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Greece 2021: Official and lay understandings of national identity

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Ελλάδα 2021: Θεσμικές και λαϊκές αντιλήψεις για την εθνική ταυτότητα

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ABSTRACT

Jubilees and national days are privileged opportunities for (re)negotiating national identity and its markers. They offer both to the states and groups of citizens or minorities within states, the opportunity to assure or challenge accepted forms of identity. The Bicentennial of the Greek Revolution, which is the founding moment of modern Greek state, was no exception to this. In this paper we present a synopsis of the public discourses about the meaning of the Bicentennial and the role of the Committee 2021 which was assigned to oversee the preparations and select projects to include in the year-round celebration. We then contrast those discourses to the ones found in the Facebook posts reacting to the proposal of the emblem of the Bicentennial. We find that contrary to conventional wisdom, it is the state and its institutions that opted for a new identity narrative, while the ordinary citizens who decided to express their opinion were resisting such a novelty.

KEY WORDS: National identity, Official and lay understandings, Greece 2021, Greek Revolution.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Οι εθνικές επετείοι και ιδίως τα ιωβηλαία αποτελούν προνομιακές ευκαιρίες για την (επανα) διαπραγμάτευση της εθνικής ταυτότητας και των σημάτων της. Προσφέρουν την ευκαιρία, τόσο στο κράτος όσο και στους πολίτες ή τις μειονότητες, να επιβεβαιώσουν ή να αμφισβητήσουν τις παραδοσιακές μορφές ταυτότητας. Ο εορτασμός των 200 χρόνων από την Ελληνική Επανάσταση, με την οποία συγκροτήθηκε το σύγχρονο ελληνικό κράτος, δεν αποτελεί εξαίρεση. Στο κείμενο που ακολουθεί παρουσιάζουμε μια σύνοψη των δημόσιων λόγων σχετικά με τα 200 χρόνια και το ρόλο της Επιτροπής 2021, στην οποία ανατέθηκε η επίβλεψη της προετοιμασίας και της επιλογής προτάσεων για τον ετήσιο εορτασμό. Στη συνέχεια συγκρίνουμε τους λόγους αυτούς με τις αντιδράσεις των χρηστών του Facebook στην πρόταση του εμβλήματος της επιτροπής και του εορτασμού. Διαπιστώνουμε πως αντίθετα με τα συνηθισμένα, το κράτος και οι θεσμοί του εξήγγειλαν τη δημιουργία μιας νέας ταυτοτικής αφήγησης, ενώ οι πολίτες που αποφάσισαν να σχολιάσουν δημόσια αντιπαρέθεσαν σε αυτήν.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ: Ελληνική επανάσταση, Ελλάδα 2021, εθνική ταυτότητα, Θεσμικές και λαϊκές αντιλήψεις.

1. Introduction

Modern nation states based their legitimacy upon identities constructed with materials of the past. Thus, they could evoke a perennial history, root themselves in a distant past and claim the deeds of heroes and sages as their own. As several authors have shown (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1984), in this endeavor nation states used rituals or customs, instilling into them the overarching presence of the state. Sometimes this was not enough, hence newly developed ceremonies and invented symbols were presented as re-enacted ancient heritage. The importance of time transformed into 'memory' has proved crucial in forging national identities. Therefore 'memory' should impose itself upon present time, producing a cyclical repetition of remembrance in a semi-religious way. It is this need that inspired the establishment of national days and the relevant rituals as ways of performing the nation (Woods and Tsang 2014, Elgenius 2018) and national identity (cf. Gillis 1994), as well as "seeing a state" (Roy 2006). Commemoration rituals "rediscover and employ older traditions to evoke and celebrate the heroic and sacred qualities of their nation" (Smith 2001, 573) and incorporate elements established centuries earlier by the monarchies and the empires, e.g. parades, decoration with flags and emblems, and participation to special religious ceremonies to support the connection between nation and its God. The yearly repetition of such rituals makes them ideal for the analysis of discourses and ideologies related to nation-building, nation-sustenance and national identity. According to Elgenius (2018, 131), national days "provide by their design a framework for the imagination and expression of nationality in terms of commonality and oneness."

In this paper we first present a brief sketch of existing literature on national days and jubilees. We notice that scholars and researchers are more and more interested in bottom-up approaches to national identity, an interest evident in recent publications focusing on national days. Such approaches complement the analysis of official discourses with an analysis of their reception and the responses from 'ordinary citizens.' We then proceed to our case study, which examines the public discourses around the bicentennial of the Greek Revolution of 1821, and the responses of ordinary citizens, as expressed when the emblem of the Committee 2021 was announced on social media. We present our methodology for collecting data from posts published in Facebook, examine our findings, and discuss them in the light of national identity. It should be noted that a few days after the events reported and the data collected for this paper, the outburst of COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns that followed ruined much of the expectations about the bicentennial and removed the focus from the celebrations for most of the national audiences.

2. Commemoration and National Identities

National days are important symbolic signifiers of national identities (McCrone and McPherson 2009b, 6). They put into perspective the time and timelessness of a nation, incorporating the past into the present and projecting them both into future. The relation between the nation and its past has been established in the writing and teaching of national history together with other nation-centric disciplines included in the curricula (e.g. literature and geography). This relation becomes dynamic through the recognition of some nodal elements as constitutive of the nation, and their inscription upon place and time as mnemonic loci. Historical time becomes

inscribed upon space through the connection with places where important battles have been fought, sanctified in the blood of the fallen martyrs of nationhood (Azaryahu & Kellerman Barrett 1999). It is also inscribed upon space through the constant reminder of the heroes and the sages, the “fathers [and mothers] of the nation” (Hedetoft 1995, Smith 1991), with statues, gardens of heroes (Leoussi 2004), Pantheons (Lyons 2003, Tollebeek & Verschaffel 2004) or “cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers” (Anderson 2006, 9). Such inscriptions upon space are active in day-by-day workings of nation, as a backdrop to banal nationalism (Billig 1995), as vague reminders of national membership. They are officially activated, though, within the sanctified cyclical time of the nation during national days (Gillis 1994, Edensor 2002, Tsang & Woods 2013, Elgenius 2018). This is strikingly clear in the case of jubilees (e.g. Lentz 2013, Sakki & Hakoköngäs, Stevenson & Abell 2011), which provide the opportunity for adding ceremonial, ritual, and symbolic content, as well as for heightened inspiration of the state, as it claims to be baptized once again into the fountain of nation’s will. National days provide an opportunity for re-negotiating the content and explanations of events past, preparing and organizing the events still to come, legitimizing certain aspirations over others.

Smith (2013, 21) contends that though celebrations, commemorative national rituals and performances don’t “constitute either a necessary or a sufficient condition of the persistence of nations and nationalisms, their ubiquity and regularity gives them a special role and significance in the forging and the reproduction of nations.”

Participation to celebrations is not confined to those physically present to events like parades, staging of historical pageants etc. During the post-war era, at least, participation is heavily mediated, allowing each member of the nation to glimpse national glory and grandeur. In fact, such events are organized to be broadcast, which makes them ‘media events’: pre-planned “live broadcasts of great events that transform individuated and stratified masses into the *communitas* of whole societies, riveting them not just to programs in general but to the very same broadcast; transporting them not just elsewhere but to ‘the center’” (Katz and Dayan, 1985: 305).

It is in this vein that M. Skey proposed the idea of ‘ecstatic event’ described as “events designed to celebrate or explicate a particular national community on a mass public scale with reference to symbols and assumptions that inform an understanding of everyday life in a world of nations” (Skey 2006, 151). He proposes that such events allow the researcher “to investigate empirically how different discourses of (national) identity are articulated, disseminated and resisted during heightened (and therefore largely identifiable) moments or periods of time” (Skey 2006, 154-155). Such an empirical investigation “might include tracing their resonance among particular sections of the populations (...) and the degree to which any forms of resistance are managed by institutional authorities” (Skey 2006, 155).

Scholars and researchers in the field of national identity are becoming more interested in understanding national identity bottom up, in place of the top-down approaches that were the norm so far. Researchers turn to ordinary citizens and call for replacing the focus from the elite production of commemorative events to the citizens who are its recipients (Fox 2013). And Randal Collins adds that “it is a danger of symbolic analysis to presume that the analyst can identify the meaning of a symbol without examining what participants actually are thinking and feeling at the moment” (Collins 2013, 54).

3. The Jubilees of the Greek Revolution

The annual celebration of the Independence War, formally described as Greek Revolution, was established with a Royal Decree in 1838, determining that the celebration should take place on March 25th, combining the beginning of the Revolution in Peloponnese with Annunciation (Elgenius 2018, 100-101, Geisler 2009, 18), binding thus together the nation and Divine Providence. In fact, the Revolution started some days earlier in Peloponnese and a whole month earlier in Wallachia, but certainly national holidays condense chronological into symbolic time. While National Days in many countries have proved controversial, contested, and susceptible to change (McCrone and McPherson 2009b, Elgenius 2018), that was not the case with Greece.

The golden jubilee of the Revolution, in 1871, took place amidst grave conditions: an unsuccessful rebellion of Crete against the Ottoman Empire, the murder of English and Italian diplomats kept hostages by bandits, and a long-term civil unrest. The celebration was organized around the recovery of the bones of Patriarch Gregory V from Odessa, and their ceremonial transfer and burial in the Athens' Cathedral. Gregory opposed the Revolution and excommunicated the Revolutionaries, but eventually was hung and his dead body was desecrated. With the ritual burial at the Cathedral, he was incorporated into the symbolic pantheon of the Revolution, allowing for the definitive marriage between the State and the Church (Exertzoglou 2001).

The Centennial celebration of the Revolution was postponed until 1930, because of the Greek-Turkish War in Asia Minor, culminating to a disaster for Greece. Nine years later, the socio-economic results of the disaster were still evident, followed by political instability. The stake was that the celebration would signal the effort for development as well as for peaceful co-existence with the neighboring countries (Koulouri 2021).

The Sesquicentennial celebration took place in 1971, amidst the rule of a military dictatorship. The regime attempted to provide a religious aura to its rule through the organization of several local celebrations all over the country throughout the year, with an emphasis to religious ceremonies followed by parades and performances based on events that took place during the revolution. It was another attempt to promote the central mottos of the regime, 'Homeland, Religion, Family.' Such a ceremonial structure was standardized throughout the period, with kitsch spectacles glorifying the regime.

Thus, the Bicentennial jubilee was expected to distance itself from sinister events. As early as 2012, the then Prime Minister Antonis Samaras, promised that his newly elected government would lead the country out of the sovereign debt crisis, to economic and social development, to proudly celebrate the Bicentennial. Officially the crisis ended in 2018 and the next year the newly elected conservative government designated a prestigious committee to oversee the preparations and organize the celebration. Gianna Angelopoulou-Daskalaki was appointed as Chair of the Committee "Greece 2021," having a reputation as the Chair of the Athens 2004 Olympics. She was soon to speak about deconstructing national myths and restoring national truth, since "national is all that is true" (according to the national poet Dionysios Solomos).

4. Research design and Methodology

Social media provide a space for studying ordinary citizens' perceptions as well as their response to the elites' public commemorative discourse. They answer to the questions that a researcher might have asked. They even offer the opportunity to realize questions regarding national identity asked by the citizens themselves, guiding the researcher towards unanticipated issues.

Our research is based on data collected from Facebook. They are related to four posts in the "Greece2021" Committee's page, posted on February 7 and 8, 2020 (see Figure 1) and the reactions to them. Two posts presented the change of cover and profile images of the page to include the emblem (logo) of the celebration. The third post was a video with Mrs. Angelopoulou presenting the emblem, along with a declaration of its/her aims regarding the whole concept of its role to the bicentennial celebration. The fourth post included the emblem, along with a call for proposals open to the public.

The reactions were divided between those who 'liked' or even 'loved' them, and those who expressed their contempt by selecting the emojis for 'angry,' 'sad,' or laughing (see Table 1). Negative ('angry' or 'sad') and ironic ('haha' or 'wow') reactions were by 10% more than positive ones. The posts were also widely debated, as they were commented 687 times and shared 239 times. Comments were also shared and met with diverging reactions.

We were able to collect 627 comments, which will be further analyzed in the rest of this paper.¹ The analysis will be preceded by a brief mention to the speeches by the Prime Minister, the Chairman of the Parliament, and the Chair of the Committee, given at the inaugural meetings of the Committee.

Figure 1. The four posts of the committee Greece 2021 in Facebook.

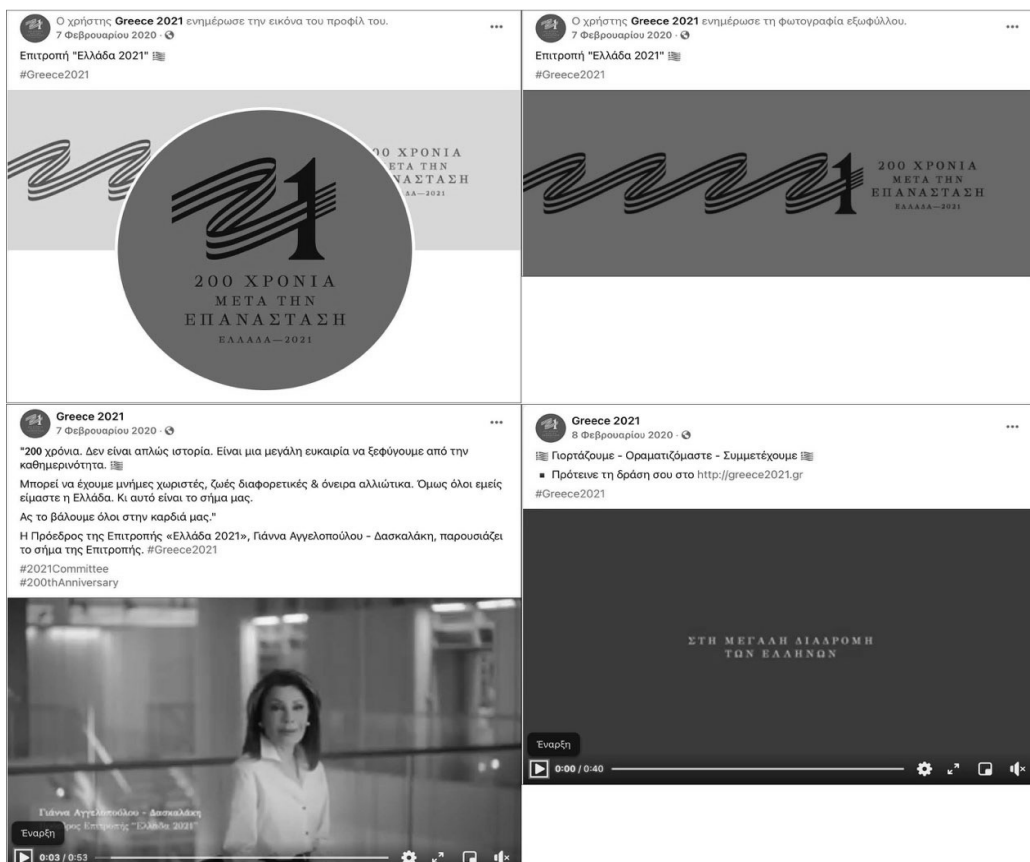


Table 1. Reactions to the four posts of the committee Greece 2021 in Facebook

Reactions	Post A	Post B	Post C	Post D	Total reactions
Like	148	135	319	252	854
Love	21	19	63	42	145
Haha	6	7	49	14	76
Wow	12	10	6	12	40
Sad	2	1	5	2	10
Angry	235	227	302	333	1.097
Comments	106	100	268	213	687
Shares	16	17	137	69	239

5. Elite discourses about the Bicentennial and its Emblem

The inaugural meeting of the Committee Greece 2021 was held in the house of Parliament on November 7, 2019. The President of the Republic, the Prime Minister, the Archbishop, and representatives of the political parties were in the audience. Addressing the meeting, Prime Minister Mitsotakis said that

...it is worthy to approach the bicentennial of the Revolution from several points of view. In the strong light of historical experience. In the wise light of its teachings. But also, with a positive projection to the future as a compass. It is an opportunity for a bold account as well as for a lively reflection. Reflection and rendering a new meaning to our values, leading – ultimately – to national self-understanding. It is, after all, a re-acquaintance with our collective self, which will offer an opportunity to Greece for internal reorganization, and for re-establishing itself, with its modern identity, in Europe and the whole world. (Mitsotakis 2019)

Thus, the Government expected a prismatic or multifaced approach to the historical past, with a view to the future. It would be in this light that the content of 'national' values (whatever this meant) should be renewed. The focus is placed upon a stochastic forgetfulness leading to a new self-understanding, to a new national identity. Thus, the identity forged in the last two centuries is deemed insufficient to be modern enough and compatible to 'Europe' and the rest of the world. This is in par with a naive understanding of the narrative construction of identities, as if a new narrative would be replacing the old ones without any friction.

The Chairperson of Hellenic Parliament proposed that:

Nowadays, in view of 2021, the Committee with its Chairperson along with us all will craft the new Parthenon Frieze. Let us prove equal to the most advanced societies thus honoring our ancestors' memory. We will craft the new Frieze and honoring the Rebirth [of Greece] we will prove that our Frieze is preparing the country for the enormous joy of life, creation, and advancement in response to their battles. (Tassoulas 2019)

Mr Tassoulas' proposal is in line with a series of previous proposals, like the so-called 'Nation's Vow' to build a Church to the Savior, adopted by the National Assembly of 1829 (Antoniou 2016, Markatou 1995). Similar proposals were made during the two centuries that followed the Revolution. For example, a year before the golden jubilee, a contest was announced for the erection of a Monument and a Pantheon consisting of statues of the heroes in front of the University of Athens, both symbols of the unity of the nation. But Mr Tassoulas' proposal sounds inconsistent with that of the Prime Minister: it is bound to a certain familiar mentality strongly related to the past, while it remains vague enough to accommodate whatever novelty is deemed necessary.

The Chairperson of the Committee, in her speech was closer to the rhetoric of the Prime Minister, and in the following weeks and months she as well other members of the Committee, signaled not only an attempt to deconstruct national myths (which, after all, has been underway for decades), but also to challenge established signs of the nation. As expected, such an idea was not well accepted by the public. Deconstruction sounds suspect when initiated by the bearers of the hegemonic discourse. Therefore, the novel truth, which sometimes looks like an invented tradition as well, was met with criticism and overt hostility in social media, not only by the far-right audiences.

One of the first episodes in this controversy was the presentation of the Committee's emblem. The presentation was made by Mrs Angelopoulou, in a video uploaded to social media platforms, repeating the abovementioned aims and ideas. The post's text in Facebook read:

*"200 years. It is not just history. It is a great opportunity to escape from everyday routine. We may have different memories, lives & dreams. But we are all Greeks. And this is our emblem. Let us all place it in our hearts." The President of the Committee 'Greece 2021,' Gianna Angelopoulou-Daskalaki, presents the emblem of the Committee. #Greece2021 #2021Committee #200thAnniversary.*²

The original emblem was available in several palettes, but the one promoted in social media was brown and involved a ribbon with five stripes, instead of nine used in the Greek flag. Thus, it ignited a heated discussion about emblems and the content of national identity, salted by references to current political issues.

6. Citizen's responses on Facebook

6.1. *Of emblems and flags: The visual markers of identity*

During the aforementioned presentation, the emblem is shown as a waving ribbon with 3 blue and 2 white stripes, which culminates as a free-form number '2' cutting through a number '1' (thus visualizing the shorthand – '21 – for the year of the Revolution), and then it is shown with five blue and four white stripes – similar to those of the Greek flag (see Figure 2). A second video, uploaded the same day, presented only the emblem in several shades of orange, beige, light brown and, eventually, blue. The brown version was selected to become the profile image of the Committee's page in Facebook (see Figure 1). While "during national commemorations important national symbols are often used extensively" (De Regt 2018, 1713) the idea of a new symbol or an emblem diverging from conventionally accepted elements of visual national identity was unusual.

Several comments were focusing on the ribbon, the colors, and the Greek flag. Most were criticizing, or even decrying the choices made as incompatible to accepted symbols of the nation and in several ways (both real and invented) related to the Greek Revolution. The most referred to symbol was the flag, and the users focused on its colors, the number of stripes and the cross included in it, as three elements missing from the ribbon.

Elgenius (2018, 52) noted the relationship of the Greek flag to the revolutionary tradition: "the Greek flag is interesting as it has combined the cross with 'revolutionary' stripes representing the motto 'Liberty or Death'. Hereby, the flag acknowledges the role of Christianity in the formation of the Hellenic Nation raising boundaries during the war of independence (1821) against the Ottoman Empire".

Figure 2. The final frame of the video with the Committee 'Greece 2021' logo.



Users supported the necessity to use the national flag throughout, including all its elements: the cross (since the Revolutionaries mentioned that they were fighting “for Christ’s holy faith and the freedom of homeland”), the nine stripes corresponding to the syllables of the motto “Freedom or Death”, as well as the blue and white colors. Even the presence of blue-white stripes without the cross are considered as unrelated to the flag and Greek history in general: “In each and every version [of the Greek flag] there was a cross (even sometimes there was just a cross). This [emblem] could be well fit to Uruguay as it is with blue and white stripes. People have died to keep the cross on the flag, it cannot be erased as an unimportant detail.”

They were also quick to indicate the resemblance between the emblem and the ribbon of Saint George, a decoration of the Russian Empire that survived into the Soviet era until the present-day Russian Federation (Zeglen 2020).

The designers offered the following explanation:

A color code was chosen illustrating the numerous ideas and colors of the Revolution and emphasizing the diversity of Greek landscape and culture as well as the receptivity and utilization of divergent ideas and experiences. (Beetroot design group 2020)

Though the color was often mentioned, it is the absence of the Cross that infuriated most of the commenting users. Indeed, the responses range from a moderate protest to overt accusation about “plotting to de-Christianize Greek society by imposing a secular multicultural state, eventually leading to Islamization through the acceptance of an ever-increasing number of immigrants and refugees.” Thus, behind such stances lie either a moderate conservative Christian-Orthodox identity, or a xenophobic identity leaning towards alt- or far-right theories about the nation.

Only a handful of users commented in favor of the Committee: They reminded that the flag used today was adopted a long time after the Revolution. Thus, they insisted on the invented tradition surrounding the flag, as one more of the 'myths' that should be overthrown during the year-long period to the celebration, when the "national self-understanding" and the "re-acquaintance with our collective self" was to take place.

One should note though, that most of those opposing the emblem are attached to an idealized and abstract concept of a flag with certain elements on it. Michel Pastoureau (2001) has supported the idea that for the most part of the history of modern states, even the colors of the flags were abstract categories.

One user proposed a different perspective, indicating that the emblem is unimportant, since even a better emblem would not be able "to save the country from its situation and its breakup," adding that "the point is whether we can be freed from breakup, misery and decadence."

6.2. 'Us' and 'You': An internal divide

Such a controversy between the Committee Greece 2021, proposing an emblem for the Bicentennial, and most of the audience who took the pains to post a comment denying this same emblem, offered the ground for unveiling an internal divide within Greek national identity. The controversy offered the opportunity to the users to distinguish between a collective 'Us' or 'We' and a less populated though powerful 'You' or 'Them.'

Most of the comments imply a divide not only in aesthetic terms, but also one about the ideals concerning the nation and its aims. They use several descriptions for the Committee and the socio-political group it represents or their ideas:

- They attribute them a Europe-centered mentality, as being foreign modernists eager to erase Greekness through changes in the markers of identity (as shown in the case of the flag) as well as faking history.
- They relate them to politicians, heirs of the local authorities of the pre-revolutionary era, who opposed the Revolution and are held responsible for the civil wars waging during the Revolution.
- They consider the academic members of the Committee as propagandists of leftist and communist ideals, though among them were several liberal historians. This confusion between liberalism and the Left is pronounced in several cases. Those ideals are understood as a "post-modernist marketing based on human rights chatter," orchestrated by politicians as well as the civil society, extremist, and antifascist movements.
- They call the Committee one of "famous celebrities," organizing "a feast fit for a political, intellectual and economic elite, praying on Greece." Only one user, though, related this elite with bourgeoisie, while others conflated it with the 'ruling class.'

On the other hand, they understand themselves as "the people," loyal to national symbols and the familiar historical narrative. They demand to have a say about the whole concept and the proposals of the Committee, since "in national issues and symbols no modernization is acceptable." They claim that "memory, interpretation and search for perspective" belong to the people.

Two posts estimate the magnitude of the two groups in opposite ways. The first notes: "you are not alone in being anti-Greek... you are the 80%... and therefore we are the last of the last... [...] Because of you Turkey is nowadays a super-power while Greeks are searching for food

in the garbage. You are the abettors of the abjection of the country." The latter takes a different position: "we are the majority, and we demand that this nonsense – imposed by some appointed [i.e., not elected, hence illegitimate] non-Greek internationalists without even asking our opinion – must change."

Either a significant minority or the majority, those considering themselves as part of "we, the people" claim a special position as guardians of the nation, its history, its traditions, its authentic essence. And they also find a homology between the times of Revolution and the present time: while they keep alive the line of revolutionary Greekness, of resistance, they consider their opponents as keeping alive the contra-revolutionary tradition of subservient local rulers, responsible for the near failure of the Revolution.

6.3. "What stands homeland for, for you? Is it just an identity card mentioning you are 'Greek'?"

When identity is at stake, it does not become salient in its totality, nor all its markers are being negotiated (Stratoudaki 2021). People tend to negotiate only those markers that are challenged. In the case of the emblem, such challenged markers were the flag and the symbols contained in it. Only a few users went far enough to question the meaning of homeland: "What stands homeland for, for you? Is it just an identity card writing that you are 'Greek'?" Thus, he suggested that identity is something one becomes rather than something one has, and therefore that "an authentic Greek must confirm his title day after day" (Savidis in Stratoudaki 2010, 219).

Another comment is lengthier, providing a complete account of what is considered to compose 'homeland':

Do you know what homeland is? homeland is the blood of the soldier, the tears of his mother for our freedom. homeland is the painful feeling for all that this nation has been through. homeland is from Evros to Corfu, to Kastelorizo and Cyprus. homeland is the sea, the air, the blood-watered land, the Holy Mountain... homeland is the children playing, the poor, the grandparents, the neighbors. homeland is a grandmother in a small island, a cafe, a school... homeland is our glorious flag, our Orthodox faith, and everything that will enter our heart.

In this account, homeland is a territory, a culture, and the people one meets in everyday life, along with its symbols. But most than everything else, homeland is thought of as a feeling not shared with the elite. The Chairperson of the Committee proposed the exact opposite: "a great opportunity to escape from everyday routine", thus suggesting that routine identity is an inferior one. The emblem condensed a rejection of the way people feel their national identity.

A few more comments were asking for the meaning of the celebration or the emblem. "An emblem must signify something, refer to something, clearly and without ambiguity. It must be understandable from people of all ages, educate the youth and remind them of the spiritual roots of our nation."

On the other edge, a user goes against the grain: "The prevailing hysteria because the video does not over-display symbols labeled as 'national' is just a superficial understanding of what a country, its people and its heritage mean. We will NOT allow the celebration to end as a celebration of obsession with ancestry, chauvinism and nostalgia." And a second user adds: "Escape from everyday routine is not calling for vacations. If we all were understanding it so superficially, then we would not honor our country's historical past."

Jon Fox (45) would insist that a legion do indeed escape from everyday routine during national days enjoying a free day. He suggests that we should *shift attention away from the enthusiastic flag-wavers and on to the enthusiastic flag-burners, to the passers-by and vendors, not to mention the garden-partiers or those working at Tesco on national days, and of course to those masses of the nation who opt to exercise their national allegiances via the remote control in front of the television.*

7. Discussion

The exchanges over Facebook express some of the aspects of the multifaceted issue of national identity. They make clear that national identity is not unique nor malleable, as the top-down approaches to it suggest. On the contrary, “no matter how carefully designed or skillfully executed, the people who ultimately determine the success of these events are not their elite producers, but rather their ordinary consumers” (Fox 40).

“As part of official historical narratives appropriated by national elites, national days are usually officially recognized events that celebrate founding myths” (Elgenius 2018, 94), and do not attempt to deconstruct them. De Regt (2018, 1713) explains that it is conventionally accepted that such “a ritual inculcates the most important norms and values of a given society.” 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 (cf. Sakki and Hakoköngäs 2020, and the various chapters of McCrone and McPherson 2009b). The case of the Bicentennial of the Greek Revolution deviates from this norm in that it is the state and its institutions that were about to propose a new narrative starting with a new symbolic 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 users were fast to respond demanding from the state to return to its traditional role and narrative. Though a national day may “involve a process by which the social bond ‘is not only reflected upon but actually constituted and reconstituted’” (Couldry in Sky 2006, 147), jubilees are the worst time to replace invented traditions with new ones. In any case, as McCrone and McPherson (2009a, 214) have shown, “struggles over national dates and events are not some petty squabble, but deadly serious issues over whose narrative it is anyway.”

Notes

1. We didn’t collect comments to other comments. While the posts and comments collected are public, we will not disclose any information regarding the users posting them, nor their profile images or any other data available online to their profiles.
2. The video is available on the channel of the Committee in Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ATUYvLHFuk>

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