

# Independent Cyprus? Postcoloniality and the Spectre of Europe

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## Abstract

*This essay reflects on the postcolonial condition in Cyprus and argues that political independence does not mean the end of colonialism. Power is not merely what prevents people from doing what they wish to do but also, and more importantly, what colonises the mind and predisposes them to think and act in specific ways. The main contention of the essay is that 'independent' Cyprus is ruled by the idea of Europe and the desire to be recognised and confirmed as a modern European society. The essay further argues that it is largely because of this idea that Greek and Turkish Cypriots have not managed to live together on this island. They have been trying to reach this phantom destination – modernity – travelling apart.*

**Keywords:** colonialism, postcolonialism, Europe, modernity, European hegemony, ethnic conflict

## The Colonised Mind

In a well-known book on subjection Judith Butler (1997) begins her discussion on the topic by pointing out that power is usually understood as something exerting pressure on the subject from the outside, preventing it from doing what it wishes to do or forcing it to do things that it does not wish to do. This is both the commonsense experience of power and the liberal conception of it but this modality, which is no doubt real, does not exhaust either what power is or what it does. If one were to follow Foucault, Butler says, one would have to acknowledge the existence of another form and function of power, namely, as that which is 'forming the subject as well ... providing the very conditions of its existence and the trajectory of its desire' (1997, p. 2). The consequences of this understanding of power are far-reaching. If it is power that forms the subject, if there is no subject without power, anything that the subject does, including resisting power, is bound to reproduce it. We live in 'postliberatory times', Butler says (1997, p. 18) in her book. If we do, it is because the subject (whether individual or collective) is beyond liberation.

The choice of Foucault as the leading authority on the question of power is understandable but it is important to bear in mind that the substance of his argument is not the medium through which it is expressed is hardly new, let alone 'postmodern'. That the subject is formed, that it is the

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product of historical, social and cultural conditions is a fundamental sociological premise whose development can be traced from Marx and Durkheim to Mannheim and Bourdieu, to mention only a few key figures. Related to this is the equally fundamental question of the liberation of the subject from social conditioning, which is to be achieved through 'socio-analysis', that is, by making conscious the unconscious in history, society and culture, thereby bringing motivation and action under rational control. Let us also note here that this premise forms the basis of the sociological distinction between the modern and the traditional, Europe and non-Europe, in effect between supposedly reflexive, rational and free societies and those in which the social is experienced as immutable nature.<sup>1</sup> I shall return to this division in due course.

It should be apparent that the conventional political discourse ('political' in the narrow sense of the term) which equates independence with the end of colonial rule operates with the commonsense, liberal conception of power. But there is another much broader sense of the political – what is often called the 'politics of culture' or identity – and another story to be told about power, namely, as that which colonises the mind and rules the subject from within. As Talal Asad points out, this other story 'tells of European imperial dominance not as a temporary repression of subject populations but as an irrevocable process of transmutation, in which old desires and ways of life were destroyed and new ones took their place' (1991, p. 314). It tells of the postcolonial condition and presents us with the paradox in which apparently independent, self-determining *nation-states* conform freely to the dictates of European power. If this story can be told at all, it is precisely because power can be conceptualised as that which forms subjects, a way of life that generates specific desires and accounts for specific actions. And if this story were to be told from the beginning, one would have to start with the most fundamental manifestation of European power and the most burning desire that this power generated in the colonies. This is none other than the desire to become like European societies, which meant, first and foremost, *nation-states* in their own right. 'One is tempted to say', says Žižek (2000, p. 255) in his discussion of this modality of power, 'that the will to gain political independence from the colonizer in the guise of a new independent nation-state is the ultimate proof that the colonized ethnic group is thoroughly integrated into the ideological universe of the colonizer'. Nationalism then, becomes the mark of a fundamental complicity with the colonisers, their mode of thought and way of being in the world.

This tacit recognition of the coloniser as the source of all legitimate signification about what it means to Be – a person, an ethnic community, a society – is completely lost in the politics of independence, nowhere more so than at the 'moment of manoeuvre', as Chatterjee (1986) calls the time of anti-colonial struggle. For this is the time when a critique of European modernity becomes necessary for the mobilisation of the colonised. Chatterjee uses the case of Gandhi to illustrate this point. As is well-known, Gandhi produced a sweeping critique of European modernity but one thing he could not reject was the idea that the only way to be an ethnic community was in the

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1 For a recent reiteration of this Eurocentric view see, among others, Giddens (1990) and Beck (1992).

form of an independent nation-state. Without taking on board this modernist assumption, he would have no grounds to struggle against British colonial rule and to call for independence. And because he did take this assumption on board, he ended up slipping into modernist thinking more and more. As Chatterjee points out, when Gandhism was forced to deal with practical organisational issues of what was after all a bourgeois political movement, 'it would argue in terms of categories such as capitalism, socialism, law, citizenship, private property, individual rights, and struggle to fit its formless utopia into the conceptual grid of post-Enlightenment social-scientific thought' (1986, p. 112). No doubt, the case of Gandhi is a limiting case, but no less instructive for this reason. To paraphrase Bourdieu (1984) who raises this issue in another context, because the opponents agree sufficiently on the stakes to fight for them, it makes little difference whether one emphasises the disagreement that divides them in complicity or the complicity that unites them in disagreement.

### **Cyprus and the Spectre of Europe**

This brief commentary on how power may be conceptualised beyond its commonsense experience and liberal understanding, sketches the context in which I wish to discuss the 50 years of Cypriot 'independence' from British colonial rule which is currently upon us. It is true, of course, that independence was not the first choice of Greek Cypriots. As is well known, the anti-colonial struggle was fought in the name of union with Greece. It is true also that Cyprus is now a member of the European Union. But neither of these factors takes anything away from the fact that 50 years down the road Cyprus remains a post colony, a society formed during the colonial period and hence a society also that cannot not reproduce the colonial power that formed it. What has been ruling Cyprus during these 50 years was not Cypriots themselves but rather, through them, the idea of Europe, a spectre that accounts for the nationalist nightmares experienced in this country during its recent history.

As I argued elsewhere (Argyrou, 1996), the Greek Cypriot desire to make Cyprus a Greek province rather than an independent country presupposes a set of fundamental Eurocentric premises. The first is the premise taken on board by all colonised societies that strove for independence – the division of the world between civilised and primitive societies or, as in the post World War II lexicon, between the modern and traditional, which is to say, 'backward'. This is also the premise taken on board by all those peripheral societies, such as Greece and Turkey, whose vision of the world has been colonised by the idea of Europe, even though they have never been colonies in the formal sense of the term. The second premise is the European claim that ancient Greece was the cradle of civilisation, which is to say, according to this logic, post-Enlightenment European culture – the culture of democracy, rationality, science and so on.<sup>2</sup> This premise gave

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2 For a discussion of the European invention of ancient Greece as the cradle of civilisation see Bernal (1987).

Modern Greek identity a unique advantage over all dominated identities in the world (Arab, Oriental, African, Indian and so forth). The best any post colony could ever hope for was to modernise and become *like* Europe – similar but never quite the same, as Bhabha (1994) says. By contrast, Greece and to a lesser extent Cyprus could claim to be part of Europe already – for historical and cultural reasons, it is often said – despite the fact that they were still lagging behind it. Although still modernising, which in this case meant de-Ottomanising, they had the right to claim European identity on account of being Greek. It is in this context that the Greek Cypriot desire to unite with Greece rather than become an independent country should be understood. Being at best in the margins of Europe, at worst in the Middle East or the ‘Levant’, as the British called it during colonial times, and having its Hellenic credentials often questioned by the British,<sup>3</sup> Greek Cypriot society opted for the cultural security provided by the ‘cradle of civilisation’. Independence was not its choice and when it came in 1960 it took a long time to find support. It was not until well after 1974 and the division of the island that the idea became widely accepted but even then the implicit understanding was that Cyprus would be another Hellenic state and hence a society that, as I have been arguing here, could claim by right to be part of Europe or more broadly the West. The political realities notwithstanding, this compromise seems to have become possible partly because Greek Cypriots had by this time come to see themselves as more modern and European than mainland Greeks – because of a better functioning bureaucracy, for example, and no doubt also because of the unprecedented affluence that was achieved by the late 1980s.

In 2004 Cyprus was admitted to the EU and the fact was celebrated with all the necessary fanfare. The decision to join the EU, it is often said, was guided by pragmatic considerations, political as well as economic. I underline the word ‘decision’ because the pragmatic people who argue in this way imply a voluntarism that has no basis in reality. To begin with, they imply that the EU was ready to embrace Cyprus with open arms should it decide to join. They also imply that there was considerable scepticism in the country about the prospect of joining, in which case all the pros and cons would need to be debated and taken into consideration; or that a different historical alternative to being (or claiming to be) European – which the EU membership formalised – was ever seriously considered so that a decision had to be made as to which way to go. On this last point, it is instructive to note that although Cyprus was one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement, it has never considered itself to be part of the ‘Third World’. On the contrary, being ‘third-worldly’ (*tritokosmikos*) is for Greek Cypriots synonymous to being ‘backward’. An index of the importance of the country’s European credential over whatever ties and affinities it maintained with the rest of the world is the fact that when it was asked to relinquish its Non-Aligned membership as a condition for joining the EU, no one in the country seems to have considered this an issue. Indeed, no one in government considered this an issue to be communicated to the wider public, and most people are ignorant of it to this day. A

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3 See Hill (1952) and commentary by Papadakis (2006) on the uses of Aphrodite by Greek Cypriots.

friend of mine who found out accidentally during a training session on EU matters for civil servants and enquired about it could not get an answer. The academic expert training them had no answer and could not see the point in my friend's question. As far as he was concerned, it was a technical matter. The idea that it could have something to do with the incompatibility between a European and a 'Third World' identity and concern about the contamination of the former by the latter does not seem to have crossed his mind.

But to return to the scenarios just mentioned, none of them is remotely realistic. The idea that Cyprus was Greek and therefore historically and culturally European developed long ago and was to become widespread with the passage of time. It developed first among the educated elite and subsequently captured the imagination of the general population which, as many commentators have pointed out, eventually learned to think on the basis of ethnic and cultural rather than religious categories – not as Christians but as Greeks. As for the readiness of the EU to accept Cyprus, it is indicative of the hurdles involved that when the country finally joined, the event was heralded by politicians both in Cyprus and Greece as the greatest victory of Hellenism in the twentieth century. This is not to deny that there were also political and economic considerations involved in the 'decision' to join – the security, for example, that membership of the EU would provide *vis-à-vis* Turkey. Rather, it is meant to highlight the wider cultural context in which such pragmatic considerations become relevant and meaningful. The traumas of the Turkish invasion notwithstanding, one would be hard pressed to deny that fear of Turkey is ultimately fear of Turkification, which is to say, fear of being taken over by the 'barbarian' Other.

Yet the most glaring manifestation perhaps of how much the Greek Cypriot mind has been haunted by the spectre of Europe is not the fact that the country is now a member of the EU. It is partly how it deals with it and above all its status as a dismembered member. Its dealings with the EU are a classic example of symbolic domination or hegemony, which is to say, rule by consent. With the single exception of the legalisation of homosexuality and the introduction of civil marriage, both of which were fought by the Church, there has been no other noticeable reaction to the EU directives. Unlike people in other member states, such as Britain, Greek Cypriots do not feel that they are ruled by Brussels. What others experience as imposition that should be resisted, they experience as natural and necessary, a step towards full Europeanization. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the most effective way to legitimise new legislation is to let the public know that it is an EU requirement. The public may not like it very much but few people would doubt its necessity. As for the status of Cyprus as a dismembered EU member, for the colonised mind that operates with the Eurocentric vision of the world, this was perhaps inevitable. Unlike most European societies, for whom the problem until recently was how to manage the other without, for Greek Cypriots the problem has always been how to manage the other within. When the issue was the union of Cyprus with Greece, the problem was how to prevent Turkish Cypriots (and Turkey) from preventing it. When the issue became the unification of Cyprus itself, the problem was how to prevent Turkish Cypriots (and Turkish settlers) from contaminating the purity of the image that Greek Cypriots have about themselves.

A recent example illustrates this quite well. One of the proposals in the current round of negotiations to unify the island is the rotation of the presidency between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Many Greek Cypriots reject the idea as an abomination, so much so that in a local TV programme a well-known nationalist politician said that he was prepared to accept a Turkish settler as vice-president provided that the president would always be a Greek Cypriot. The comment caused a stir and in a qualifying statement he complained that he was deliberately misrepresented: he did not want a settler to occupy any political office in a unified Cyprus because he did not want any settlers to remain in Cyprus after a solution (*Politis* newspaper, 24 December 2009). As everyone knows however, Turkish settlers – considered by Greek Cypriots to be even more Other than Turkish Cypriots – will stay in Cyprus (the Greek Cypriot side announced that it is prepared to accept 50,000). The choice for this man (and all those who think like him) was therefore clear. If neither Turkish Cypriots nor the settlers can be excluded, it would be a lesser evil to have an Other-Other as vice-president than to have an Other as president. To his mind the office of the president is a key symbol of the country and represents Cyprus both to itself and more importantly to the outside world, while the office of the vice-president has no such signifying power. An arrangement of this sort would convey to all concerned the right message: although the Other is within, it takes second place and is under control. Such is the extent of the cultural contamination that the nationalist (because colonised) mind is prepared to tolerate. Failing that, total exclusion of Turkish Cypriots would be preferable. Cyprus would remain divided but the part that counts would at least be purely Greek (and European) – which, as opinion polls suggest, seems to be what the majority of Greek Cypriots want if their ideal solution cannot be implemented.

I have been talking about the colonised mind with reference to Greek Cypriots but this is only part of the story. Turkish Cypriots suffer from the same affliction, perhaps more so than Greek Cypriots since for them the Other that they have to deal with is themselves. A few examples should suffice here to illustrate the point. I have already suggested that for Greek Cypriots (and mainland Greeks) modernisation (or Europeanization) inevitably meant de-Ottomanisation. Such however, was also the aim of the founder of modern Turkey and ‘father of the Turks’, Mustafa Kemal, whose vision of Turkishness was warmly embraced by Turkish Cypriots and is diligently upheld today despite the pressures exerted on them by the rise of Islamism in Turkey. For instance, a proposal to establish Islamic schools in northern Cyprus was condemned by Turkish Cypriot parties and trade unions across the political spectrum. I have also suggested that for Greek Cypriots the Turkish settlers in northern Cyprus epitomise otherness. But such is also the way that many Turkish Cypriots view them, particularly those that come from Anatolia – as an Other that spoils the European image they have about themselves (Navaro-Yashin, 2006; Hatay, 2008). I have argued that for Greek Cypriots joining the EU formalised the claim they have always made about themselves, namely, that they are modern European people. But such is also the claim that Turkish Cypriots (and mainland Turks) make about themselves and the way in which they strive to

legitimise it. As is well known, the Turkish bid to join the EU is driven by this claim and finds support in many EU member states. As for the Turkish Cypriots, it is now widely recognised that the catalyst for voting overwhelmingly in favour of the United Nations peace plan for Cyprus in 2004 (the so-called 'Annan Plan') was the prospect of becoming formally European, since Cyprus was to become an EU member-state in the following month.

These are well-known historical events and on public record. But there are countless other examples of the Turkish Cypriot infatuation with the modern and the European that, being ordinary everyday events, do not make the headlines. They are no less important. Here I shall mention only one example, partly because I was initially puzzled by this event and partly because it reminded me of a popular ethnography about village life in Egypt written by an Indian anthropologist and novelist whose work I admire. During the summer of 2003 when many Turkish Cypriots rebelled against the regime in the north and rallied in favour of the United Nations peace plan, I met several people with whom I became friends. One of the things that struck me in our conversations was their claim that unlike Turkish Cypriots, Greek Cypriots were deeply religious. This, my Turkish Cypriot friends pointed out, was one of the major differences between the two communities. I found the comment puzzling and, as it was repeated on several occasions, annoying as well. What if Greek Cypriots were more religious (if they were) than Turkish Cypriots, I thought to myself? Religion has not been an issue in the conflict between the two communities; ethnicity has! It then occurred to me that perhaps this claim was not related to the prospects of unification, which was the main topic of our conversations and the issue on most people's mind at the time. Perhaps my Turkish Cypriot friends were trying to tell me something else. As is well known, secularism is supposed to be one of the hallmarks of modernity, since it is inextricably associated with rationalism, the disenchantment of the world, science, the triumph of knowledge over ignorance and superstition. It seems then, that what my Turkish Cypriot friends wanted to say was that contrary to what Greek Cypriots thought about them, they were modern European people – more so, in fact, than Greek Cypriots who still clung to religion. This interpretation also explained my annoyance with them. Deep down, I was caught in the game of playing modern and European myself.

This ordinary event reminded me of an incident that Amitav Ghosh describes in his ethnography of village life in Egypt – a quarrel with the local Imam for whom the Indian practice of 'burning the dead' and 'worshipping cows' was primitive. Having argued with him bitterly as to whose country was more modern and civilised, Ghosh reflects thus: 'At that moment, despite the vast gap that lay between us, we understood each other perfectly. We were both travelling, he and I: we were travelling in the West' (1992, p. 236). So too, I thought, was I and my friends, Greek and Turkish Cypriots in general. We have been travelling in Europe all these years of 'independence', towards the same phantom destination but apart, and because of this we have never managed to live together on this island.

### Concluding Remarks

Because the foregoing may suggest that I am envisioning the possibility of a de-colonised Cypriot mind and perhaps also a future in which Greek and Turkish Cypriots would live in perfect harmony – like ‘brothers’, one often hears – I would like to close this paper with a few qualifications. It is certainly the case that autonomy is one of the most fundamental premises of European culture. It is its definition of what it means to be a subject, whether individual or collective – a person, a society, a nation. It should suffice here to point out that this premise is enshrined in the motto of the Enlightenment: ‘think for yourself’; it constitutes the basis of the institution where European thought reaches its highest summits, namely, the university; and it circulates widely in everyday life and ordinary discourse. As I have suggested at the beginning of this paper, it is also the case that at this historical conjuncture European thought is beginning to recognise, which is not to say accept, that achieving autonomy through independent reflection is not possible. For no one can think *ex nihilo*. Even the most reflexive subject must take something for granted in order to think at all, the limiting case being the Enlightenment directive to think for oneself. Even if this was the only thing that one had to accept without questioning, one would still be dependent on someone else – the ‘guardians’ as Kant called them, which in this case would make *him* a ‘guardian’, or, thinking more sociologically, on one’s society and culture. With this recognition, whether acknowledged or not, European culture comes full circle: from pre-liberatory times when the subject was (supposedly) not yet thinking for itself and was therefore subject to the powers that be to post-liberatory times when thinking for oneself leads to the realisation that one cannot think for oneself and that therefore the subject is beyond liberation. But with it, we come full circle ourselves, those of us at any rate who have been following Europe closely in this journey that leads back to the point of departure, which is to say, nowhere. Whether we like it or not, we are forced to admit that autonomy is a figment of the European imagination which the most credulous among us took for a real thing.

I do not think that minds can be decolonised. Nor do I think that postcolonial societies like Cyprus can exorcise the spectre of Europe. But perhaps this realisation is not as pessimistic as it may appear at first sight. We may not be able to put spectres at rest, chase the shadows away and construct a world suffused with light but perhaps we can learn to live with them, become so familiar that, if nothing else, they no longer cause the kind of nationalist nightmares that Cypriots know only too well. At a time when the two communities are considering – yet again – whether it would be possible to live together on this island instead of travelling apart in Europe, this thought may prove of critical importance.



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