

# **“The Greek Nation”: An Inherently Totalitarian Concept. Concerns to be Borne in Mind during the Reconciliation Process in Cyprus**

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This commentary will focus on a crucial ideological dimension of the power relations governing the Greek-Cypriot social formation: Greek nationalism, with the totalitarian elements it entails. This dimension is a decisive factor in allowing the Greek-Cypriot authorities to perpetuate their “rejectionist” strategy, as they face the prospect of a united and federated (Greek-Turkish) Cypriot polity.

I will build my argument on the three theses that follow:

## **Thesis 1**

The nation in its modern-day sense is an inseparable aspect of the capitalist social order, very tangibly expressing the political and ideological-cultural predominance of capital, which homogenises every community within a political territory into an “ethnic community”. This homogenisation “effaces” the boundaries between the classes, i.e. class power and exploitation (transforming them into demarcation lines between professions) or merely relativises them (representing them as something secondary in the broader context of national unity and cohesion).

The state embodies the interests of the entire social capital of the national polity. At the level of the economy, the state contributes decisively to creating the general material conditions for reproduction of capitalist relations. This includes political management of the workforce, interventions for boosting the profitability of overall social capital, state management of money, the institutional and legal framework underwriting the “freedom” of the market. These material conditions both differ from country to country, despite the fact that they tend to converge between the advanced capitalist countries, above all within the regional free trade areas. At the political and ideological-cultural level the state legitimates the exercise of bourgeois political power as “national independence”.

However, these strategic interests of the capitalist class that are being “condensed” by the state always entail a compromise with the labouring classes: There is, therefore, always the possibility of a change in the class relation of forces

(and thus of implementing different policies or even forms of government) within the capitalist power relations.

These compromises of the ruling classes with the labouring classes are an indispensable condition for the stabilisation of capitalism: Any form of class power can reproduce itself only if it achieves to win the consensus or at least the tolerance of the ruled classes. The Gramscian (and Poulantzian) notion of hegemony refers exactly to this dimension of class power. Nationalism is a traditional ideology through which the ruling classes in capitalist social formations ensure their hegemony over the ruled classes. And to the extent that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (K. Marx, *The German Ideology*, 1845), nationalism becomes an ideology of the popular masses.

Nationalism is supported by the way the capitalist state is structured: a nation-state. To name only one example, the right to elect a government or to candidate as a MP in any modern state, is granted not to the permanent inhabitants of the country but only to the state’s citizens, i.e. persons belonging to the people-nation.

The (Greek) nation in its present-day form (as a community of language and of “fate” encompassing even people beyond the borders of the state) was created, and exists, as the result of a process expressing the hegemony of the forces of capital over (antagonistic modes of production in) society. Its other aspects include the claim – and achievement – of political self-determination and state sovereignty (in the same historic space of capitalist hegemony).

The nation constitutes the historically shaped and specifically capitalist unity (cohesion) of the antagonistic classes of a social formation, tending to unify the “internal”, i.e. the national, and demarcate and distinguish it from the “external”, i.e. the “non-national”. What is involved is a complex and relatively autonomous process of nation-building in the age of capitalism (i.e. the age of nations and nation-states).

The creation of a nation-state often entails the emergence of irredentist demands: the desire of national populations living in areas that have not been incorporated into the nation state to become part of that state; the demand for territorial expansion of the state so that it may embrace “the entire nation”.

## **Thesis 2**

Within a nation state, the nation manifests itself as a totalitarian tendency: incorporation of the populations of the state into the main body of the nation, differentiation from negative discrimination against whoever does not become part of the nation, sometimes to the point of expelling them from the main body of the nation.

Nation-building: the process of political structuring of a nation through attainment of independence is typically described in terms of the “tendency towards freedom” initially implied in it: emancipation from an empire or multi-national state entity (embodying, for those seeking “national independence”, national subjugation and oppression). The “tendency towards freedom” is frequently manifested through the irrevocable decision of large sectors of the population seeking independence to activate the principle of “Freedom or Death”, sacrificing their lives for the sake of national integration in an independent nation state, so confirming the political soundness of Lenin’s thesis for adoption by the workers’ movement and the Left of the demand for national self-determination of every people.

The “tendency towards freedom” was admittedly more dramatically visible in the early national movements of the nineteenth century, such as the Greek Revolution of 1821.

However, alongside the “tendency towards freedom”, no less inherent in the character of every nation, there also exists the “tendency towards totalitarianism”. This is the tendency towards expansion and at the same time homogenisation of the “internal” dimension of the national polity, that is to say the national-cultural homogenisation of the populations who will be located within this polity, with their subjection as an integrated whole to the “character” and rules of the (new) class sovereignty and power: A class power distinguishable from neighbouring systems of class power through its particular national characteristics.

The “tendency towards totalitarianism” becomes evident even in the bourgeois revolutionary movements of the early nineteenth century. Thus, for example, in the Proclamation of Alexander Ypsilantis of 24 February 1821 inaugurating the Revolution of 1821 we read:

“The Morea, Thessaly, Bulgaria, Serbia, the islands of the archipelago, in a word the whole of Greece, has taken arms to throw off the heavy yoke of the barbarians” (emphasis added).

This extract expresses the view common to those Orthodox intellectuals and to the popular masses actively engaged in the revolutionary struggle against the “ancien régime”. Inevitably they saw the struggle as national: a struggle for national liberation. These masses, themselves products of an ongoing process of transformation in social relations, were to be found mainly in the southern and coastal areas of present-day Greece, as well as in some mountain areas. They saw themselves as Greek, irrespective of the language they spoke or of their particular cultural traditions (for example the Albanian speakers of Hydra, Souli and elsewhere). They projected this national identity of theirs onto all the (nationally amorphous, for the most part) Christian populations of the Ottoman Empire.

The “tendency towards totalitarianism”, towards national homogenisation of all – without exception – of the peoples of the polity under construction, is thus inherent even in the most democratic and liberal variants of bourgeois domination (when the bourgeoisie are leading the armed struggle for an independent democratic nation-state).

We may see, then, that the “tendency towards totalitarianism” does not operate only “inwardly”, within a particular cultural and linguistic population (evolving into a nation in the present-day sense of the term) along with whatever “minorities” may happen to be on the territory it inhabits. At the same time it also operates “outwardly”, seeking to expand everywhere it does not meet with adequate (national) resistance, incorporating and homogenising every territory (and every other nationality), subsuming it in the prospective national-state structuring of the dominant nationality. To put the matter differently, we could say that the “tendency towards totalitarianism” entails not merely an inward-turning impulse (national homogenisation) but also an outward-looking impulse of national expansion, even when its predominance is no longer particularly likely, given that it is coming up against the homogenisation-expansion process of the neighbouring nationality.

The “tendency towards freedom” and “tendency towards totalitarianism” co-exist in that indivisible ideological-cultural unity that is nationalism. Nationalism proclaims the timeless indivisible unity of the people-nation, and the unquestionable historically and ethically validated propriety (in conformity with the principles of law) of their every position and claim in the given international political conjuncture. Of course when the process of constructing the nation state has been consummated, i.e. following attainment of the much-vaunted national independence, the “tendency towards totalitarianism” will establish itself as the predominant facet in power relations. To cite a formulation of Nikos Poulantzas: “The enclosures implicit in the constitution of the modern people-nation are only so awesome because they are also fragments of a history that is totalised and capitalised by the state. Genocide is the elimination of what become ‘foreign bodies’ of the national history and territory: it expels them beyond space and time (...) Concentration camps are a modern invention in the additional sense that the frontier-gates close on ‘anti-nationals’ for whom time and national historicity are in suspense” (Nikos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, London/New York, Verso, 1980, pp. 114-115).

Thus nationalism does not survive merely as the predominant facet in social relations, national unity and national interest (in this way obstructing realisation of the class unity and the class interests of the labouring strata and their antagonism to the predominant capitalist interests). At the same time it also serves to construct this national unity and these national interests in contradistinction and (potentially, and depending on the historical conjuncture) in conflict with the national interests of other nation-state constructs, other national unities.

The tendency towards totalitarianism is a tendency in the direction of eradication of “the alien” or “the foreigner” from the main body of the nation: whether through incorporation into the national population or, to the extent that this is impossible, through expulsion beyond the borders of the state, or conversion into a “minority” with limited rights. In no instance does it favour federal solutions on the basis of cultural and institutional equality of the different national communities.

### **Thesis 3**

All European nationalism is, by virtue of the manner of its historical composition, racist. Since World War II racism has attained a mainly “cultural” dimension: People are differentiated on the basis of their “specific culture” (embedded in a specific history). In Europe, this “culture” is mainly conceived as the “culture” of a “race” with “ancient historical roots” and less as the “culture” (or the “civilisation”, the “way of life” etc.) of a polity: Most European nations are “blood” nations (as opposed to “soil” nations such as those of America). A person becomes a citizen of a European country not for having been born in the territory of this country, but as a descendant of a (male) parent belonging to the people-nation. However, there are no clear “demarcation lines” between “cultural” and “blood” nationalism: a) they are both cultural even if they refer to blood because it is a cultural perception on blood; b) they are all blood nationalism because nations have all committed acts of blood in the past to maintain their nationhood (wars, border control, expansion, empires, revolts etc).

In this dimension, nationalism is inseparable (whether overtly or in a latent or disguised form) with a “differentiating racism”: it proclaims in each instance the superiority of a specific nation as against other nations, connecting this superiority with a supposed “blood oneness” of a historic people-nation. In circumstances of heightened national-state antagonism it also proclaims the (racial, cultural and “historical”) inferiority of competitor or enemy nations. Devaluation of the “foreigner”, but also the evaluative dichotomies European/Asian, Western/Eastern, civilised/barbarian, etc., flourish on the soil of the (latently) racist ideology that is inextricably interwoven with nationalism.

This ideology of the popular nation (the historical continuity and national “unity” of the chosen people, its destiny and its glorious future), which constitutes the basis of nationalism, acquires an aggressive-militaristic character in the form of the far right and fascism.

### **Epilogue**

The Greek nation was constituted historically as a “blood nation”, with a pronounced racist element of “national/tribal superiority” as against “others”.

This helps to explain the ease with which the strategy of the Greek-Cypriot bourgeoisie became hegemonic in the mid-1950s and has remained so to the present day, in establishing a “second Hellenic state” in Cyprus: While interpreting failure of union (enosis) of Cyprus with Greece (which it rejects because it would mean transformation into a province of Greece) as the outcome of machinations by “foreigners”, it has refused to implement the solution of the Greek-Turkish state agreed upon in the framework of the international community: then, in the mid-1960s, through naked violation of the treaties of Zurich and London, today through rejection of the Annan Plan.

The opposition to racist Greek nationalism in southern Cyprus makes a decisive contribution to facilitating a solution of the Cyprus problem on a federal basis.