down," rather than a "remnant of the past."[11] The language we use, Gadamer insists, expresses the totality of our human experience: "every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole world-view that underlies it to appear."[12] When we consider together this resonance of the Turkish language within Greek linguistic tradition, the experience of a shared world that it implies, and the hardly

incidental commonalities of Greek and Turkish cultural performance, we are confronted with, to borrow Clifford Geertz's expression, most of the "gross actualities" in which peoples' communal identities are lodged. Even if we agree to exclude that elusive element, "mentality," from the equation, Sameness is tangibly present in the lifeworlds of Greeks and Turks.

But confronting even the possibility of Sameness introduces an excruciating paradox. Thalia Dragonas, professor of social psychology at the Capodistrian University of Athens and former co-director of the government's Western Thrace-based Programme for the Education of Muslim Children, described ongoing, dead-end discourses with officials from the Greek Ministry of Education whose objections to the minority's right to self-designation spoke to their fears about hosting national minorities on Greek soil. Describing majority reaction to the minority's demand to call itself "Turkish," Dr. Dragonas recalled a Greek ministry official insisting, '"*They are not Turks!* They *happen* to be Muslim. They're Greeks!"' Dr. Dragonas called such pronouncements "ridiculous," explaining the process of antipodal reasoning that drives the government's minority policy:

> The moment you say, 'They're not Turks, they're Greeks'. . .nobody's happy. When they're Turks, the other side says, 'No! No! They're Greeks!' When you say, 'They are Greeks,' they say, 'No, no, they're Turks!' If they are Turks, then they're not like you. If they are Greeks, they're like you. *Are you like a Turk?*. . .No! Like *them*? [They're] *boundalades* [dimwits]!'[13]

Dr. Dragonas's account of such tangled official thinking exemplifies Kristeva's analysis of the "uncanny," that is, the Freudian construct that identifies the "immanence of the strange within the familiar."[14] Just as the "archaic, narcissistic self. . .projects out of itself what it experiences as dangerous or unpleasant in itself," the encounter with the Other arouses in the Self the same repressed awareness of a former, somehow shameful, intimacy. The idea that the Other "can make us feel that we are not in touch with our own feelings. . .[W]e feel 'stupid,' we have been had"[15] parallels to a remarkable degree Dr. Dragonas's description of the cognitive trap into which the Greek Self steps when pressed to acknowledge Sameness. So much depends upon believing in minority inferiority, in constructing images of backward and mentally lazy people who stand, literally, worlds apart from the clever, sophisticated, accomplished—civilized, in other words—people of the Greek majority.

4. Turkish Self and the Problem of Assimilation

To their credit, successive Greek administrations have implemented since the 1990's a series of social and economic measures to improve the lot of the Turkish minority. Critics of the government will point out that Greece's entry into full European Union membership left it no alternative but to bend to international pressure and examine its human rights practises, but certain welcome changes have occurred nonetheless. Greek citizens of Turkish descent are now free to buy land and houses, get bank loans, and receive equal consideration for hiring in the civil sector, all of which are literally changing village and neighborhood landscapes at a remarkable pace. A university admissions program akin to American-style affirmative action has been introduced, allotting a percentage of the spots annually available to minority students. Such integration efforts are premised on the assumption that prosperity and human happiness belong to the mainstream. A related but less obvious objective is to loosen the minority's social and cultural ties to Turkey. Therein lies the problem: wary members of the minority, while welcoming the benefits of full participation in Greek society, nevertheless view reforms as *assimilation* attempts that threaten their identity.

Marginalisation, we discover, has not been in all cases tantamount to isolation and insult. The comforts of mother-tongue, traditional lifeways, and communal identity have been many, and the Turkish Self, faced with change, has worries of its own. Cemil Kabza, a journalist with the Turkish-language weekly, *Gündem*, expressed in conversation a desire to maintain a clear line between the Turkish Self and the Greek Other. As a prominent minority rights activist, he directs much of his energy to preserving the essentially segregationist system of minority education in Western Thrace. He resists Greece's efforts to "integrate" the Turkish minority, countering that, "underneath, there is assimilation. The government side says, 'Oh, we would just like to integrate you,' but I believe that being integrated as *they* want, I will assimilate."[16] His vision of assimilation is not clear, although his resistance to the shrinking of social distance between the communities speaks to a general fear of a minority Self being swallowed up by a dominant Other.

Distinguishing between acceptable integration and unacceptable assimilation is mostly guesswork, since minority experiences are varied and subjective, *felt* rather than judged against established criteria. Mr. Kabza asserts his willingness to be "integrated," but wants to be in control of the process: "Whenever I feel that by being integrated I will be assimilated, then I'll stop that."[17] The terms of his cooperation are "respect." And how would he know when he was respected?

> I wouldn't know that, I would feel it. . .When I don't see any kind of reaction from a majority person, when I say that my name is Cemil and I'm from the Turkish minority, and they say, 'Oh, nice to meet you, Brother, come and have a cup of coffee.' Then it will make me feel that I am respected. I'm not a threat. I'm not *different* perhaps.[18]

He resents the disparagement of his identity that is implicit in government policies that do not support or nurture his cultural difference, notably the continued sanction against identifying minority organizations or enterprises as "Turkish." At the same time, he dislikes being made to feel "different" in the company of majority persons. One may pronounce such thinking a muddle, but his double injunction to "Support my difference"/"Disregard my difference," like all double injunctions, begs for a hermeneutic of meaning that may, eventually, suggest a way out.

5. Similitude and the Possibilities of Transformation

To interpret the perspective of Cemil Kabza, being a member of the Turkish minority means having to watch someone who looks very much like you flinch anyway when he or she first hears your name. *That* is the injury—the felt-in-the-body sting of rejection based solely on a hasty determination of guilt by association. Mr. Kabza's unhappy dependence upon the reciprocal acts and judgements of his Other speaks again to the bond between Self and Other. It also serves as a basis for substituting the notion of alienated difference with "similitude," a habit of thought whose ethical intention points in the direction of, after Ricoeur, "'*the good life,' with and for others in just institutions.*"[19] Implicit in similitude is the recognition that the Other shares a nature with the Self, with common needs and a point of view that requires alterity in order to be received and understood. It is the end of self-esteem for, as Ricoeur asserts, it recognizes that "I cannot myself have self-esteem unless I esteem others *as* myself."[20]

Similitude implies as well the need, the obligation, and indeed the ethical *decision* to acknowledge the Other as another Self. Reform measures may encourage the social virtues of respect and acceptance, but surely they must begin at the level of the individual and trickle up. Neither the majority nor the minority leadership have shown themselves able to advocate effectively for co-operation between their communities; even human rights advocates who support minority causes confided to me that most minority leaders were as nationalistic as the majority, and that their limited aims were trapped in communitarian discourse. Without a transformative shift in

purpose and vision, Self and Other will continue to regard each other across fictive but formidable boundaries, with unknown consequences for the future.

Notes

[1]A Heraklides, *Greece and the 'Danger from the East'* (Η Ελλάδα και ο 'εξ ανατολών κίνδυνος'), 39.

[2]The Treaty of Lausanne, honoring the preference of both Greece and Turkey to define their respective minorities in religious rather than national terms, designated the Turkophone-Islamic inhabitants of Western Thrace a *Muslim* minority. For further discussion, see A Alexandris, "Religion or Ethnicity: Identity of the Minorities" and J Edwards, "What's in a name? Identity, politics, and the 'Turkish' Muslims of Western Thrace, Greece."

[3]P Ricoeur, "Capabilities and Rights," 1.

[4]Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 317.

[5]E Herda, *Research Conversations and Narrative: a Critical Hermeneutic Orientation in Participatory Inquiry*.

[6]M Stratigopoulos, research conversation, 16 June 2004.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid.

[9]F Arvanitaki, research conversation, 18 June 2004.

[10]Stratigopoulos.

[11]H Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 389.

[12]Ibid, 458.

[13] T Dragonas, research conversation, 25 June, 2004.

[14]J Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 183.

[15]Ibid, p. 187.

[16]C Kabza, research conversation, 4 July, 2004.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 172.

[20]Ibid, 193.

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