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National Identities in Contemporary Media. Introduction to the Special Issue

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Εθνικές Ταυτότητες στα Μέσα Επικοινωνίας στις Σύγχρονες Κοινωνίες. Εισαγωγή

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ABSTRACT

Collective identities (as it is the national identity) are an object of continuous process, negotiation and redefinition (in the field of private as well as in the field of public discourses –such as the media discourse). Two hundred years after the creation of the so called “romantic nations” (among which modern Greece) how the contemporary media define the world? Are “national” identities still important or solidarities among people follow different (such as religious, technological or simply “monetary”) inspirations of “belonging”? How the contemporary “identities” are shaped and how are they “reported” by the contemporary media and political discourse? The articles of this volume, based on research data and analyses contribute to answer the question: what is the national idea nowadays?

KEY WORDS: National Identities, Media, Modern Greece, community, national idea.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Οι συλλογικές ταυτότητες (όπως οι εθνικές) αποτελούν αντικείμενο συνεχών διαπραγματεύσεων και επαναπροσδιορισμών (τόσο στο πλαίσιο του ιδιωτικού όσο και στο πλαίσιο του δημόσιου λόγου όπως είναι ο λόγος των μέσων επικοινωνίας). Διακόσια χρόνια μετά την δημιουργία των λεγόμενων «ρομαντικών εθνών» (μεταξύ των οποίων και η Ελλάδα) πώς ορίζεται ο κόσμος από τον σημαντικότατο δίαυλο αναμετάδοσής του που είναι τα μέσα? Συνεχίζουν οι «εθνικές» ταυτότητες να είναι σημαντικές ή η αλληλεγγύη μεταξύ των ανθρώπων εδράζεται σε άλλου είδους εμπνεύσεις της έννοιας της ταυτότητας (θρησκευτικές, τεχνολογικές ή απλά οικονομικές) και της αίσθησης της κοινότητας. Πώς τείνουν να σχηματιστούν οι σύγχρονες ταυτότητες και πώς εκτίθενται στο μηντιακό και πολιτικό λόγο? Τα κείμενα αυτού του τόμου που στηρίζονται σε έρευνες ανάλυσης περιεχομένου των διαφόρων μέσων συνεισφέρουν στην απάντηση στην βασική ερώτηση: τι σημαίνει «εθνική ιδέα» σήμερα?

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ-ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ: Εθνικές ταυτότητες, ΜΜΕ, κοινωνότητες, σύγχρονη Ελλάδα, εθνική ιδέα.

1. Introduction

Collective identities (as it is the national identity) are an object of continuous process, negotiation and redefinition (in the field of private as well as in the field of public discourses –such as the media discourse).

Nowadays, Media play a very essential role giving meaning to current ideas and diffusing perceptive images of the ongoing social reality (through concrete symbolical forms). Thus, the sociological study of identities needs to observe the (mass and social) media narratives and the social representations (images and arguments) which are reproduced by them creating the “feeling of community”. This “feeling of community” is essential because it determines the constitution of social links (the nature of “social link” reveals the conditions of being together in a concrete society). Common symbols (such as the national ones) are converted to a part of everyday life for the audiences, bridging distances in time and space and bringing events in the sphere of personal and everyday perception.

In times of globalization and of social and economic uncertainty (due to the economic crisis, the refugee and migration problems, the construction of supranational entities or the deconstruction of the existing socialist systems etc.), the contemporary societies redefine borders and identities. Two hundred years after the creation of the so called “romantic nations” (among which modern Greece) how the contemporary media define the world? Are “national” identities still important or solidarities among people follow different (such as religious, technological or simply “monetary”) inspirations of “belonging”? How the contemporary “identities” are shaped and how are they “reported” by the contemporary media?

The articles in this volume (whose edition is motivated by the celebrations of 200 years since the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire, in 1821), intend to investigate media and current discourses describing the contemporary meaning of “important” identities; questioning if the national identification remains an important one and/or how it is connected with ongoing other important issues for the contemporary social actors?

School remains an essential institution for young peoples’ socialization (although it is not as strong nowadays as it was in the past). This is why it is important to observe the “highlights” of the Greek educational system still focusing on the essential national myth of the Great Idea (the continuity of Hellenism through ages since Greek Antiquity, including the Byzantine Orthodox Christianity, thus mixing two important but rather opposed to each other cultural expressions, in order to create a solid national feeling of belonging to an important “race”¹). The attempting to discuss the relation between the “classic” historical and religious background inspiring the contemporary teaching in the Greek mandatory educational institutions and the surrounding context (the contemporary international relations and the modern life needs, the economic crisis and its reasons as well as the immigration issue, forcing to accelerate the change of the old conceptions on the “Others” etc.), is undertaken by the first article of the volume which claims that the employment crisis² as well as the new forms of labor and the general economic environment dictate first of all the necessity to re-define educational policies and teaching contents.

Yet, the national discourse in Greece (as it was elaborated by school and church) is strongly rooted in common peoples’ consciousness, as it is shown in the following article. The author argues that “normally” official historical narratives are appropriated by national elites, (national days are officially recognized events that celebrate founding myths) and that if there is contest

about the authenticity of history represented or its meaning, as well as of the resulting national identity, it usually comes from grassroots movements or minority groups. Yet, the case of the Bicentennial of the Greek Revolution deviates from this norm as it is the state and its institutions that were about to propose a new narrative, starting with a new emblem, and 'the people' were vociferous in their reject of such a proposal, supporting a two-century old historiography not only about the Revolution and its protagonists, but also its place in the history of the nation. To this "reversal of roles", most members of the examined sample were fast to respond demanding from the state to return to its traditional role and narrative. This feature can also be understood as a return to popular roots against the "Europeanization" which has also brought the economic crisis—at least in peoples' conception of the facts- and may also show that "tradition" is felt as a security against a hostile environment brought by "modernity" weakly assimilated). Under these circumstances it is not strange if a majority of modern Greeks, wishes the stability of the national symbols at least.

A quite interesting and rather related example is given by the study of a neighboring country Ukraine, example which lights up other aspects of the meaning of "identities" in the current political discourses: the "average" Ukrainian runs along the important line of "old-new" also revealing the major contemporary question: the ways of adjustment of popular cultures and beliefs to a quickly changing environment.

The above major question is also hidden behind the results of the survey concerning citizens' idea of European Union (as indicated in the contribution on the European Parliament Elections) because the idea of "Cultural Diversity" against the idea of "Loss of National Identities" in the frame of European Union (as different conceptions of "belonging" and pointing out some kind of antagonism between old and new ways of thinking about "us"), becomes rather "capital" if we considerate the rates on these issues.

This is why, it seems interesting to also investigate the contribution of digital media in the negotiation of young people's identities. Social media platforms intensify not only communication, but also the management of the self; it seems that social media and new technologies have generated a re-imagination of youth identities through a digital lens: it is difficult to approach, yet, it deals with online discussion of ideas and positions not necessarily "new" although using "new media" for their dissemination.

An important issue nowadays concerns the use of words (the same term being understood in different ways) and because of this it become interesting to have in mind the conclusive thoughts about the meaning of the "nation" and "national identities" in contemporary political discourse (which is attempted in the last article of this volume).

Having in mind the above results, what can be the main research questions concerning the contemporary identifications (and especially the national identities)? Almost two centuries after the creation of modern national states and almost a century after the de-colonisation movements, how much the idea of "national belonging" can be important and inspire peoples' beliefs and actions in a "globalized world"? We attempt to examine this issue, focusing on the three following points:

a) National Identities

Whereas the appeal to culture and tradition is an old weapon of the nationalist, the notion of identity is relatively new. The issue of identity has recently gained cultural and political significance. It originated in social psychology (with Erik Erikson as the contemporary classic) but has become an essential issue in political and social debate nowadays as all sorts of movements appeal to identity,

and the issues of ethno-national identity in particular keep attracting the hearts and minds of millions of citizens, setting the framework of the debate, (even for the most ordinary matters).

The issue of identity has recently gained cultural and political significance. The demise of communism in the Eastern Europe, the German reunion in Central Europe, and the Maastricht Treaty in Western Europe are said to have awakened nationalistic sentiments and movements, and processes of cultural, economic, and political internationalization and globalization are assumed to have caused not only increasing insecurity about national identity at least in Europe (where appear problems of national identifications which generate an emphasis on regional and local cultures, as it can be somehow concluded by the texts in this volume). A central question could thus concern the fact that despite the “globalization” and the “cosmopolitism” which reign in the modern world according to many social researchers, the possibility to “return” towards the reliable solutions for living together given by the national discourse remains an appealing option for politics, movements and everyday life issues. The existing precarity (in domains such as economy or health) reinforces the desire to “return” to safety (to times thought to be more “comforting” than nowadays)

b) Myths and Popular Culture

Furthermore, contemporary revisions and reinterpretations of mythological elements reflect some important tendencies in current culture. Movies, television, computer games, comics, graphic novels, traditional literature, visual arts, performing arts, politics, blogs etc. hold both explicit and implicit renderings of archetypes such as Thor and Athena and Kali, and of mythological narratives such as those found in bodies of sacred literature, classical Greek tragedies, and medieval Grail legends, to name only a few examples. There is a mythological perspective of modern media in which the question of origins (even if not explicitly referring to national origins tries nevertheless to interpret the modern world according to old myths -very usually medieval, given that “Middle Ages” often appear as the origin of the Western World). This is a tendency for all popular art creations (especially in the field of cinema).

So to some level, there is a general “return” to beliefs and emblematic symbols (archetypes as would write Jung) which favour the search for origins and the “national identity” (together with the religious identification as Islamic Fundamentalism has proved) is one of the strongest discourses. Of course, together with the importance of the origins comes the question of the “otherness” (compared to Self). On this behalf we understand that despite the political precisions given in the conclusive article of this volume, the idea of belonging (as far as it concerns the artistic mass cultural discourse) takes elementary (archetypical) forms, mostly inspired by western middle ages.

c) Contemporary social “links” and imagined societies

Apart the above background, societies change and some features also become dominant. This is strongly relied to the new media ethics. New media contribute to the change of 1) the meaning of social link and 2) the “duration” and commitment towards any “other” (including the private or public sphere meaning close friends or political others).

Mass culture (as Edgar Morin had remarked long ago) praises the individual values (such as romantic love, personal happiness, self-fulfillment). Its rhythm is based on timeliness, the way of participating to it is playful and aesthetical, having as essential core the consumption. The Gods

of mass culture (the mythical heroes) are mortal like all of us. Of course, the consuming society cannot “offer” everything. It is not possible to offer security and risk, so it removes real adventure offering slippers (in order to be comfortable when watching adventure on the screens). Mass culture, provides virtually everything that cannot be consumed in reality and makes virtual a big part of consumers’ lives. Of course, the sociologist can observe as important “parallel effects”: the transfer of responsibility, the emotion on screen heroes (rather than neighboring actors) rendering solidarity mostly “virtual”, the visual cannibalism and the “mandated” existence and last but not least: the duration of the social link; nowadays, social links are rather ephemeral: this is immediately related to the fact that they thus become less “strong” than in past times.

In this frame, “national identities” do matter of course, but only as a part of the general (which is in fact much simulated) background. In this background, media, as it was indicated above play a leading role.

Because this volume was motivated by the bicentenary of the Greek War for Independence in 1821, it is interesting to see how Greek media “define” the features of “Greek-ness” (being more or less the current discourse including the generally admitted “components” of the Greek national identity, thus framing the Greek national discourse).

2. How Greek media “define” the Greek National Features nowadays³

The emissions with big audience which have been examined, provide several “features” generally admitted as characteristics of the Greek Identity (so it is generally believed that there is a “national character” which remains primordial and which is thought able to describe the idea of being “Greek”; this idea, is deeply rooted in the popular beliefs and remains present together with the changes and influences due to the globalized issues). Resuming, these (“incontestable”) components of the Greek beingness are the following:

- Extreme Intelligence (of the kind attributed mythologically to Odysseus), which helps the Greek to affront any challenge, especially when abroad (when the Greek has to deal with other nationalities which are not supposed to equal this feature); the examples which are given by the journalistic discourse in order to sustain this “verdict” are sometimes rather funny (as for instance one’s patent to cook on the mountain in order to feed mountaineers with freshly cooked food, or a compatriot who has opened a popular canteen or a tavern in some western country etc. All this is very plausible of course, yet it does not prove any kind of “national supremacy” as it is promoted by the journalistic discourse).
- Sense of Honour (φιλότιμο) and hospitality: This is the everyday discourse given by the media (whose veracity is not at all questioned on this point, even if it is not always verified); in fact, the Agenda often describes realities which go very much against the existence of this kind of characteristics -as for instance the existence of fonctionnaires’ bribery or position abuse or hostile behaviour towards immigrants and refugees); yet the sense of honour and the hospitality are considered as part of the Greek national pride. On this point, as Marx & Engels had discussed years ago (about German Ideology), the most “humiliated” a nation feels the richest national ideology it produces (for instance, this is why the kind of publications which are relevant on “Turkish” threat are very numerous in the Greek media).

Yet, to the above idealization contrasts the so called “remnants of the Ottoman Empire”: tips in order to give solution to a pending request instead of rights’ claiming, use of friends to obtain a public job, sentiment of alienation towards the state, lack of civil attitude in many aspects of everyday life etc.

- Because of the new redistribution of national states in Europe and the role played by European Union, part of which is Greece, and the economic problems of the Memoranda and of German economic hegemony (in Europe) many Greeks folded back to themselves and to what the resources of popular culture could give. When the discussion has to deal with National Identity, all these elements count, this is why the question of “national identity” nowadays is very complicated, yet quite dominant in the global system.

We believe that the pages which follow based on research data and analyses contribute to answer the question: what is the national idea nowadays?

Notes

1. We should remind that when national states were created, the idea of “race belonging” was dominant (C. Constantopoulou, “Reporting meanings and aspects of contemporary exclusions”, an introduction to the C. Constantopoulou, L. Maratou-Alipranti, D. Germanos & Th. Oikonomou (ed.) *We and the Others, Reporting Tendencies and Symbols*, in Greek, Gutenberg, Athens 1999 & 2000.
2. Eurostat (7/10/2013) survey about the European areas with decreased GDP. Four of these areas are in Greece.
3. The features described above, have resulted from a content analysis of Greek televisual magazines of the week ends presenting elevated rates of audience such as: «Σαββατοκύριακο με τον Μάνεση» (Weekend with Manesis -Alpha) «Τώρα ό,τι συμβαίνει» (It happens now -Open), «Πρωϊνοί Τύποι» (Matinal Guys -ANT1), Καλημέρα με τον Γιώργο Αυτιά» (Good morning with Giorgos Autias -Skai)

Biographical Note

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(in Greek, Papazisi, Athens 2020), *Crisis' Representations, Frontiers and Identities in the Contemporary Media Narratives* (Ed. *Studies in Critical Social Sciences*, Brill, Leiden, Boston 2020), *Représentations Sociales et Discours Médiatiques, La crise comme narration contemporaine* (Ed. in French, L'Harmattan, Collection Logiques Sociales, Paris 2020). E-Mails : konstant@uom.gr & christiana.constantopoulou@panteion.gr