Not My Flag! Citizenship and nationhood in the margins of Europe (Greece, October 2000/2003)

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Abstract
This article critically examines the generation of discourses on Greek identity following an episode that took place in northern Greece (2000/2003) when an Albanian student was elected flag-carrier in a commemorative parade. Three versions of Greek identity emerged in this context: the first was based on civic understandings of identity, promoting the current Europeanist project of citizenship as belonging. The second version drew upon the notion of “culture” as an all-encompassing concept to promote ideas of Greek cultural “purity” that have roots in Greek ethnogenesis. The third version adopted an understanding of the “nation” in terms of racial affiliation, transforming it thus into a natural category. The argument put forward is that in the context of the 2000/2003 episode (a) Greek self-perceptions are affected by the problematic economic and cultural position of Greece within Europe and (b) Greek discourses of identity are a form of resistance to processes of Europeanization that threaten traditional “imagined communities” embedded in history.

Keywords: Citizenship; culture; ethnies; Europe; Greek identity; racism.

Introduction
According to Billig (1995) there is no better metaphor for nationalist sentiment than the ‘taken-for-granted’ display of a flag on the balcony of our home – especially on a day of collective significance. No passer-by would observe it with wonder and question its role as the ‘semiotic carrier’ of national pride. In Banal Nationalism Billig was, of course, concerned with the quiet, yet pervasive expressions of nationalism that have as much power as its official manifestations. But what happens when such given foregrounds of celebration are questioned? What
happens when one morning we wake up to find ‘our’ flag in the hands of a ‘foreigner’ who claims the right to parade it on the day our ‘nation’ remembers its past? This article follows the trajectory of such an episode that received national and international coverage. Despite its local nature, it inflected and problematized global concerns regarding the state of ‘national identity’ at the turn of the century.

The episode took place in 2000 in an unknown corner of Greece, the coastal town of Nea Michaniona near Thessaloniki. It was late October, and the Michaniotes were in feverish preparation, as the organization of the parade with which Greeks remember their World War II history was under way. This is always the focal point for every Greek locality: authorities, church representatives and parents crowd the streets to applaud parading schoolchildren. One may note here that the parade itself stands for what Paul Connerton (1989) has termed commemorative rites of ‘calendrical nature’ that sustain collective, national, memory through regularized repetition. All communities, especially national communities, need such rites to re-instate their collective belonging. Their standardized nature is paramount to the maintenance of the rite itself as a practice of bond making. Thus, every year the flag comes out of the grandmother’s chest to decorate Greek buildings; every year schoolchildren dress up to participate in festivities; and every year local photography-shops display hundreds of photographs of youngsters marching. Popular understandings of such local festivities focus on the Greeks’ refusal to ‘submit’ to the Italian ‘ultimatum’ and surrender to the Axis Forces (28 October 1940). Throughout Greece, from its capital to the tiniest village of its borderlands, the ‘nation’ remembers the legendary ‘Ohi’ (No) that the Metaxas fascist regime (1936–1941) allegedly delivered to the Italian fascist regime. The conflict between Greek and Albanian troops (then sided with Italy) that followed the ‘Ohi’, and the short-lived Greek victory before the German invasion and occupation (1941), are registered as a great patriotic act. Parading thus symbolizes the triumph of the ‘Greek spirit’ over its ‘enemies’ (Karakasidou 2000, p. 241) – a nationalist ritual that figures in the 2000 dispute.

In 2000 the object of discord was the flag – or, more accurately, who was going to hold it during the local school parade. Traditionally, the Greek national symbol is handed to the best pupil of the school in recognition of that pupil’s excellence. In 2000 this was not to be: with distress that bordered on terror, the Michaniotes discovered that their top student was not a Greek, but an Albanian whose family had migrated to Greece a few years before in search of a better life. Odysseus Cenai (Odhise Qenaj), the student in question, encountered hostility from his fellow students and so many parents of his classmates that he decided to give up his right to parade altogether. Michaniote anger directed against the Albanian community that
resides in the town, and bitterness expressed by Cenai and his fellows, precipitated developments. The story moved a step up the ladder, reaching the national political headquarters, only to poison with more hatred local Michaniote-Albanian relations: the Greek government, staying true to its tolerant agenda, supported Cenai’s right to ‘represent Greece’. By that time, the episode had already developed into a major ‘national cause’ with television channels arguing for or against Cenai’s civil rights. As often happens with such explosive events, the agitation eventually subsided. It was only two years later, in October 2003 that the drama was replayed in the same locality: once more, Cenai was nominated the best pupil of the year. Once more, his right to hold the Greek flag was contested, and Cenai himself decided to withdraw.

It is very tempting to dismiss the adamant and curiously repetitive Michaniote response as backward or ‘overly emotional’. In the age of European globalization (as the then Greek government had it), of the breaking-up of national boundaries and the definition of belonging in terms of civic participation (rather than origin), this attack upon a seventeen-year old student seemed to carry a great deal of local short-sightedness and bigotry. But by the end of 2004, this episode has already been followed by numerous similar ones across Greece: in 2003 the Kallithea High School in Athens had elected an Albanian as flag-bearer; the Aspropyrgos High School in Thessaloniki found out that two pupils from Kazakhstan had to hold the flag; in Kalloni of Lesbos an Albanian was the best student of the school and therefore its flag-bearer; and in all those cases there were mixed feelings or violent reactions. Even shortly before the October 2004 parade, an Albanian student in the Peloponnesian village of Lappa had to end the sit-in protest of her classmates by giving up her right to hold the flag (Kathimerini 19 October 2004). A sociological examination of these events may in fact show that they are far from nonsensical and disorganized acts: to modify Herzfeld’s reflections here (1997), the presence of a ‘foreigner’ in a national rite of such importance constitutes a gross violation of the nation’s ‘intimate space’. For, rites are fully-fledged narratives of national identity ‘in which history is traced back from the present moment’; as such, they are ‘a crucial component in constructing a national[ist] consciousness’ (Anderson 1991, p.193). If anything, the presence of Cenai in that commemorative parade threw unwelcome light on all those presuppositions regarding the status and nature of Greek identity, posing a number of questions: who should be included in those national celebrations and by what right? Does the participation of an Albanian (a descendant of World War II Greek ‘enemies’, after all) not invite radical redefinitions of native identity?
These questions are pertinent in a study that concentrates on national resistances to global change. In fact, these are the questions that this article will set out to explore. The project of European integration may be adorned with the rhetoric of a ‘common history’ or ‘heritage’ of democracy and justice, yet under the colourful ornaments of such claims there lies the ugly reality of an economic project prescribed ‘from above’. This involves the opening of national borders, the migration of cheap labour, the exploitation of human resources and plenty of hatred directed against ‘newcomers’ such as Cenai’s family. There are alternative ways to articulate this discrepancy in the context of the episode. We only need to consider that Greece, a country traditionally placed at the (economic and cultural) margins of ‘Europe’ could easily regard the influx of foreigners from other, even more ‘underdeveloped’ Balkan countries as an attack upon both its internal cultural homogeneity and its European ‘purity’. As Stathis Gourgouris has explained (1992), the implicit exclusion of the case of Greece in discussions on European identity exemplifies the power imbalances that currently exist within Europe — and institutionalizes the distances European political ‘centres’ try to keep from the ‘peripheries’ (Sutton 2000, p.152). The issue of preserving the imagined ‘purity’ of national cultures within Europe (which is presumably threatened by newcomers from less developed countries) should then sociologically and anthropologically be seen as a form of ‘segmentation of the global flow’ (Foster 1991, p. 236; see also Ray 2002, 5.2 and 5.4).

Clearly, the debate that followed within Greece upon the ‘right’ of Cenai to hold the Greek flag was nothing other than an internal negotiation of the contours of Greek identity and of its place in the European political order. My aim in this study is not to explore the local debate or its origins — something that deserves meticulous ethnographic examination and which therefore comprises a study on its own that I pursue elsewhere. Alternatively, here I would like to shed light on the national uproar that followed the episode in 2000 and 2003. The internal debate the episode instigated unveiled some discourses of identity. I understand discourse as a form of speech. Discourse sustains ideological divisions of the world into opposite camps that do not simply reflect, but are inherent in, visible power relations (Foucault 1980). Because semiotic language can be misleading, I will note in advance that, although most of my material comes from Greek newspapers and internet publications, the focus of my study is not the structure of media messages. Rather, in a more sociological vein, I shall emphasize the historical and socio-political contexts in which such discursive messages and narratives are generated (Wodak 1989). My ultimate aim is to understand the
emotive and social power that they possess to mobilize crowds and incite violence and hatred (see also Solomos and Bulmer 1998).

The versions of identity that emerged in these discourses exemplified the conflict between state-sponsored identity and nationhood, cultural bonding and biological group identification. Each section of the article looks at one of these versions in their specific socio-cultural, and general transnational, context. The first section explores the role of civic participation in the construction of ‘national citizenship’; the second looks at the question of cultural assimilation as integration into the ‘nation’; and the last section analyses historical understandings of ethnic/racial purity as belonging. The separation of these versions of ‘Greekness’ is artificial, as they often overlap and form complex combinations that conflate notions of history, culture and ethnic/racial origins. It is precisely the relationship between the nationalist and the racist elements of these discourses of identity that this study will set out to investigate.

**Honorary Greekness: Citizenship as identity**

In 2000 government and other political reactions to the episode encompassed attempts to situate Greekness vis-à-vis civic definitions of the ‘nation’. A suggestion was made in 2000 to grant Cenai Greek citizenship so that he could hold the flag (HR-Net 31 October 2000). In 2003 this suggestion became a demand by former Foreign Minister, Theodoros Pangalos, whereas the Culture Minister reminded his colleagues how immigrants are treated in Greece and ‘how [much better] Greeks are treated abroad’ (Baldwin-Edwards 2003). It must be emphasized that the idea of granting citizenship to Cenai came with its own political baggage.

As Anthony Smith (1995) has explained, citizenship has always been part and parcel of civic, state, nationalism. At the heart of civic nationalism there lies a contradiction: on the one hand, citizenship has ‘an approved, universalistic dimension’ (Purvis and Hunt 1999, p. 461; Roudometof 1999, p. 234); but on the other hand, the very idea of demarcating the boundaries of the ‘nation’ by making rights and duties available only to a certain number of people makes citizenship a problematic enterprise (Smith 1995, p. 98). Even when the state grants citizenship to non-indigenous individuals, it aspires to turn them into naturalized citizens. More precisely, the state invites these individuals to conform their subjectivity ‘to the nature of the society that grants them citizenship, a nature that allows for their subjectivity to be nationalized’ (Gourgouris 1996, p. 33, emphasis in original; Balibar 1990, pp. 348–49). Although the Greek equivalent to naturalization, πολιτογραφήσις, literally the inscription upon one of the marks of the citizen (from polis and grafo, engrave), places greater emphasis on the
contractual nature of naturalization, the metaphor of ‘nature’ (the ‘nature’ of national culture) remains central to the question of citizenship. At the same time, the fact that civic nationalism harbours a ‘particularist conception of the “people”, i.e. the community of which each citizen is a member’ (Smith 1995, p. 98) betrays the presupposition that the ‘people’ share **ethnic ties** based on given commonality (Geertz 1963). It is worth noting here that this idea goes against Jürgen Habermas’ (1996, p. 495) conception of *constitutional patriotism*, which could be proposed as an alternative to ethnically-based conceptions of citizenry. Habermas elaborated on this, suggesting that it is possible to replace national consciousness with ‘rationalised ties’ between people and the state. Such ties would be based on collective support of the republican principles that underlie the constitution and could transcend ‘exclusive’, essentialist, understandings of belonging that nationalist discourse purports. Habermas’ suggestion offers a new vision of belonging, whereas Smith’s emphasis on a specific version of citizenship seems to apply to Greek realities. I will return to this later.

The enduring association of belonging with the ethnic past of the Greek nation became clear when some Greeks argued that granting Cenai citizenship would not erase his ‘alien’ identity. Two mothers of Michaniote pupils gave voice to such reservations by shouting in a local meeting ‘I will not let an Albanian touch MY FLAG or sing MY NATIONAL anthem!!!’ (Raptis 16 November 2003). Both the flag and the national anthem are emblematic references to the Greek *ethnie* with its own myth of common origins and history (Smith 1981, p. 66). The Greek flag (blue with white cross) dates back to a decree issued during the Greek Independence War (1822), and ‘entwin[es] national sentiments with religious convictions’ (Karakasidou 2000, p. 226). The Greek anthem operates along the same lines, as both its history (as a piece of poetry composed by the Greek ‘national poet’, Solomos) and its content refer to the process of Greek *ethnogenesis*. But the exclusivity of the Greek *ethnic* community also naturalizes origin and belonging. As in other cases, Greek nationalism activates a mechanism through which it begins to identify those characteristics that enable the ‘nation’ to see itself as an always-already established phenomenon (Handler 1988, pp. 6–7; Foster 1991, p. 237). For example, senior members of the conservative party *Nea Dimokratia* (New Democracy) suggested that bearing the flag is a question of birthright, thus overriding the civic conception of the nation. The substitution of civic with ethnic understandings of the nation figured again in 2003, when the Prefect of Thessaloniki, Panagiotis Psomiadis, declared that ‘You are born a Greek, you cannot be turned into a Greek!’ (Raptis 16 November 2003). The comment makes one wonder whether Cenai would have been recognized as a ‘true Greek’ had he...
been born in Greece. There is little doubt that this would not have been the case: Psomiadis was just confusing here ethnic (that is, culturally acquired through socialization) and biological understandings of identity.

The debate acquired a new dimension when it examined the role of honorary citizenship in the construction of Greek identity. Lefteris Papadopoulos, a well-known political commentator, speculated:

If Odysseus was the son of – Albanian, of course! – Mirella Maniani, the European javelin champion, what would they do? Wouldn’t they give him the flag? [...] It is the Greek flag in which the beautiful Maniani wraps herself when she celebrates her victory—is it not? It is our national anthem we hear when she is awarded – or not? (Ta Nea 27 October 2003)

The comment is shrewd, but not totally original (for similar cases in Europe see Hedetoft 1999, p. 81 cf.). It happily marries symbolic presentations of foreigners as naturalized members of the national community with a multiculturalist discourse. Yet, we have to be careful here: although Maniani’s recognition as an ‘honorary Greek’ is presented as an act of reciprocation (by the Greek state, on behalf of the ‘nation’) of her wish to represent the country abroad, Maniani is still an exception to the ‘rule’ (that is, the amorphous mass of ‘uncultured’ foreigners that threaten the integrity of the nation). Maniani is allowed to be(come) a Greek because she incorporates that aspect of ‘Greekness’, which is recognized and respected by the rest of humanity: the Olympic ideal. Again, we note an interchangeability of the civic (Maniani participating in the Greek civic community) and the historic/ethnic (the representativeness of Greek culture in Maniani’s athletic excellence). I would like to suggest that this exception reflects Greece’s problematic relationship with ‘Europe’, past and present. I am not arguing here that understandings of ‘Europe’ can be stabilized. Europe has been historically associated with ideas of racial purity, whiteness, religion and many more (Smith 1995). To find a common denominator of European-ness across cultures and times is futile. However, Greek understandings of European-ness are still overdetermined by nineteenth-century Western definitions in relation to ‘high culture’ (see also Delanty 1995). The fact that ancient Greek culture is used by the Greek state for the promotion of a ‘purely European’ image abroad should not be divorced from the question of European power balances. The degree of ‘European-ness’ that different states can claim is tied to different forms of ‘symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu 1984; see also Lofgren 1989) that they are in a position to display: from political/economic power, to cultural value. Note for example the effort that the Athens Olympic Committee put in the preparation
for the 2004 Olympics just to respond to foreign accusations of incompetence within the EU and in the United States (Tzanelli 2004).

Maniani is, for the Greeks, a form of cultural capital that can enable Greece to appear in the eyes of the ‘West’ and of ‘Europe’ as cultured, open and tolerant. In effect, the strategic mobilization of Maniani by the Greek state explains why a Habermassian vision is constantly repressed in Greek politics. Economic inequalities within Europe simply reinforce the idea that certain states are being kept in a subordinate position in the new European political order. Consequently, Greek reactions to the idea of citizenship-as-identity become a form of resistance to a European project with economic imperialist undertones. It is not coincidental that in the context of the Michaniona episode the identification (or self-identification) of citizenship defenders as ‘Europeanists’ became a leitmotif. Inevitably, there are concerns that a distinctively Greek identity will not survive within the framework of Europeanization. The very project of the EU as a supranational entity contributes to the development of resistance practices on a local and national level, after all (Hedetoft 1998). The EU fosters a ‘European identity as a second layer of political loyalty, asking national citizens to make a leap of faith beyond the self-referentiality of their political identity’ (Hedetoft 1999, p. 75). This has been noticed and analysed in a number of articles in the Greek press, especially in relation to the myth of ‘national purity’ that the citizenship argument aims to replace (Ta Nea 22 October and 3 November 2003).

With regard to the same issue, the EU outcry over Greece’s treatment of ethnic minorities poses a challenge of a different order that needs to be addressed. The European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly warned Greece against maltreatment or non-recognition of ethnic minorities such as the Albanian and the Turkish (the so-called ‘Muslims’ in Thrace) (Greek Helsinki Monitor 4 November 1998). The incident in Michaniona only added fuel to the fire, as further warnings were issued by Human Rights groups. The fact that in 2000 and 2003 members of the socialist government of PA.SO.K. (Panhellenic Socialist Movement, which historically associates itself with Greek World War II resistance to the Axis Forces) tried to promote civic understandings of Greekness was certainly an attempt to side with this European ‘post-national’ agenda, even though they were accused of national treason. This oscillation between subordination to European demands and resistance to them is often typical of anti-imperial nationalism. Even some conservatives attempted to follow this route,
but with an interesting twist that deserves meticulous examination. Former President of *Nea Dimokratia*, Miltiadis Evert, claimed:

It is an honour for our country and its national symbol when someone wants to hold our flag. [...] Let’s not forget that many Greeks are in Northern Epirus. If young Cenai wants to become a Greek citizen, I would gladly co-sign his application (*Ta Nea* 27 October 2003).

The ‘Northern Epirote’ Question to which Evert refers is still a thorny issue in Greek national politics. ‘Northern Epirus’ is that part of Albania that the Greek state tried to incorporate before the foundation of the Albanian state in 1911 on the ground that a substantial Greek minority existed in the region. During World War II, Muslim Albanian groups on the Greek-Albanian border (known as *Chamidhes*) were targeted by the Greek royalist and irredentist resistance group EDES, and by 1944 their communities had been destroyed (Mazower 2000, pp. 25–26). In the post-communist Albanian order it was the Albanians’ turn to terrorize the Greek communities of Northern Epirus. Undoubtedly, the term ‘Northern Epirus’ is not geographical, but political: even now, there are voices in the Greek political arena that urge for a ‘response’ to threatened ‘Greek rights’ in Northern Epirus. Much like the controversy over the name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in the 1990s (at which time *Nea Dimokratia* was in power), the ‘Northern Epirote’ Question is for Greeks an issue of historical continuity: none in Greece would dare object to the idea that ‘Northern Epirote’ populations are still Greek.

When FYROM authorities began to propagandize for the liberation of their alleged ‘brothers’ in northern Greece that ‘remained oppressed’ ever since their migration in the middle ages in the region, the Greek side responded with protestations that the ‘Slavic’ identity of their ancestors had been assimilated centuries ago into Greek culture (Karakasidou 1997, p. 229). I will expand on the ‘Slavic controversy’ later in the article. For the moment, it is important to stress that ‘Northern Epirus’ is still viewed by Greeks as a territory in which they can raise claims of historical continuity – thus reversing the game that FYROM played only a decade ago. If anything, there is a hidden ‘hegemonic play’ (Kearney 1995, p. 548) at work here, which finds expression in the relationship between national centres as they vie for control over each other’s political life. Human transnational flows (immigration) become a useful tool in the hands of different nation-states.

It is not accidental that the conservative press reminded its readers of the shortfalls of governmental policy on the ‘Epirote Question’. To
belittle PA.SO.K. ‘Europeanists’, right-wing newspapers stated that, whereas the government remained inactive with regard to Albanian violations of ‘Greek Epirote human rights’, it was quite happy to ‘flood’ Greece with Albanian immigrants just because they would vote for PA.SO.K. in the (then) forthcoming elections (Eleftheros Typos 27 October 2003). In the previous national elections there were also allegations that PA.SO.K. had ‘sold out’ on Greek passports to acquire minority votes (see also Eleftherotypia 25 October 2003). The idea of ‘selling out’ identifies fears of cultural adulteration with political manipulation — it politicizes culture, in other words. The ways in which specific cultural narratives and histories become part of political agendas needs considerable ‘unpacking’ that I will attempt to do in the following section.

Culture as belonging

Concerns with regard to the preservation of Greek ‘cultural frontiers’ were expressed in 2000, following an intervention by the President of the Greek Republic, Kostantinos Stefanopoulos (Kathimerini 11 October 2003). In an attempt to protect the Minister of Culture, Petros Efthymiou, from further right-wing attacks, Stefanopoulos reminded his fellow citizens of the Isocratin saying ‘Hellenes are the ones who participate in Greek culture’ (Ta Nea 22 October 2003). Efthymiou repeated this dictum on the same day (Eleftherotypia 22 October 2003). To back this up a few days later, Minister of Macedonia and Thrace, George Paschalidis, promised to introduce scholarships for foreigners who achieve high grades, beginning with Cenai (HR-Net 31 October 2000). Isocrates was mobilized even by the Greek conservative leader, Konstantinos Karamanlis, albeit in a more blunt way. In one of his public speeches in 2003, Karamanlis mentioned that Greece ‘is the country of hospitable Zeus’ and its aim should be ‘the integration of immigrants’ (Eleftherotypia 25 October 2003). In a commemoration of World War II victims, the President of Parliament, Apostolos Kaklamanis, also explained that the Greek nation should take advantage of its ‘ancient ability to absorb foreign elements’ (Ta Nea 30 October 2003) to face contemporary challenges to its ‘homogeneity’.

The Isocratin paradigm and its centrality in the Greek state narratives of identity deserve a few words here. Isocrates was an Athenian orator (436–338 B.C.) who allegedly promoted in his famous speech Panegyricus (par.50) ‘panhellenism’, a Hellenic ideal based on education, language and culture. An adherent of Socrates and Plato, Isocrates believed that culture (understood as Hellenic, especially Athenian, culture) and language were what distinguished humans from animals. His cosmopolitan vision was based on an amalgam of
prejudice and utopia: the Isocratian cosmos (world) consisted of the Greek ecumene. The world outside this ecumene was inhabited by barbarians, beings who used an incomprehensible ‘bar-bar’ to communicate with others. Hence, civilized Greeks were only those intelligent beings that could communicate their thoughts in the language Greeks understood.

Unsurprisingly, the Isocratian ideal was mobilized in the nineteenth-century within the context of Greek ethnogenesis to support the Greek nationalist project. The ‘Great Idea’, as the project is known, was a combination of irredentist politics, which involved the annexation of Ottoman provinces that previously belonged to the Byzantine empire, and a desire to transform Greek culture into the ‘intellectual beacon’ of South-eastern Europe and Asia Minor (for an overview see Augustinos 1977, p. 16; Kitromilidis 1989 and 1998, p. 11; Clogg 1992, p. 2). In this conjunction, Isocratian panhellenism became a convenient political tool that legitimized Greek nationalist divisions of humanity into two camps: the civilized, Greek, and the uncivilized, non-Greek. Implicit in the political use of the Isocratic speech was that the Greek ‘nation’ was a fully formed entity in antiquity and that the pan-Hellenic ideal was identical to the ‘Neo-Hellenic’ or modern Greek. Nineteenth-century invocations of a Greek ethnie were, therefore, already woven into the fabric of nationalist propaganda.

We should not view the projection of modern Greek identity into a Hellenic past simply through what Ernest Gellner (1998) identified as ‘primordialism’. The main function of this projection was to endorse a Greek version of ecumenical nationalism (Herzfeld 1997) that was played at the heart of post-Enlightenment ‘Europe’. To be more precise, a discourse had already begun to take shape in Western European countries, which promoted the recognition of ‘Greek Hellas’ as the cultural progenitor of a fictionally homogenous ‘Europe’ (Kitromilidis 1983; Herzfeld 1987). Unfortunately, the Greeks internalized this discourse by re-constituting the Greek ‘nation’ (by analogy to the Hellenic ancestors of Europe) as the leading cultural force in the East and beyond. The emphasis on cultural heritage and ethnic continuity was not a Greek peculiarity: from the eighteenth century Balkan federalists began to pursue the foundation of supra-national states (Stavrianos 1958; Jelavich 1983) similar to that envisaged by the Greeks.

On a practical level, the ‘Great Idea’ vision was shattered in 1922, when Turkish nationalist forces defeated the Greek army in Asia Minor during a Turkish-Greek War (1919–1922). Yet, the narrative that supported Greek irredentism outlived its political use and reconfigures even twenty-first century political debates. On the surface, the invocation – that is, interpretation – of Isocrates in the episode of 2000/2003 presents us with a version of Greekness that is inclusive,
open and based on individual self-selection: why should Cenai not be a ‘Greek’ if he chooses to speak Greek and live like a Greek? But underneath this thin layer of ‘tolerance’ we encounter a number of issues that contest the supposed inclusiveness of this political vision.

We can begin by pointing out that the use of a single ‘culture’ as an imaginary national register departs from a multiculturalist agenda (see previous section on Maniani). As in the original Isocratian dictum, the support of any cultural norm presupposes that ‘barbarian others’ need to be ‘assimilated’ (Herzfeld 2002a, p. 19). As in the Anglo-American context, in Greece culture and ‘otherness’ become mutually exclusive categories (see Gilroy 1987, p. 55). We must bear in mind how the multicultural discourse was born out of Western de-colonization, which brought whole communities from the former colonized countries to the metropolitan centres of the empire. The pressure of integrating these communities led to resentment ‘for a whole new citizenry in the white world, alien in terms of culture and colour’ (Christie 1998, p. 232, emphasis mine) in the eyes of Westerners. In this respect, recent Greek Isocratian invocations simply codify a racist discourse whose internal organization is based on metonymical chains: culture and race become interchangeable (Barker 1981; Solomos and Back 1994, p. 156).

This manifestation of ‘cultural racism’ is better illustrated through an article that appeared in a Christian conservative newspaper just before the parade in 2003. The article is a controversial attempt to place Isocrates in the context of the 2000/2003 incidents. It begins by explaining the ancient difference between native Athenians (born of Greek mother and father) and metiki (of mixed blood), stressing that the latter did not even have the right to vote. It suggests that, by analogy to those metiki, Albanians should never be given any civic rights in Greece (Laos 25–26/10/2003) – yet another conflation of naturalized ethnic ties and civic rights. The argument has become common and it currently reflects the status of most undocumented immigrants (Fakiolas 1999).

The much admired Hellenic past was only one of the two cultural repositories the identity debate drew upon. During the episode it was repeatedly mentioned that when Cenai’s parents arrived in Greece in 1996 they had Cenai baptised a Christian so as to help him integrate into an overwhelmingly Orthodox Christian environment (Raptis 16 November 2003). The action was not illogical, bearing in mind that, historically, Orthodoxy is a definitional element of Greek identity (Roudometof 1996, p. 255). The Ottoman division of colonized peoples into millets (religious administrative units) had certainly established an enduring relationship between identity and religion throughout the nineteenth century (see Just 1989; Kitromilidis 1989; Karakasidou 1997). It has been noted that an emerging secular
conception of ‘identity-as-citizenship’ clashed with religious understandings of identity in the nineteenth century during the formation of Balkan ‘imagined communities’. But Christian religion was also the definitional element of the Rum-millet that included other *ethnies* except for the Greek. In fact, despite its secularization, Greek nationalism always drew upon the religious vocabulary to articulate itself. The first major expression of another Balkan nationalism, the Bulgarian, was the creation of a new Church (the so-called ‘Bulgarian Exarchate’), separate from the Greek Patriarchate (1870). The Greek Church did not welcome this ‘schism’, as behind religious unity there has always been a project of turning Greek Orthodoxy into a hegemonic Balkan culture (Augustinos 1977, pp. 18–20). We note then, that Isocratian and Orthodox understandings of Greekness have common roots in the *ecumenical*, assimilatory, vision that they uphold.

Religious definitions of Greekness during and after the episode (*Macedonia* 24 October 2003) indicate that Orthodoxy still retains a close-knit association with ethnic-based conceptions of Greekness. Moreover, as Adamantia Pollis has explained (1992, p. 189), the constitutional declaration of Orthodox religion as the Greek state religion comprises a violation of the European Convention on the Defence of the Fundamental Human Rights, which Greece has signed. The clash of the spirit and letter of the European Convention with the spirit and the letter of the Greek Constitution pose serious obstacles to Greece’s European integration. Clearly then, Orthodoxy is both informally recognised *and* legally sanctioned as a definitional element of Greek-ness. But in the 2000/2003 episode it also transpired that even religious conversion would not truly ‘open’ participation in the Greek ‘nation’ to outsiders. The exclusivity of participation in the Greek Orthodox ‘imagined community’ was, for example, striking in the response that the Metropolite of Kalavryta, Ambrosios, addressed to Stefanopoulos in 2000. Ambrosios, disregarding Cenai’s religious conversion, stated:

> Our folk say that two things cannot be lent: the wife and the car! To that we would like to add our flag [. . .] Even our President became a supporter of the Albanian student [. . .] In what country are we living? Are there no Greeks to defend the honour of the Greek flag? (*Ta Nea* 11 January 2000).

Although the Greek government, the Archbishop and other high-ranking members of the Greek Church condemned Ambrosios’ indecorous outburst, it is worth following its rationale, because it exposes the ‘dirty laundry’ of official nationalist discourse. Ambrosios made up a list of the things that constitute Greek male *property* (woman, car, flag), immediately demanding from Greeks to defend the
honour of a national symbol. His vocabulary comprises a combination of kinship (our ‘women’) and honour terms (‘defend the honour’), which may be ‘a source of external embarrassment’ (Herzfeld 1997, p. 3), but which provide a nation with common ground for self-definition vis-à-vis outsiders. Women are in Greek culture the symbol of the domestic hearth, the most private space of a family (Herzfeld 2001, p. 217). Their metonymical association with the flag and the summoning of Greek filotimo (love of honour) to protect both point to the nature of kinship obligations. As Herzfeld (1992, p. 148) has explained, nation-states are always anxious to hide behind a bureaucratic façade the relationship between the ‘rational’ (demarcation of national territory, protection of civic rights) and the ‘symbolic’ (the state operating like the pater of the ‘nation’, the ‘nation’ like an extended family). The response to Ambrosios by the government and the Greek Church itself may then be seen as an attempt to cover up this relationship. We are already on the fringes of ethnic understandings of the Greek ‘nation’ and its ‘defenders’ (the state, the church). Symbolic references to national identity as a form of ‘blood bonds’ take us a step further, where nationalist discourse meets issues regarding ‘race’ and racism.

Phantoms of ‘race’ and curses of history

We are not in a position to fully explain the role of ‘race’ in Greek nationalist discourse until we understand the place of Albanian identity in Greek national birth. Nineteenth-century claims to Greek nationhood were haunted by the European accusation that modern Greece had lost its cultural connection with the illustrious Hellenic civilization. This was backed up by suspicions that the Ottoman conquest contaminated Greek culture with a non-European ‘disease’: everything in modern Greek behaviour came to be viewed as ‘unwholesomely Oriental’. As Herzfeld (2002b) has explained, Greece has always been in a ‘crypto-colonial’ relationship with the Western European Powers. The West has used Orientalist practices of writing to describe, classify and denigrate countries outside ‘Europe’, complementing thus its actual colonial rule (Said 1978). But the ‘Orientalization’ of Greece has been somewhat peculiar, because the country constantly eluded firm classification into colonial categories (Europe/West, the ‘Orient’): it could be both and neither.

The ‘archaeology’ of the Albanian case we examine can be situated within this ‘Orientalist/Hellenic’ discourse. Celebrations of the foundation of the modern Greek state in the 1830s were overshadowed by the work of classicist historian and pamphleteer Jacob Philipp Fallmerayer (1790–1861) from Tyrol. Fallmerayer fostered an argument in which, according to (his reading of) Byzantine sources, the
Byzantine ‘Greeks’ were not Greeks at all, but a race adulterated by Slavic invasions in the Balkan peninsula (then part of the Byzantine empire) during the sixth century. The controversy that erupted placed Byzantine history at the centre of the debate upon national continuity: the Greeks struggled to prove that the Byzantines (now viewed as the cultural descendants of the ancient Greeks) were, and remained, Greeks after the Slavic ‘invasion’ (Dimaras 1985; 1986). Putting aside the fact that Fallmerayer projected modern Greek-ness into the Byzantine past, we note that there is a profound confusion in his theory between continuity (did ancient Greek civilization survive in the modern Greeks?) and racial purity. Fallmerayer’s hypothesis was a consequence of the nineteenth-century panic that the Panslavic movement for the unification of all the Slav ‘races’, which had found support from Russian agents, might ‘adulterate’ Germanic and European culture. Yet, his conviction that the Albanians, amongst the Slav ‘races’, had eliminated the last traces of Hellenic civilization from Greece infuriated the Greeks (Skopetea 1999, p. 155). A similar fear that ‘criminal’ Albanians would ‘pollute’ Greek culture was widespread in Greek official and press debates in the nineteenth century (Tzanelli 2002). Some of these Albanians had contributed to the Greek Independence War (1821–1828), but after the foundation of the Greek state they became outcasts and brigands.

At the time the ‘Albanians’ were not a separate ‘nation’ with a state, but an ill-defined ethnic group that inhabited the Greek peninsula. With time, their differential treatment within Greek society was explicated on the basis of differentiated identities: the Albanian populations of southern Greece (the so-called Arvanites) were deemed to be assimilated, Hellenised, ex-Slavs; the Albanian groups of the North, however (Muslims by religion and Albanian citizens after 1913) were regarded as enemies of Greek unity and ‘purity’. Contemporary Greek political discourse has also hermeneutically adapted the nineteenth-century formula of Albanian exclusion. This discourse, which is structured around conflations of physical boundaries with symbolic borders (criminality, deviance, dirt, disease) (Douglas 1993), promotes a fictional preservation of racial purity against ‘alien contamination’, feeding the urgency for the Greeks to claim direct racial and cultural continuity from antiquity. The belief circulates in all Greek institutions, including that which traditionally produces identity: the school. The study conducted by Frangoudaki and Dragonas (1997) on the reproduction and construction of national identity in the Greek educational system shows how Greek curricula consolidate exclusivist and xenophobic conceptions of Greekness. The narration of the Greek historical experience in this context is characterized by antithetical and oppositional relations to other cultures and ‘nations’ and exaggerates the existence of historical
‘enemies’. In other words, adolescent views on Greek identity are regulated with the help of state institutions such as that of the school. In 1999 the Centre for Social Research published the results of a survey of 1,200 school students, who were asked about their identity. It was reported that ‘over 70 per cent […] agreed that all Greeks descended from the same ancestors and belong to the same family’ (Verney 2002, p. 12).

It is in this context that Greeks learn about their Byzantine heritage first without questioning the validity of modern Greek claims over Byzantium’s history. The ghost of Fallmerayer is still exorcized even in Greek academic production, especially works published in Byzantine Studies circles. As Karakasidou (1994) has argued, the relationship between intellectual production and promotion of political discourses is very strong in Greece. Her own case is an excellent illustration of this phenomenon: her book Fields of Wheat, Hills of Blood: Passages to Nationhood in Greek Macedonia (1870–1990) (1997) was met with brutal criticism in Greek academic and intellectual circles, because it exposed practices of Greek assimilation of ill-defined ethnic groups in Macedonia from the late nineteenth century. Interestingly, the Greek response to Karakasidou was formulated on the selfsame nineteenth-century official counterblast to Fallmerayer’s ‘accusations’. She has summarized the critique in the following:

The population of Macedonia has been nothing but pure Greek since antiquity […] the Slavs who migrated into the area during the sixth and seventh centuries had been assimilated into Greek culture, although some Greeks in Macedonia picked up a Slavic “idiom” of speech (Karakasidou 1997, p. 229).

It is worth examining the presence of a similar discourse of purity in the domain of public policy, because it is central to political reactions in the episode of 2000/2003. In 1996 anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis, then Adviser to the Greek Ministry of Public Health, discovered an association between Albanian (and other) immigration to Greece after the opening of E.U. borders, and stories about ‘waves of infections crossing Greek frontiers’ (Seremetakis 1996, p. 489). Research into migrant labour in Greece also showed that Greek attitudes towards Albanian workers are biased, manifested in the use of pejoratives such as ‘dirty’, ‘cunning’, ‘untrustworthy’ and ‘primitive’ (Lazaridis and Wickens 1999, p. 648). Albanian immigrants are thus symbolically excluded from the pale of ‘civilization’. Simultaneously, these pejoratives symbolize Greek self-perceptions not simply as ‘European’, but also as ‘European par excellence’ (the purest descendants of European civilization).
This rationale outlines comments in the episode of 2003. Dimitris Stavoras, a Greek artist, cleverly asked whether the same reaction would have taken place, ‘had the flag bearer not been an Albanian, but a Dane or an American’ (Ta Nea 23 October 2003). Again, the comment points to a division of identities into two camps, with civilization working as an infallible criterion of classification. Even the moral panic concerning rise in crime levels is always associated with Albanian immigration – even more so after the replay of the Michaniona episode in October 2003 (Kathimerini 31 October 2003; Ta Nea 24 October 2003). The most disturbing example comes from Laos, which criticized Athenian anarchists for supporting Albanian rights in Greece. A relevant article suggested that Greek anti-terrorist circles expressed concerns that Greek anarchist groups are in contact with UCK, the ‘military group that covets our Epirus [the ‘Greek’ Northern Epirus]’ (25/26 October 2003, emphasis added). The chain Albanian immigrants-Greek anarchists-UCK-crime neatly conflates internal limits (the Greek anarchist movement) and external borders (Albanian organizations). This is a commonplace feature of nationalist discourse (Balibar 1994, p. 63), which suggests that the danger comes from ‘within’ (Tzanelli 2002; Kiprianos et al. 2003).

One ought to underscore that current policy attitudes and the nineteenth-century Fallmerayer controversy are not the same. The trajectory of the debate is, nevertheless, a wonderful specimen of the ways in which conceptions of nationhood contingently meet understandings of ‘race’. Etienne Balibar (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991, p. 52) saw in the development of official, state, nationalism ‘the transformation of antagonisms that have different origins into racism in the modern sense’ (ibid.). This reciprocal determination of racism and nationalism does not necessarily reconcile their conflicting agendas: that of assimilation (for nationalism) and that of isolation and stigmatization (for racism) of ethnic groups. Therefore, the raison d’être of the Isocratic argument, examined in the previous section, and of the racist argument we examine here, are totally different and incompatible. As Benedict Anderson has clarified, nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies when ‘racism dreams of eternal contaminations’. Racism has its origins in notions of class, manifesting itself ‘not across boundaries but within them’ (Anderson 1991, p. 150). We need only mention that the incident in Michaniona has provoked the defenders of human rights, who cannot tolerate the exploitation of immigrants as cheap labour (see Avgi 2 October 2003, MPA 30 January 2004). Eleftherotypia, the official government paper, noted that 500,000 immigrants are becoming vital for the Greek banking and taxing system. It also pointed out that their general contribution to the Greek economy is incontestable, despite certain ‘nationalist allegations’ of the opposite. The newspaper went on to explain that
right-wing preaching concerning ‘the purity of the nation’ is ‘cheap demagogy’ that resembles ‘Ku Klux Klan practices’ of the past (2 November 2003). To Vima, the self-fashioned centre-left intellectual newspaper, reminds Greeks of their immigrant compatriots in Germany, America and Australia, and their initial exclusion from the host country. The editorial reports actual cases of racism in Greece, pointing out that although everybody regards Albanians as ‘third-class citizens’, they employ them ‘for less money to do all the heavy work that Greek workers refuse to do’ (26 October 2003). The response to these comments was immediate: it was explained in a TV show that Greek migrant experience was ‘harsher’, and that compared to foreign racism the ‘emotional outbursts in New Michaniona’ were ‘innocent’. This ‘folklorization’ of Michaniote ‘emotionalism’ is not supported by evidence, bearing in mind Greek accusations that foreign ‘serpents’ ‘have snatched everything from [the Greeks], their country, their labour [and] their self-respect’ (Laos 25–26 October 2003).

Beyond any shadow of a doubt the present debate links Albanian identity to labour distribution, and calls for a return to more classical Marxist conceptions of racism in relation to economics (Miles 1982, 1988). The debate is racially coloured in human rights reports that compare Greek treatment of Albanians with that of black residents in Greece (Baldwin-Edwards 6 November 2003, Raptis 16 November 2003). This takes us away from nineteenth-century understandings of Albanian identity within the Greek nation and transforms the relationship between Greeks and Albanians into an issue of domestic repression that originates in economic inequalities.

The resurgence of fascist propaganda following the episode in Michaniona was one of the most disconcerting developments. On 28 October 2003, an extremist right-wing group, Chrysi Avgi, created embarrassing episodes during an Athenian parade because an Albanian girl who excelled in her school in Athens carried the Greek flag. Although Chrysi Avgi propagates nationalist ideas, its political programme is also permeated by racism, as Nazi values comprise the core of its ideology. On the day Chrysi Avgi orchestrated these episodes, other right-wing and junta advocates commemorated the Metaxas dictatorship. Former members of the junta (1968–1974) Stylianos Pattakos, Ioannis Ladas and Spyros Zournatzis, present at the event, called for a ‘return of the Greek flag to the Greeks’ (Ta Nea 29 October 2003). The presence of junta actors in the episode should not be dismissed: supporters of the last dictatorship are still active in Greece, maintaining their own websites to propagate fascist ideas. One of those websites recently returned to the question of the Greek parade and its history, arguing vigorously that Metaxas’ involvement in the organization of Greek resistance against the Axis Powers should be reinstated in school curricula (see The Fourth of August Project, an
on-line database with gateways and hyperlinks). Examining these two episodes together, we realize that racist and nationalist components co-exist. The introduction of flag display, parading and nationalist festivities were, indeed, institutionalized during the Metaxas regime (1939) (Karakasidou 2000, p. 227), and used by subsequent regimes and governments for the cultivation of patriotic feeling. But the resurgence of fascist hatred directed against non-natives is an addition to the gamut of Greek politics that encourages the transmutation of Greek nationalist discourse into racism.

Conclusion

This article used an episode in a marginal country of Europe to examine the ways in which national boundaries are drawn and contested at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Despite its peculiarities, which are related to the specific European histories in which Greek identity was trapped and moulded, the present case study encapsulates what David Sutton (2000) has beautifully termed ‘local conversations with global implication’. Sutton’s remark was adapted in my study: I did not examine the ways in which the episode unfolded in the locality of Nea Michaniona, but how the discourses it re- enacted circulated in the channels of national politics. The Michaniote’s pledge not to let an Albanian ‘touch her flag or sing her national anthem’ was echoed in Greek national debates upon the flag, the parade, the place of the unlucky Albanian student in Greek society and the fate of Greek identity in the European redrawing of maps of belonging. While drafting obligatory conclusions, one realizes that Greek national debates have two discursive layers and not one. Although their separate examination does not do justice to their interconnection, for reasons of clarity and convenience we have to present them individually. In the first discursive layer we find out that in some cases clear-cut divisions between civic and ethnic definitions of national identity live only in the scientific laboratories of sociology: the ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’ become interchangeable in Greek national self-narration, supporting practices of social exclusion and marginalization likewise. Moreover, in contemporary Greece ethnic notions of identity acquire a naturalized status that opens up dangerous possibilities for confusion between ‘ethnic’ and ‘racial’ self-definitions. The relationship between the ‘ethnic’ and the ‘racial’ is mediated in our case through the imposition of official versions of history that originate outside the domain of the ‘nation’, in the ‘crypto-colonial’ situations in which the Greek state was born. Put simply, past European discourses of Greek unity and continuity regulate present Greek self-narration and dictate a conflation of ideas of culture, ethnicity and ‘race’. We are already on the second discursive layer, where understandings of the
national past based on experience or custom, are strategically replaced by history, or official discourses of self-presentation to outsiders (Herzfeld 1987; Sutton 2000). To exemplify this we can recall the split between ideas of ‘honorary Greek-ness’, which are directed to an imaginary contemporary ‘European audience’, and moral panics of contamination, which symbolically protect the intimate national terrain by constantly referring back to past European discourses of Greek purity. These overlapping discourses contribute to a sense of historical continuity and memory, a prerequisite for the preservation of the Greek ‘imagined community’. At the same time, they make clear that twenty-first century ‘nations’ do not live in watertight compartments but are shaped by political and ideological forces that reside outside them. Uses of official versions of Greek history can be viewed as a response to current practices of European homogenization that keep contemporary Greece in a subordinate position within the EU. Instead of looking at nationalist ‘eruptions’ in marginal countries such as Greece with suspicion, it may be better if we first consider our understandings of their ‘marginality’; and instead of celebrating the European ‘civic renaissance’, examine its implementation and consequences in actual contexts and social milieux.

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