The politics of ‘forgetting’ as poetics of belonging: between Greek self-narration and reappraisal (Michaniona, 2000/3)

RODANTHI TZANELLI
School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds, UK

ABSTRACT. The repressive mechanisms of collective memory have received due attention in the social sciences, with scholars examining the ethics of remembering and forgetting and their political implications. This study focuses on episodes that took place in a Northern Greek town in 2000 and 2003, when an Albanian student was twice denied the right to hold the Greek flag during a commemorative national parade. It is argued that this line of action against the student, representative of Greek attitudes towards immigrants in Greece, asserted the locality’s participation in the Greek ‘imagined community’. This was made possible through a process of ‘forgetting’ the locality’s history and the analogies this presents with the experience of contemporary immigration. Questioning the ethical implications of this collective decision, the article links regional micro-politics to nationalist discourses that originate in the European project itself.

KEYWORDS: collective memory, Europe, Greece, immigration, nationalism.

Context and analytical framework

In October 2000 Odysseus Cenai (Odhise Qenaj), an Albanian student from the school of Nea Michaniona in Greece, found himself at the centre of a furore. Parents of many pupils at the local school objected to his bearing the Greek flag during the parade with which Greeks celebrate their Second World War history – 28 October is recognised as a national day, and the argument was that a foreigner could not carry a Greek national symbol. Cenai’s election as flag-bearer was incontrovertible: he, amongst dozens of schoolchildren, had excelled in his school performance. It is customary for the best pupil to carry the flag in national parades, although, as soon became evident, most locals thought that such pupils ought to be Greek. A great confusion characterised the debate on the implications of allowing a ‘foreigner’ to represent Greece on such a special occasion. The episode was given extensive publicity, with many
Greek and foreign television channels arguing for or against the cause. The Greek socialist government of PA.SO.K. (*Panhellenio Sosialistiko Kinima*) found itself in an awkward position, supporting Cenai and running against nationalist feelings. The controversy resurfaced in the same Greek locality in October 2003, when Cenai was once more nominated the best pupil of the year. Again, his right to hold the Greek flag was contested, and Cenai himself decided to withdraw.

This episode, which comprises the paper’s ethnographic focal point, is misleadingly ‘regional’ in character: parading and raising the national flag are widespread nationalist practices. In Greece, the institution of 28 October as a national day was part of the state’s post-war attempt to glorify the Greek Second World War experience (Karakasidou 2000: 223). Historical discourse links this day to Greece’s involvement in the Second World War: on 28 October 1940, as the story goes, the John Metaxas authoritarian regime (4 August 1936–29 January 1941) rejected the ultimatum the Axis Forces delivered to the ‘Greek nation’ to surrender. This is the core narrative proffered by the *Ohi* (‘No’) day, still celebrated nation-wide as the moment of national unity in adversity. The Greek – Albanian conflict that followed Metaxas’ response to Mussolini (as Albania was an Italian ally) entered the Greek national register as the ultimate act of patriotic sacrifice (Karakasidou 2000: 241). Today Greeks seem to forget the background of the parading that accompanies *Ohi* commemorations, a ritual that the colonels’ regime of 1967–74 made central to Greek nationalist celebrations. The central status that the 1967–74 dictatorship awarded to *Ohi* day served a political agenda: remembering the trauma of war, while refusing to acknowledge the national schism of the Greek civil war that followed a few years later (1947–49), served to protect a national cohesion that even today is being contested by political divisions even within Greek families that date back to post-war atrocities.

*Ohi* day is significant for Northern Greeks in particular, because it symbolises the first time that Macedonia stood as part of the nation-state in the forefront of an unequal conflict with the colossal Italian-German enemy. As Macedonia has been a politically contested region in the Balkans since the slow decomposition of the Ottoman empire in the late nineteenth century, its recognition by the Greek state through its inclusion in nationalist narratives of war sacrifice matters a lot. It could be argued that the reaction to Cenai’s election as flag-bearer comprises a nodal point in the articulation of (Northern) Greek identity. Parading is a formalised act of calendrical nature, which ‘does not simply imply continuity, it claims it’ (Connerton 1989: 45). It was no coincidence then that in that Northern town Cenai was not allowed to carry a national symbol: ‘symbols [are] powerful differentiators and reminders of the unique culture of the ethnic community’ (Smith 2003: 191). The national flag came to be venerated through the 28 October celebrations during the Metaxas era, as a counteraction to alleged communist disrespect for national symbols. Clearly, in 2000/3 the admission of an alien into such a long-standing ritual
celebration (by bestowing upon him the safeguarding role of the ethno-symbol par excellence) was seen as an act of national ‘desecration’.

But exactly what was violated in that marginal corner of Greece? The answer, which seems to be straightforward, becomes very complex when we enter the labyrinths of regional and national histories. I would like to explore the 2000/3 incident by placing it in two intertwined contexts. The first context points to macro-social processes – namely, the ways in which political discourse on national belonging is constructed in a country that has been presented in European self-definitions as the ‘cradle of European civilisation’ in the past, and, at the same time, has a marginal part to play, today, in the agenda of European integration. The second context is micro-social: the nature of Michaniote cohesion. An engagement with locals is important for understanding the nature of their resentment against Albanian newcomers. Significantly, Michaniona was an Anatolian (Asia Minor) refugee settlement founded in 1923/4. The Michaniotes still preserve memories of their difference vis-à-vis the autochthones (Greek natives) that never figure in the 2000/3 episodes. In addition, although the experience of economic migration is familiar in the locality and in contemporary Greek history, the Michaniotes consign it to oblivion.

I understand both Michaniote memory and forgetting as part of the same process of identity making. Collective remembering may be central to the creation of social bonding (Halbwachs 1992: 53), but it can also become a destabilising force within a community (Lowenthal 1985: 72). Consequently, mechanisms of repression, obliteration and distortion come to the fore to prevent the catastrophic consequences the resurgence of the past may have (Adorno 1986: 1117). Forgetting exists within the structure of Michaniote memory and codifies regional history in ways both fascinating and poignant. It is vital to have this as a starting point when we focus on a locality that comprised groups who were initially considered national pariahs. Undoubtedly, had we accepted the defensive Michaniote attitude towards Cenai, we would have discarded the moral ambiguities of the past and freed the political potential of collective memory (Pensky 1989: 353–5). Nevertheless, ‘forgetting’ the unpleasant aspects of the past in order to revitalise our national self-image (Stürmer 1990; Westergaard Madsen 2000) is a dangerous anaesthetic to self-understanding and a betrayal of our commitment to social justice. A recollection of the days of exclusion in the Michaniote historical chronicles during the Cenai episode would have secured both an honest self-narration and an ‘anamnestic solidarity’ (Habermas 1989: 233; Habermas 1987) with past Greek suffering. But the Michaniotes’ disconnection of past and present experience disabled this process for the sake of contemporary political needs.

This form of ‘memorial regression’ may be erroneously seen as an isolated expression of belonging with no apparent implications on the national or international level. But such a thesis would ignore the fact that the object of Michaniote hatred was the child of an Albanian family that had migrated to Greece in search of a better future. The story of Cenai’s family is typical,
rather than exceptional, in the context of European integration. The project of European integration is prescribed from those centres of policy-making that still have the aura of legend in marginal places such as Greece. But the political marginality of Greece itself, constantly confirmed by its exclusion from debates upon the nature of the ‘new Europe’ (Gourgouris 1992), also plays a role in our understanding of anti-Albanian sentiment in Michaniona. On a national level, the admission of foreign labour from countries even weaker than Greece institutionalises hierarchies of economic power within Europe, simultaneously confirming the formulaic subordination of the Greek periphery to the European centre (Sutton 2000: 152; Wallerstein 1974). On both national and regional levels (Foster 1991: 236), the introduction of foreigners into a country that strives for political recognition in Europe is being regarded as a threat to its ‘European-ness’ (Ray 2002: 5.2, 5.4). Whereas the project of ‘Europeanisation’ dictates economic integration and gestures towards a more ‘technocratic’ model of transnational governance by Western centres, in Greece it takes the form of nationalist understandings of ‘cultural purity’ and racial continuity that hold fast to historical traditionalism (Delanty 1995a: 148). From a travelling nation Greeks have turned into a host of underprivileged others, and the project of national integration has both hardened backward-looking visions of national identity and weakened the ability to reflect upon the Greek émigré experience of exclusion in the past.

The term ‘poetics’ originates in Herzfeld’s anthropological analysis of Greek culture. His Aristotelian conception of ‘social poetics’ (Herzfeld 1985: 10–1) as a grandiose ‘front stage’ (Goffman 1987: 114–15), in which social identity acquires the uniformity that has never existed ‘behind the scenes’, is extended here to cover collective identity performance. The way the Greek past is narrated within the intimate space of the community tells us something about the struggle for refugee integration into Greek society as well as perceptions of Greek immigration to countries wealthier than the Greek ‘homeland’. The repression of this past in the 2000/3 local nationalist discourse asserts Michaniote Greekness though the process of Cenai’s ostracisation. Brief reference to similar episodes shows that this practice of exclusion becomes an ‘infinite [Greek] gesture’ (Žižek 1999: 18), which defiantly denies any Albanian ‘others’ the right to invade the private space of the ‘nation’ (Herzfeld 1997). Whereas I question Michaniote forgetting on moral grounds, I examine the poetics of belonging in a more anthropological/sociological fashion. The two work together to provide a holistic picture of the episode, its causes, politics and ethics.

My overall analysis will suggest that the Michaniotes’ politics of ‘forgetting’ their past operates as poetics of belonging, narratives of a ‘pure’ Greekness actualised in the exclusion of ‘impure’ Albanians from the Greek ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991). The ‘imagined community’ that I depict here does not live on the level of theoretical abstraction; it is constituted through everyday alliances and divisions within localities. This places local self-narration right at the centre of nationalist discourse, suggesting that the
nation is an everyday popular referendum that communicates with ‘high brow’ discourse. Official manifestations of nationalism and local types of ritual identity performance are often closely intertwined (Rapport 2002b: 27; Brown and Theodossopoulos 2004: 8). But I do not seek to reiterate Gellner’s (1998) argument that nationalism is the product of elite hegemony, because even the Greek state was hegemonised by external political forces a long time ago. Thus, some of the internal debates I present were not consolidated in domestic contexts, but take us back to the political evolution of the pan-European project, where the nation-state and modern Greek identity were formed. At the same time, Michaniote forgetting is conditioned by specific local histories of migration from Asia Minor. Hence, we must view the alignment of Michaniote forgetting with official histories of national integration primarily as a strategic move that bestows versions of Michaniote-Greek identity with authority.

At this early stage I must state that my relationship with the Michaniotes is more intimate than that of any anthropologist. As a Michaniote who lives abroad, I am both well acquainted with, and distanced from, the Michaniote social microcosm in which the drama took place. Such confessions may raise a few eyebrows, but are central to my contention that the traditional division between observer and observed, subject and object, is already problematic in the face of the familiarity that anthropologists establish with the communities they study (Rapport 2002a: 17). The transition from the cultural intimacy of the natives to the social intimacy in fieldwork is never uneventful – loyalties are always at stake and moral stances may be adopted, even unconsciously. After all, retaining a healthy balance between other- and self-examination is a problem as old as the ethnographic project of Malinowski (1967), who saw in local self-knowledge the practice of ethnography itself.

Therefore, I cannot deny that my study places me in the interstices between anthropological reflexivity (that still struggles to retain its scientific, ‘objective’ stance) and local self-understanding. But my agency here takes me beyond that of a local ‘story-teller’: my narrative does not aim to support regional traditions, thus reproducing native ideological conundrums (Just 1995: 285–6) but instead offers a synthetic understanding of them (Thomas 1996). My task is to interpret the structure of Michaniote experience, not to re-enact it (Turner 1986: 35), and therefore echoes Habermas’ Benjaminian (1992: 249) take on the ‘historians’ debate’ (Historikerstreit): it is marked by an attempt to resurrect those national traditions that received a nearly fatal blow during the Cenai episode. These traditions would generate a feeling of guilt if put alongside Michaniote attitudes, but may introduce a rational understanding of equality and cultural diversity (Habermas 1989: 226–7).

In the course of my five-year-long ethnographic research, I never managed to escape the bipolarism of ‘us’ and ‘them’. As an occasional ‘insider’, I was entrusted with stories and incidents, which could not be revealed to my readers as such, and certainly not eponymously. Any names that appear in this paper are fictional, with the exception of individuals who had adminis-
trative responsibilities at the time. I was assisted in my research by locals who are also never named in this paper. Although I made attempts to explain my objectives to them, I cannot be sure that they fully understood my refusal to partake in their actions. They are, therefore, not responsible for any speculations that appear in this paper.

Regional (auto)biographies

The town of Nea Michaniona is situated on the western side of the Thermaikos Gulf, 75 km from Thessaloniki, the largest city of Northern Greece. Having now a permanent population of just over 7,000, the town has formed a municipality together with the neighbouring village of Kerasia and enjoys a degree of administrative autonomy with a council and a mayor based in the town. Historically, it belongs to a cluster of villages and towns (Angelochori, Kerasia, Baktse, Perea) founded by refugees who fled the coastal parts of the crumbling Ottoman empire after or during the last Turkish – Greek war (1919–22), an offshoot of the Great War, often examined within the framework of the new imperialist vision that thrived in European countries such as Britain, France and Germany. As in other refugee settlements in Greece (Hirschon 1998: 32), in Michaniona the idea that the ‘Great European Powers’ incited Turkish – Greek hostility is widespread. This externalisation of blaming appears also in Greek historiography: in school textbooks, the context of the ‘Asia Minor Catastrophe’, as the war of 1919–22 is commonly known, is linked to British and French aspirations to control economically the inner part of the Ottoman empire, especially the oil-rich region of Mosul (Northern Iraq). Following the partition of the Ottoman empire into spheres of influence, Mosul attained economic value for the British, who wanted to retain some control of the passage to India and the oil supplies of Mosul that opened the way to Palestine. British support of Greek expansionism in Asia Minor aimed to counterbalance the French influence by generating a friendlier environment for the British in the region. It is held that the Asia Minor War itself was the most crucial phase of the Greek expansionism known as the ‘Great Idea’, with tragic consequences for the Greek populations of Turkey (Smith 1973; Kitromilides 1992).

‘Nea’ (new) Michaniona claims direct descent from ‘Palaia’ (old) Michaniona, a village close to the historic town of Peramos. It was part of a cluster of villages in Kyzikos (Kapidag), a peninsula situated on the Asian side of the Sea of Marmara (Propontis) between the passage of Bosphorus that links Marmara to the Aegean, and the Dardanelles (Canakkale) that open up to the Black Sea. In reality, the first-generation Michaniotes make up less than half of Michaniona’s founding population, with first-generation Avdimiotes from Eastern Thrace claiming the lion’s share in the foundation of the town and the socio-economic organisation of Michaniote life. To this patchwork of groups, we may add refugees from Imvros (Gökçeada) and Tenedos (Bozcaada), two
islands located outside the Bosporus and granted to Turkey with the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne (Gallant 2001: 145–6) that officially ended the Turkish–Greek war. Imvriotes and Tenedioi came to Michaniona in waves, but most of them decided to abandon their native land in the 1950s, when the Turkish government initiated a programme of demographic ‘purification’ on the islands. These recent arrivals are still discussed even by third-generation ‘New’ Michaniotes in negative ways. The pejoratives used to describe Imvriotes and Tenedioi often allude to their ‘Turkish’ past and their ‘unruly’ character. Such historical-regional divides defined the spatio-social façade of the little town, and survive in the derelict buildings of the old machaládes (neighbourhoods) (Hirschon 1998: 23–6, 30–1). These past rivalries, which mirror the actual diversity of Anatolian refugee groups (Hirschon 2003: 19), are concealed from external critics – Greek politicians of status or foreigners. To the stereotypes that Anatolian refugees brought with them and passed on to younger generations we could add the Michaniote contempt for Epanomites (from the town of Epanomi), the actual natives of the region, who are often termed ‘Vlachs’, people of the mountains, uncouth and uncivilised. This pejorative denomination already sets refugee identity apart from Greek native identity, presenting the former as ‘open’ and sociable rather than nomadic (Tzanelli 2002), ‘closed’ and isolated. As has been revealed by other studies (Hirschon 1998: 4, 28–31), proud of the cosmopolitan flair of Asia Minor town life, refugees constructed a positive self-image as carriers of a glorious socio-economic heritage vis-à-vis that of the ‘less progressive’ Greek relatives of the metropolis, who remained trapped in Western discourses of backwardness and incompetence.

Although the Michaniotes describe their Asia Minor past as kserizomós (uprooting), they obstinately resist their representation as not fully recognised Greeks. This is the case with first-generation refugees but also with second- and third- generation locals (Hirschon 1998: 30–5; 1999: 162), who take pride in their Mikrasiatikí (Asia Minor) identity. The use of covert markers of self-definition (the Michaniotes are hardworking, clever and entrepreneurial as opposed to the native ‘Vlachs’) works as a substitute for more obvious markers of ethnicity, such as language or religion (Hirschon 1998: 5). Stereotypes are the ‘building materials for practical nationalism’ (Herzfeld 1992: 73), rhetorical devices that enable us to come to terms with distressing social realities (Theodossopoulos 2003: 181; Brown and Theodossopoulos 2004: 4), and as such they tell us a story about local social poetics.

But local poetics become implicated in national poetics – or, to be more precise, local self-presentations refract national histories. Like most Anatolian refugees, the first-generation Michaniotes belong to a social group that was not welcomed in Greece in 1923. In the early twentieth century, the Greek state was in ruins: four wars (the Balkan Wars (1911–13), the Great War (1914–19) the Asia Minor War (1919–22)) left the Greek economy in a rather bad state. The arrival of almost a million souls from the Anatolian lands that the Greeks once aspired to annex added to this burden. Officially, the Greek
state never regarded these refugees as ‘dispossessed “others’ who, having crossed international boundaries, remain[ed] a “categorical anomaly”’ (Voutira 2003: 148): citizenship rights were granted to them incontrovertibly. Unofficially, though, once territorial distance ceased to exist, the ‘Greekness’ of the Anatolian populations was contested by Greek natives who saw these ‘aliens’ claiming land and civic rights (Hirschon 1998: 10). Undoubtedly, the hostility between natives and Anatolian refugees was reciprocal, as the latter did not adopt a very favourable attitude towards their metropolitan hosts. But when today Michaniotes talk about their dislocation, their experience of social exclusion comes to the fore. ‘We were [for the locals] giaourtovapitisménès (baptised in yoghurt), tourkáles (Turks), pastrikés (obsessively clean – to hide the symbolic “dirt”) and “poutánes” (whores),’ said an old Michaniote lady to me years ago. Chagrin accompanies such widespread community memories, echoing accounts of refugees from other parts of Greece (Hirschon 1998: 31).

But discursive contradictions do manifest themselves in Michaniote self-presentations: although an official version of Michaniote history is non-existent, local historians have compensated for this gap. In their account, ‘old’ Michaniona is integrated in Kyzikian myths and understandings of ancient Greek mythology. In an account produced in 1968 by Gregorios Avgerinos Sgouridis, the history of Kyzikos is narrated in relation to ancient Greek mythology:

It will be impossible to bring up all of the history of this glorious city that existed for more than 2,000 years and ruled over a large area from the Hellespont, the Bosphorus, all of the Propontis (Sea of Marmara), and its interior lands. We will restrict ourselves to give a general idea of what was Kyzikos . . . and how significant was its role in the civilization that flourished and achieved in the long Greek history.

. . . As to the founding of the City of Kyzikos, tradition that is referred to by ancient writers says that it was built by Kyzikos who was the son of the god Apollo. Another tradition says that the son of Apollo and Stilbis, Aneas, immigrated from Thessaly to the Hellespont. There he married his daughter Eniti to the king of Thrace, Eusoros, and from this marriage was born Kyzikos. As we see the beginnings of Kyzikos were reputed godly (Peramos Homepage, ch. 2, 1998: 2–4).

This monograph was discovered by a Greek refugee and handed to Steve Manitsas, a second-generation Greek American who lives in San Francisco. Manitsas’ interest in family history led him to construct a website in which he presents a translated version of the work, photographs from Kyzikos and other correspondence that he exchanged with people who trace their origins in the same region. The book is endorsed and recommended by Greeks who live both within and outside Greece. Sgouridis’ reference to ancient Greek mythology establishes a Michaniote genealogy structurally homologous to the ways in which Greek nationalist discourse reclaims ancient Greek ancestry (Herzfeld 1987). Since its inception in Western Privy Councils and philhellenic circles, modern Greece was under pressure to conform to ‘European’ political standards of administration and conduct derived from an imagined ‘Greek’

antiquity. Of course, this ‘Europe’ has remained a nebulous category to the present (Delanty 1995b), but at the time the Greek inability to respond to such demands was perceived as a failure and resulted in the labelling of the state and its people as semi-Oriental, like their past Ottoman rulers. Michaniote attempts to follow the nationalist antiquity-inspired paradigm are better illustrated in the official website of Michaniona, which combines references to the refugee and the ancient Greek past of the area. The website forges Greek continuity from antiquity to the present: we are informed that the town ‘has a special cultural heritage’, as it was built on the ancient Greek settlement of Aenia, but that the area ‘was populated during the Roman and Byzantine periods’ and throughout Turkish occupation. Part of the municipality’s cultural mission statement is to conserve any surviving monuments in the region (Aegean Axs 2003; Dimos Michanionas 2003). This is a deliberate attempt by the local administration to fit local identity into contemporary nationalist political discourse that supports Greek continuity from antiquity to the present. Past narratives of Greek continuity, the contemporary socio-economic conditions of the town and concerns over a viable political future merge in such narratives. Moreover, narratives of ethnic continuity are openly challenged today by another wave of changes that comes from Europe to contest established notions of local belonging.

Local voice and (inter)national politics

If Greece’s global political voice is weak, Michaniona’s protests are whispers fading in the global background. European integration has triggered a process of socio-cultural change: traditionally a fishing town, Michaniona proudly claims to have one of the biggest fishing fleets in Northern Greece. In the 1980s a series of EU loans boosted the local economy, enabling Michaniotes to repair their boats and expand their businesses. However, short-term investment recently led some to the verge of bankruptcy. New EU restrictions on fishing, and pollution of the local waters, is forcing many to sail further and further away from the North in search of fish. These grim developments make Michaniotes place greater emphasis on tertiary education, encouraging their children to excel at school and conform to European standards of professional competence. At the same time, they engage in endless criticism of the effects of neoploitismos (the nouveau riche culture) upon the new generation, making youngsters ‘indifferent to their future’. This formulaic grievance is a universal Greek phenomenon and points to a reciprocal definition of status and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984: 132). Like most Greeks, Michaniotes simply identify social recognition with the status that education bestows upon individuals (Stewart 1991: 126; Sutton 2000). This marks a departure from traditional Michaniote understandings of identity: social and geographic mobility goes against the first and the second generation’s socio-cultural embeddedness.
The local economy has also suffered from the war in former Yugoslavia, which discouraged many returning Balkan and German tourists from visiting the town in the summer. The guesthouses that once thrived remain empty or are filled with students from the local Maritime School and immigrant workers. Immigrant labour is a phenomenon of the 1990s, when Greece opened its borders to other countries. The debate on immigration policies dates back to the ‘repatriation’ of Greeks from the USSR in the 1980s, but it was the collapse of the Soviet Union and of other communist regimes at the start of the 1990s that forced Greek policy-makers to address the issue seriously. In 1997, ‘green cards’ (i.e. work permits) were given to immigrants to reside in the country, although it was not until the adoption of legislation in 2001 that a proper policy framework was introduced for the irregular immigrants. The inefficiency of the Greek bureaucratic machine, the massive numbers of immigrants and Greek institutional xenophobia led to unregulated deportations or to unreasonably long waiting periods for legalisation.

Immigrants have already formed a new ‘underclass’ that supplies last-minute services and takes up the jobs that locals refuse to do any more (household and construction chores) (Lazaridis and Wickens 1999; Kiprianos et al. 2003). The largest immigrant group in Michaniona is the Albanian. There are, however, also some immigrants from the Middle East and Egypt, mainly employed as assistants in the fishing business, who are excluded from the community, even though they do not constitute targets and are described as ‘peaceful’ and ‘hardworking’. Racism boils under the surface, but is persistently being denied – lack of ‘cultural communication’ is usually the excuse presented to critics of this attitude (Barker 1981). The Albanian case is somewhat different: constant verbal attacks upon Albanians are part of everyday routines. Drawing upon media discourses of disorder and criminality (Seremetakis 1996: 489; Tzanelli 2006: 42–3), Michaniotes accuse Albanians of ‘unruliness’, drug dealing and ‘uncivilised behaviour’. The condemnation is near-universal in the community and has been communicated to the third generation, with children reproducing the same socio-cultural divisions at school.

Both in 2000 and 2003, the flame of dispute was ignited within local school management. Days before the parade, Cenai’s nomination was objected to by members of the Council of Parents and Minors’ Guardians, a local establishment comprising parents of schoolchildren and bestowed with economic and administrative management. Two Michaniotes told me that the evening before the 2000 parade a group of council members visited Cenai’s house to ‘intimidate him’. Cenai, then fifteen years old, ‘succumbed to their pressure’ and handed the flag to them. Kyr Michalis, another local, explained to me that the Michaniotes were upset because the local authorities had allowed Cenai to keep the flag at home. He exclaimed that Albanians are kopróskyla (literary ‘dung-dogs’) that ‘covet Greece’ because of its ‘admired history’. The vocabulary deserves attention: ‘dung-dogs’ are in the Michaniote vernacular the ‘dirty’ and careless individuals who, like stray dogs, have no master.
A non-domesticated dog is a powerful metaphor for the transgressor of social norms. Domesticity is venerated by Michaniotes to such an extent that it becomes unthinkable for someone to survive outside the safe haven of their ‘home’ (Du Boulay 1994: 143). Kyr Michalis’ reference to ‘dung’ collapsed the distinction between the natural and social order: like excrement that ‘has traversed the boundary of the body’ (Douglas 1999: 122), an Albanian identity that refuses to be assimilated had traversed the boundary of the Michaniote Greek community. The comment may have sprung from Cenai’s declaration that he loves Greece but he feels Albanian; this angered many Michaniotes, who found the ‘incongruity’ of his civic and ethnic identity ‘disgusting’. Kyr Michalis’ account also borrowed from the Orthodox cosmological order (Campbell 1964; Stewart 1991: 15): in his mind the devilish ‘evil eye’ that ‘covets’ the lustrous Greek history the Michaniotes claim for themselves was identified with an exotic (Albanian) identity. The Orthodox vocabulary was mustered also because of the debate upon Cenai’s religious identity in the media: upon arrival in Greece, Cenai’s parents had christened him to assist in his social integration (Raptis 2003). For historical reasons that date back to Ottoman occupation, religion has been a defining characteristic of Greekness. Greekness was discussed in relation to religion in the national press (Macedonia 24 October 2003), but in Michaniona many refused to accept Cenai’s inclusion in the community because of what they called ‘his strategic conversion [to Christianity]’. Others claimed that his parents lied about his baptism, ‘which will be done now secretly to observe the types’.

The rationale of Kyr Michalis’ account figures in subsequent encounters of Michaniotes with local administrators and government representatives who sided with Cenai. Both were described as ‘dung-dogs’ who want to destroy ‘Greek identity’ with ‘their progressive ideas’. In effect, the Michaniotes were using their intimate lexicon (Herzfeld 1997: 43ff.) to exorcise ‘two demons’ at the same time: like the Albanians, the ‘state’ and its agents were viewed as external forces that disrupt the order of Michaniote – and by extension, Greek national – life. This is not a mere linguistic game, because it did support and shape political action. Even the local mayor, who initially adopted a neutral attitude in the affair, was forced by his constituents to make up his mind. In 2000, his official line was similar to that of the Minister of Culture, Petros Efthymiou, and the then Minister of Macedonia and Thrace, Charis Kastanidis, who promised to introduce scholarships for foreign students who achieve high grades (HR-Net 31 October 2000). The official response to the episode had already assumed great dimensions with the protestations of Former Minister Theodoros Pangalos (Baldwin-Edwards 2003) and even the announcement of the former conservative leader, Miltiadis Evert, that he would support Cenai’s naturalisation (Ta Nea 27 October 2003). However, when in 2003 locals organised themselves against PA.SO.K.’s attempts to support Albanian students, the same Michaniote mayor declared that he could not ignore his constituents and he would fight to remove the racist label
they had acquired. In these reactions we encounter the clash between universalist and particularist definitions of belonging (Purvis and Hunt 1999: 461; Delanty 2002: 346–7) that obstruct the project of Europeanisation. Especially in southeastern European nation-states, civic belonging is based on a ‘particularist conception of the “people”, i.e. the community of which each citizen is a member’ (Smith 1995: 98) that is predicated on the presupposition that the ‘people’ share ethnic ties based on given commonality (Geertz 1963). For Greeks, who have such fixed understandings of identity based on ethnic ties, Cenai, the child of Albanian immigrants rather than someone born and raised as Greek, was an anomaly to be disposed of.

October 2003 marked a turning point from the mild protests of 2000. The teachers’ council firmly opposed Michaniote reactions and refused to transform the school into a ‘nationalist battleground’. One of the high school teachers (in her attempt to force the Parent’s Council and the Michaniotes ‘to behave like civilised citizens’) invited television channels to record local episodes. This had hardly any effect. Two men told me that this teacher has always been a komatóskylo (a ‘party dog’, blind follower of party agendas) and that ‘she deserved to be fired for that’. Both men were adherents to the conservative party of Nea Dimokratia (New Democracy), as opposed to the schoolteacher, who supports PA.SO.K. The politicisation of Michaniote social life is so strong that everything was filtered through party loyalties. These political divisions were reproduced during the visit the new Minister of Macedonia and Thrace, Charis Kastanidis, paid to Michaniona in 2003. The meeting was broadcast nationally, giving many Michaniotes the opportunity to raise their voice. Many, mostly supporters of Nea Dimokratia, complained that they were forgotten until then by the government, but now they are used for ‘all political intents and purposes’ (Adesmeftos Typos 27 October 2003). I found out what this meant from Kyria Maria, who explained that the government is using the incident to grant citizenship to more Albanians. ‘What they want is to win the next elections’, she said, ‘and they are going to sell civic rights to foreigners in return.’ As the elections were approaching, this comment was taken seriously. Kastanidis found it impossible to appease the locals, who deplored his intervention shouting ‘Hellas [Greece] does not exist on paper’. Their condemnation shows the persistence of discourses that favour a conception of the ‘nation’ as an organic entity, not as a group that is bound by sets of regulations and rights accessible and open to all (Smith 1986: 144–7). In contrast, the government of PA.SO.K., taking into account appeals to the European Court of Human Rights against Greece (Greek Helsinki Monitor, 4 November 1998), claimed the Europeanist model of civic participation as a universal right (Delanty 1995b, 2002; Roudometof 1999: 234) and condemned the Michaniote ethnonationalist approach. The attack upon a state agent illustrates how the relationship of the Michaniotes with the national centre is ever-shifting: the complaint here is not that ‘the state has failed to act as a fair adjudicator [but that] it failed to be partial [that is, to the speaker’s interests]’ (Herzfeld 2002: 125).
The Cenai controversy suggests that right-wing Michaniotes invariably supported practices of exclusion, as opposed to the majority of left-wing locals who upheld an inclusive model of Greekness. This clash of local attitudes appeared to mirror national divisions between the political Left and Right. In reality though, even some adherents of PA.SO.K. aligned with the neo-conservative hard line: two acquaintances from the two ends of the political spectrum did not hesitate to say that Cenai ‘does not belong here’. Using the term óksoapodó (the ‘out of here’, the Devil) to describe him, they symbolically exorcised an ethnic outsider. Therefore, even if Michaniote attitudes were articulated through party loyalties, the dividing line between left- and right-wing supporters might have been thinner than at first sight: definitions of Greekness on the basis of symbolic/ethnic bonding informed the attitude of most of my compatriots.

In 2003, the Cenai controversy incited discussion on the so-called Albanian Epos of 1940–41, a regrettable coincidence for Cenai, who was being educated in a system that favours the political uses of the past. As pupils in all Greek schools, Michaniote pupils learn in their history classes to be proud of Greece’s Second World War resistance (Frangoudaki and Dragonas 1997). Ideological infiltration is characteristic of nationalist pedagogy, and in Greece it finds its finest expression in the celebration of national days with school festivities (Dragonas forthcoming; Theodossopoulos 2004: 31). This instigated concerns in other parts of Greece where foreign students were elected flag-bearers (To Vima, 28 October 2003). Some, predominantly conservative, Michaniotes organised pressure groups that visited another mayor in the region to convince him to take the flag from an Albanian student who had also excelled at school. ‘The flag belongs to those who can die for it – those born Greek’ said a second-generation Michaniote, echoing Anderson’s argument that patriotism becomes a synecdoche for blood bonding (1991: 141 ff.). ‘If these bastards declare war against Greece, whose side is this kid going to take? For whom is he going to die – do you think it is going to be for us’?, someone said to me. From the outset the assumption was, as an older man vigorously pointed out, that to éma neró den gı´nete (the blood does not turn into water), a Greek expression that likens the Michaniote sense of identity to that of kinship bonds (Hirschon 1999: 159; Herzfeld 2002: 217). Nation-states often trespass the boundary of ‘rational’ self-presentation by adopting the symbolic language of kinship (Herzfeld 1992: 148): on such occasions, the state begins to operate like the pater of the ‘nation’ and the ‘nation’ like an extended family. The conflation and emotive connection of kinship bonds with community solidarity overdetermined social evaluations of actors in the Michaniote incident (Just 2000: 94–5). To be ‘of the same blood’ is to be morally committed to the community’s pursuits and agendas as an ‘insider’.

The most radical line of action came from pupils of the local High School who, shortly before the 2003 parade, organised a meeting to discuss the controversy. Almost half of the schoolchildren decided to barricade
themselves in their school and ‘go on strike’ to express their indignation at having an Albanian carrying the flag. The action reproduced Michaniote nationalist ideology down to its minutest detail. The graffiti that was sprayed on the walls of the high school (‘Hellas [of] Christian Greeks’, ‘The flag belongs to us’) dealt the final blow. ‘We like our classmate’, said a young student, ‘but we can’t give him what belongs to us’. Many schoolchildren expressed their shame for the ‘smearing’ of their glorious history by an Albanian. One teenager in particular, repeating the words of his parents, claimed that school standards deteriorated with the arrival of Albanian students. The defenders of Cenai simply withdrew from the argument, but the language of honour and shaming continued to circulate within the school. A parent told me that only those who had *filótimo* (love of honour) ‘responded vigorously to the challenge’. There were, however, responses to Cenai’s exclusion from the parade that she did not mention in her account, such as that of the second-best student, who declined to take the place of Cenai as flag-bearer when locals presented her with this option. There were also allegations that from the outset Cenai’s exclusion aimed to make her, instead of Cenai, the year’s flag-bearer, and that even the pupils’ organised protests targeted Cenai’s success at school. Such gossip betrays the presence of competition (*zíleia*) in the Michaniote community. In the summer of 2005, I sat in the company of three Michaniotes who were discussing Cenai: for them, the pupil appeared to be better than his classmates in 2003 because he was ‘more experienced’ and ‘favoured for political reasons’. Thus, the Michaniote poetics of belonging manifested itself with protestations of favouritism: Cenai, an Albanian ‘outsider’, it was claimed, had always been at an advantage *vis-à-vis* his classmates because of support that stemmed from government policies towards foreign immigrants and because he was older than his fellow pupils. However, underneath the politics of the moment, there was a layer of Michaniote narratives of exclusion and suffering that remained untold during the Cenai controversy. Their examination will enable us to weave the histories of the locality into those of the nation.

**Solidary amnesia as poetics of belonging**

A dispassionate examination of the 2000/3 episodes suggests that it mattered little if the ‘reactionary’ Michaniotes were the critical mass: the poetics of belonging comprise the *front* stage of social-as-national life and those who complain in the backstage for the shabby performances others deliver make no real difference. As often happens, those who remained silent during the episodes began to speak after the 2003 parade: they did not want to become targets, because ‘they had a family to think of’. I was surprised when a local brought up the issue that had been highlighted repeatedly in the media: the Michaniotes have forgotten the *xenitiá* or immigration (*To Vima* 26 October 2003) and the Turkish persecutions they had to endure in the 1920s and after
Michaniote political choices in 2003 foreclosed a ‘re-appraisal’ (*Aufarbeitung*; Jedlowski 2001: 37) of local histories that would have enabled the locality to consider alternative attitudes to Cenai’s exclusion from the community. Unlike Habermas’ call for anamnestic solidarity (the establishment of a moral connection between the living and the victims of past atrocities), Michaniote nationalist discourse seemed to favour a process of ‘solidary amnesia’, which enabled members of the Michaniote community to forget their own socio-historical experience. Although Michaniote solidary amnesia was often filtered through party loyalties, in reality party politics simply masked the neo-conservative stance that defines Greek identity in general and in terms of exclusion of those who challenge a historically fictional ‘mechanical solidarity’. The comment of that local was revealing then: *during* the Cenai controversy the Michaniotes did not want to remember their Anatolian legacy or the tribulations of Greek emigration.

Ironically, the declaration that the Michaniotes ‘are more Greek than other Greeks’ betrayed unease: because the ‘nation’s’ self-fulfilment makes nationalist discourse tautological (Greekness becomes Greekness and is never relativised) the production of a ‘surplus’ (‘more Greek’) over the ‘nation’ is necessary for self-definition (*Žižek* 1991: 133). Therefore, the Cenai case is simultaneously a manifestation of nationalist sentiment and the expression of anxiety over the Michaniote role in Greek identity. This is why the absence of critical discourse over the Michaniote past during the 2000/3 controversy needs to be highlighted. The Michaniote *Mikrasiatiki* self-narration itself, which has been passed on to the younger generation, presents us with a rueful replacement of historical discourse (used in self-presentation to outsiders) with narratives of *custom* (informally sanctioned modes of self-presentation) (*Herzfeld* 1987; *Tonkin* 1992: 87; *Sutton* 2000). This explains why in Michaniote stories of exclusion we find references to the alleged ‘Ottoman’ past of the Greek identity, which Greek nationalist discourse constantly represses to counter historically potent European accusations of ‘orientalisation’. And yet, members of this community adopted in 2000/3 the selfsame attitude towards newcomers that Michaniona’s founding fathers had to endure less than a century ago. I am not suggesting that the two cases are identical: the Michaniotes always understood their identity as Greek, whereas Cenai declared that he feels Albanian and he comes from a country with a distinct national identity. When once I recalled the analogy between Albanian immigration and Greek refugee settlement, three third-generation Michaniotes stated to me that the two cases are not the same: unlike Cenai, ‘we’ are all Greeks. But the ever-present tribute to Michaniote past suffering through story-telling with its empathetic overtones evokes Adorno’s claim that mourning often functions as an expression of loss of self-respect (*Erikson* 1980). *All* generations of Michaniotes feel strongly for their Asia Minor
heritage and partake in its mourning as if it was their immediate experience of
displacement. Geographic and social mobility may be slowly loosening
Michaniote social ties, suggesting a cosmopolitanisation of identity among
progressive members of the community, yet collective attachment to what is
perceived as the ‘pure Greek past’ of Michaniote Mikrasiatiki identity
persists, blocking a re-evaluation of regional histories for reflexive purposes.
The experience of exclusion and the desire for recognition by the community
in which one lives remain the same in the 2000/3 context, after all.

This was discussed by the moderate newspaper To Vima, which made
references to mid-twentieth century Greek transatlantic and European migra-
tion. One of the consequences of yet another World War was an increase in
Greek emigration for economic reasons (Chasiotis 1993: 136–7): many Greeks
left their homeland for other parts of the globe, such as the United States,
Australia and Canada, or some better industrialised parts of Europe (Gallant
2001: 188). In the 1960s almost half a million Greeks found themselves in the
Federal Republic of Germany only as ‘guest workers’ (Gastarbeiter), often
supporting the whole family at home with their earnings. At the beginning of
the 1970s, political changes in the host country led to an increase in
unemployment and reductions in social benefit provision, inciting native
hostility against foreigners (Chasiotis 1993: 154). This experience of exclusion
found an unpleasant continuation in the Greek state’s inability to respond to
requests for repatriation (epanapatrismoś) (Mousourou 1991: 105). Even those
Greek migrants who managed to return to their hometowns, especially in
Macedonia, remained unemployed. Michaniona claims part of this history of
dislocation too, with some first and second-generation Michaniotes trying
their luck in countries such as Australia, the United States and Germany. My
sole reference to the analogy between these histories and the Albanian case
provoked my Michaniote interlocutors: not only did they dismiss the
comparison, but they also reminded me that ‘we’, unlike the Albanians, are
‘civilised’ and peace-loving guests. Many offensive remarks were made on the
American (‘uncouth’, ‘idiots’) and German (‘dictators’, ‘over-rationalised’,
‘calculative’) ‘characters’ by Michaniotes who had little familiarity with the
two cultures. The suggestion was that a sophisticated European-ancient
Greek culture is superior to that of ‘lesser’ Balkan nations and European or
transatlantic countries younger than Ancient Greece. Evidently, the locals
were aligning themselves with national narratives of identity that have
political currency abroad.

When Habermas debated the value of anamnestic solidarity, he associated
it with the invocation of collective guilt for the victims of the Holocaust. Only
by exposing the plurality of historical experience, he claimed, can historians
avoid the relativisation of past atrocities in historical discourse – their
mobilisation for political purposes (1989: 43–4). Habermas was committed
to the specificity of the ‘historians’ debate’, wanted to avoid generalisations
(1994: 26) and was more interested in the cross-generational survival of
memory and guilt for the suffering of abused others. But the Michaniotes

rejected the reappraisal of a past that would normally invoke guilt in its perpetrators – whether these be the shadowy ‘Great Powers of Europe’, the Greek natives or foreign policy-makers. More correctly, they seemed happy to attribute blame to all historical actors, excluding themselves and their grandfathers from the equation. This attitude secured Michaniote communal bonding and national membership, but was endorsed by a slant of memory, helping the locals to deny responsibility for their actions.

Conclusion

This paper examined the disconnection of regional socio-historical experience from collective self-presentation in a Northern Greek town in the context of an incident that involved the exclusion of an Albanian student from a commemorative parade. The ethnographic approach explored the relationship between regional and national Greek self-narration. I have explained that regional self-narration endorses the uniqueness of Michaniote (in relation to Greek) identity, a move that originates in the refugee past of the town. In the context of the 2000/3 controversy, however, the locals strategically identify with hegemonic narratives of Greek identity as historically uniform and ethnically pure instead. Such identification sidelines memories of the community’s initial exclusion from the national body in the 1920s; it also leads to a ‘repression’ of the history of Greek emigration in other countries, a history that is part of some Michaniotes’ personal experience. This manipulation of collective memory facilitates the exclusion of the Albanian student of the 2000/3 episodes from the Michaniote community and, by extension, the Greek imagined community. At the same time, Michaniote self-presentations highlight the tensions between historically embedded understandings of national identity and Greek aspirations to follow the project of Europeanisation with its post-national nuances and its prioritisation of civic rather than ethnic political commitment – a commitment the Northern Greek community of the story finds difficult to make.

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