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Title: Mobilising geographies: notions of Greek-Cypriot diaspora in London

Introduction

My analysis is an attempt to understand the notion of diaspora (from the Greek verb *speiro* [to sow] and the preposition *dia* [over]) and particularly the formation of Greek-Cypriot diasporic identity in London. I am particularly interested in issues of displaced belonging, the mobility of 'being' and the negotiation of loyalties in the process of creating viable lifehoods in diasporic conditions; the powerful local-global nexus that shapes and re-shapes fluid identifications is also a matter of discussion. The paper's overall argument is that diasporic identities are by no means static and fixed but subject to change and in constant dialogue with the social, political and economic conditions of the 'host' society. It is true that a re-conceptualisation of 'space' is necessary in formulating an understanding of 'belonging' – with spatial non-spatial dimensions to it- and of course such a theoretical endeavour leads to the de-construction of issues of 'citizenship'. Diasporic populations adhere to an 'imaginary belonging' one that is partly confined to 'another place' and 'another time'. As such the politics of the past in creating and altering the present are also subject to analysis.

The ethnographic data consist of informal and formal discussions with a Greek-Cypriot man, Mr. Giorgos, owner of a *Taverna* in central London. Mr Giorgos left Cyprus during the 70s. My frequent visits to this *Taverna* during the years 1996-7 provided me with many useful observations and illuminating discussions with the owner, stuff and clients. It must be noted that my remarks are by no means conclusive yet they do throw some 'ethnographic' light to the conceptualisation of diaspora.

In what follows I first explore the theories concerning the formation of diasporas and also assess their applicability. Then I provide some observations from the *Taverna* setting and move to specific issues that my interviews illuminated like for example issues of exclusion and economic adaptation, the importance of family bonds and the institution of the Church in maintaining collective identifications in the 'exile', issues of language, and friendships. Finally I try – in the light of my ethnographic data – to provide alternative insights to the notion of diaspora and emphasise the processes of negotiation and contestation involved in its formation.

Some theoretical remarks

According to Cohen (1997) the idea of diaspora may vary to a significant extent however, diasporic communities which are settled outside their country of origins claim on their loyalty and emotions and adhere to their natal or imagined natal land. The concept of imagination is indeed important in conceiving the bonds between the members of a diasporic community but also their affinity with their country of origins and the citizens of that country. This loyalty is often embedded in language, religion and traditions. In a sense - as Anderson (1991) had remarked for national communities - diasporas are ‘imagined communities’ *par excellence* with a strong sense of imaginary kinship. Thus members of a diaspora have a strong sense of belonging together, being members of a brotherhood, participating in a fraternity.

Cohen (1997) argued of ‘nation- peoples’ meaning groups evincing a ‘peoplehood’ a sense of ‘togetherness’. Such peoples are imperfectly held within the borders of nation-states and they are often treated with hostility and discrimination by the indigenous population since they are believed – factually and symbolically – to be ‘imperfect’ citizens, who ‘lack’ certain qualities in order to be included in the host society. Their common loyalty is often embedded in language, religion and traditions. Diasporas have been shaped by the processes of migration and colonisation but some signify a collective trauma, victimisation and persecution. According to the – Cohenian scheme - Jews, Africans, Palestinians and Armenians are cases of victim diasporic populations whereas the Indians are an example of labour and imperial diaspora. Yet Cohen recognises that the typology he proposed is ambiguous and rather fluid since some groups take dual or multiple forms and others change their character over time.

This is the case of the Greek-Cypriots in London. Actually there are two groups: those who settled before 1974 and the consequent dichotomization of the island of Cyprus and the occupation of the northern half by Turkey and those who settled before the 1974 tragic events and therefore lost their property, family and friends. It is obvious that in the first case we are dealing with a labour / imperial diaspora and in the second with a victim diaspora, who has suffered victimisation and persecution. Yet even this typology is inadequate in explaining the multiplicity of diasporic movements. Greek-Cypriots, like the owner of the *Taverna* I interviewed, who came before 1974 belong to a labour diaspora but have suffered and internalised loss and deprivation. Mr Giorgos – as will come up in the discussions we had – internalised the loss of his home, family, friends and the nostalgia of his ‘lost’ country. Though he was not victimised and

persecuted because of the events of 1974 he was nevertheless 'victimised' and suffered the trauma of poverty, deprivation, exile and unwanted migration. Typologies are for the most helpful theoretical tools but inadequate in explaining the shifting conditions of life.

In a recent book titled *Greek Diaspora in the 20th century* (1999) it is argued that Greek diasporic communities have been theoretically neglected or even undertheorised with a considerable lack of ethnographic material. The book offers an overview of the Greek communities in Egypt, Australia, America, South Africa and Russia but also discusses some of the applications of Greek nationalism as far as the formation of Greek identity. In particular, the chapter on Greeks in Australia by Doumanis is an example of a population of immigrants who wished to start a new life in a modern, capitalistic environment. Greeks who initially worked as manual workers soon climbed the socio-economic scale and entered the capitalist economy of their new country. From the early 20th century until recently they opened numerous coffee-shops and fish-shops near the popular beaches where natives used to go during weekends. The author (1999) argues that Greeks successfully developed a model of 'restaurant culture' in Australia gradually succeeding in altering their conditions of life: from open discrimination and stigmatisation to acceptance and recognition. But this was indeed a very slow process; the first immigrants in Australia remember being banished for using their native language and being called degradingly *«γουογκς»* meaning 'black dogs'.

The experiences of Greek-Cypriots in London were not much different. Mr Giorgos recalled similar situations of discrimination during his first years in London that gradually gave place to tolerance associated with the economic achievements of the Greek people in the host country:

"Things have changed a lot since I first came here. They did not even want to listen to our language, Greek, Imagine the Greek music! In my neighbourhood a Greek who used to listen to the Greek music he was forced by English neighbours to turn the radio off. They used to complain: 'we don't want to hear your nonsense'. For them we were just 'bloody foreigners'. Everything has changed now. They have learned to accept our music and us! Well don't forget that our community here is very strong. Even the poorest Greek has got his own house and car. But we have worked hard for all we have achieved"

My discussions with Mr Giorgos

The owner of the Taverna admitted that it was easier for him to speak in Greek yet in most of our on and off the record discussions he had difficulties in using Greek words and expressions and therefore he made extensive use of his English. Mr Giorgos

narrated to me that the first one from his family to visit England was his father in 1960. After two years the rest of the family came to meet him with a ship called *ENOTRIA* a word that stands for 'togetherness' in Greek. In 1967 he got married to a Cypriot woman and they had two children.

He remembered:

"We were very poor. We had to leave our country, see we had no choice. My parents had six children. Can you imagine? I stopped school in Cyprus when I was 12 years old. At those years if had no money you could not study. In my country I used to work in a restaurant. I was washing the dishes and then I went to work in a dry-cleaner's. When I first came here I did the same job. At that time Cyprus was a British colony that's why we came here. But now we are strong; we have many Churches, schools and a radio station"

The interviewed talked to me a lot about the first years of their settlement in England, the difficulties of adjusting to a new country and the exclusion that foreigners suffered:

"At the beginning I faced many difficulties. The most difficult thing was the fact that I couldn't speak English. Then it was that the English people did not want to mix with us, we were considered somehow 'inferior' to them. I never loved this place. I still hope that someday I might return to my country"

The Orthodox Christian Church was a unifying institution at least for the first generation of Greek-Cypriot immigrants. Mr Giorgos explained that he used to attend the Church every Sunday but in recent years life has been more demanding and it is not possible anymore attending the Orthodox mass every Sunday. Being quite apologetic he noted:

"Even today I want to go there often but I work very hard. Of course work is always the excuse but I am Greek and I will remain Greek until I die"

The interviewed added that language is for him one of the most important elements of his identity and it has been a fundamental family affair. The first language that his children learned was Greek and according to him even at school they kept saying that they were Greeks. Mr Giorgos admitted that he likes socialising more with other Greeks but because of his work he mixes with all kinds of people. Though, because of his work he socialised with all kinds of people he really enjoyed being with other Greeks because they understand him. As he put it: "Greeks are different. Greek are funny and they can understand your sense of humour"

Apollonia: **a Greek-Cypriot** ***Taverna*** **in London**

'The restaurant' serves often as the locus of the re-production of the original land's culture but also the laboratory of new cultural patterns involved in the creative

processes of adaptation and synthesis. My observations of the *Taverna* setting revealed that the acts of eating, drinking and dancing could prove essential in perpetuating, re-creating and altering diasporic patterns.

Finkelstein (1989) claimed that dining out is a rich source of incivility and that restaurants are public places were social relations are harmoniously managed and there is a certain degree of mutual tolerance between a wide variety of customers. Yet the scholar argued that we are made lazy because the decoration is fixed and the interaction is controlled thus restricting openness and free engagement.

For Martens and Warde (1997) the emphasis must be laid on the concept of 'pleasure' and the fact that different peoples choose to eat in different restaurants for a variety of reasons. They note that "The sources of satisfaction from eating out are thus wide-ranging, indicating a mix of traditional and modern urban pleasures. Arguably the traditional pleasures of achieving comfort from food and stimulation from companionship provide a reliable platform from which other, more modern, pleasures may be pursued (1997: 142).

But the concept of pleasure is itself subject to deconstruction; instead of a unitary 'pleasure' various pleasures emerge and 'eating out' acquires several meanings. For example 'eating out' can be associated with 'ethnic pleasures' or the experience of 'returning to the original country'. In turn these concepts are often associated with other concepts like 'authenticity' , 'originality' and 'traditionality'. This was the case for Mr Giorgos and his two level Greek-Cypriot Taverna; its name was actually the name of an ancient Greek god. The paintings on the walls reminded of 'traditional' Greek dancers and when the owner at some point changed the wall paintings to ancient Greek representation like temples he remarked:

"Now the Taverna is more Greek. Our previous decoration was also Greek. But now we have decided to bring in the decoration something ancient"

As noted (Soysal 2000) diaspora is a past invented – with no sense of fabrication – in the present. It can be argued that diasporic people are not a lived reality but part of a wider programme to promote continuity and coherence of broken down life stories due to migrancy and exile. For that reason 'the past' either close or distant (see traditional Greek culture and ancient Greek culture) becomes a powerful, unifying symbol of diasporic communities.

Eating Greek food in the Taverna was promoting feelings of 'authenticity' and 'purity' and it was through eating the Greek cuisine that 'others' – mostly Europeans – were 'introduced' to the Greek culture. Mr Giorgos commented:

"Our cuisine is purely Greek but we also serve some food for others, I mean for other nationalities. For example lamp chops, pork chops also chicken, you know dishes that foreigners prefer. Many people have not tried the Greek cuisine yet. That is why our menu is rich in Greek-Cypriot dishes like *kleftiko, stifado, fasolakia, keftedakia, souvlaki, moussaka,* we also serve many fish dishes like *kalamari, marida, mparbouni.* See, we have a big variety for every nationality"

The owner of the Taverna argued that through some 'European tastes' he was trying to promote the Greek cuisine and eventually through music and dancing 'Greekness' and 'Greek spirit'. What comes out from the above is that 'the past' either as ancient past of as authentic/ 'traditional' past was celebrated and 'commemorated' through the acts of decoration, eating, listening to the music and dancing.

While the Taverna of the first floor food was far more expensive yet the one in the basement had a more 'Greek' decoration, the food was cheap, and the music was Greek. The waiters were mostly Greeks but some were Yugoslavians who had some knowledge of Greek. At times Greek dancers, in traditional costumes were dancing famous Greek songs and they were encouraging the clients to dance with them; it was as if those performances enacted a process of encountering the 'other', the exotic. Most customers were willing to dance and thus participate in another culture even for a few minutes. According to Mr Giorgos the lacked the Greek 'spirit' and that's why they could not dance as Greeks do: "When a Greek dances you can tell. The others are so funny". Only some clients were Greek or with Greek origins and the majority of them were Londoners or Western Europeans. Mr Giorgos noted that:

"Customers come here not only for the food but for the hospitality we offer, for the kindness of the stuff and for the fun. 95% of our customers are foreigners who want to feel Greeks just for a night, to eat Greek, drink Greek, and smash the plates like we do…(interestingly enough in Greece smashing the plates has been abandon for more than a decade. Instead they throw flowers). Most of them have been for vacations either to Greece or Cyprus and they kept their memories with them. They want to come here in order to live again those happy moments. Some of them have even visited the Greek islands. That's why they love the Greek spirit"

In his words it was as if globalisation - with it's central process of the intensification of human contact via tourism - was 'transferring' other countries in London and this 'return' was lived through the experience of an ethnic restaurant. The music, dance and Greek food were being reproduced in a Greek Taverna and foreigners who had

visited Greece were invited to participate again in the Greek 'experience' bringing their own baggage of memories and preferences. Greek nights in the Taverna seemed as imaginary journeys to that remote country.

The contestations of diasporic identities

Typologies and clear-cut categorisations are too limiting in our endeavour to conceptualise diasporas. However diasporic identities are clearly responsive to the conditions – social, political and economic- of the arrival societies. The process of dialogue is at the heart of diasporic claims. According to Soysal (2000) the axiomatic primacy given to the formation of nation-states, as geographically bound entities is seriously put into question by the post-war changes in the geography and practice of belonging.

Thus, belonging to a diaspora alters the concept of 'space' and also our ideas on fixed and emplaced notions of 'citizenship'. For diasporic belonging is a mobile and displaced belonging constantly involved in negotiation and contestation. The paper describes how everyday, trivial performances like eating, drinking, listening to the music and dancing had been so analysed as important ingredients that give meaning to the concept of diaspora and prescribe the notion of 'citizenship'

Diasporic identities do not exist in a vacuum; they contain meanings of displacement and forced – directly or indirectly – migration and the trauma of exile. But most importantly such identities are formulated trough the conceptualisation of 'difference' with the culture of the arrival society. But again 'difference', inclusion and exclusion – some might argue – assimilation is always responsive to host social, political and economic conditions and found in a constant dialogue with them. As noted identity does not grow out of clearly bound communities and it is not a quality that can be possessed or owned by individual or collective social actors. It is instead, a mobile, often unstable relation of difference (1996, Lavie and Swedenburg).

My observations of the Taverna setting revealed that solidifying the sense of being and 'belonging' to an imagined homeland can be achieved through the acts of eating, listening to the music and dancing. In the case of Greek-Cypriots in London the sense of sharing an imaginary collective citizenship is daily internalised through participation in those acts. It was as if the Taverna stood for their country of origins and was certainly a medium to return to her. But that experience was not exclusively for Greek-Cypriots; other people, with diverse nationalities were also 'invited' to live the 'Greek experience' in the Taverna and 'be' Greeks for a night. It is obvious that 'citizenship'

and 'national belonging' are too limiting concerts in order to understand the multiplicity of human experience in a global era.

Instead of an epilogue

Mr Giorgos is a Greek-Cypriot who has been living and working in London for the last forty years, his wife is Cypriot but they got married in London, his children claim to be Greek but hardly speak any Greek. A whole range of identities that are indicative of diasporic conditions. I would like to end my discussion with this man's words:

"After 36 years I am still saying that some day I will go back to my country. It is my pleasure to talk about the Greek feeling to another Greek. When you leave London don't forget about me. Write what we've discussed, what you have seen in here. People in Greece must learn how we feel, how cruel *xenitia* is, how much we miss our country. But we live here, we work here, our lives are here. After all these years I'm used pushing myself to feel that this is my home. Now it is easier for me…"

After all diaspora is more than just a condition: it is a process, in which individual agency is responsible for constructions, re-constructions and everyday negotiated identifications.

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