

The Ontology of ‘Cyprus Conflict Literature’

Echoes from the Dead Zone: Across the Cyprus Divide

Yiannis Papadakis
IB Tauris, (London, 2005) 224 pp.

From the East: Conflict and Partition in Cyprus

Costas Yennaris
Elliott and Thompson, (London, 2003) 278 pp.

These two volumes highlight some basic methodological issues in conflict research and in work on conflicts more generally. In one, the Cyprus conflict represents a divide which comes to be understood not as an ontological given. In the other, this divide, though represented as the sum of one side’s strategy can now be accepted as ontological even if the other’s support for the divide were to be removed. One is a tale of a voyage of personal discovery involving meeting, trying to understand, and occasionally confronting the other, through which we learn that all barriers are simply produced and reproduced rather than ‘real’. In *Echoes from the Dead Zone* Papadakis presents his tale indirectly as being of universal significance for all of us and therefore more significant than one person’s experience of a conflict. For Papadakis, ontology suggests that the human subject and their relationships are more fundamentally positive than negative. In *From the East*, Yennaris, ontology dictates that the human subject is simply flotsam in the crushing oceans of international politics, driven by ‘good’ states and ‘bad’ states, this being a representation of truth, fact, and history, without the need for further reflection.

The juxtaposition of these two texts brings to light a little explored tension within the study of the Cyprus conflict, between ‘understanding’ and ‘explaining’, between methodological rigor and difference, between ‘social science’ and humanities, and of course between left and right political ideologies. These texts are so driven by these issues and problems, that it is difficult even to discuss them as being representative of a conflict without examining one’s own motives and interests and

taking up a problematic third party and omniscient stance. However, Papadakis' text is the more radical, striking, appealing, and original, and is a brave attempt in an otherwise often petty and politicised political 'research' environment. Yennaris' 'realist' text is unashamedly biased, strategic, conservative and ugly in what it says about the region and the Cyprus conflict. Both are deeply flawed, and demand deep, but inevitably subjective criticism on the part of the reader. For the purposes of this review, Yennaris' book offers little more than a foil for Papadakis' study, and is an exemplar of all that is wrong with so much of the 'research' on the Cyprus problem. Papadakis' text stands out as providing a much-needed anthropological and humanist insight into a conflict on which so much has been repeatedly and derivatively published over the years. Though I myself have been trained in positivist and inductive approaches to research such as that represented by Yennaris' text, and have received little formal training about debates in anthropology and ethnography, it is clear from the juxtaposition of these texts how much the study of international politics needs to be able to bridge this gulf if it is to gain an understanding of conflicts such as that in Cyprus which does not end up reproducing the dynamics of the conflict itself.

Yennaris' text is an attempt to illustrate (or construct) through a somewhat skimpy textual analysis a grand meta-narrative in which the 'enemy' betrayed its neighbours according to an historical enmity that had essentialised entire peoples to the extent that they had become, in comparison to the other, self-interested and even perhaps calculatingly evil. It aims to prove that all that has occurred on Cyprus has simply been the result of Turkey's conspiratorial leanings, and the nationalism of Turkish and Turkish Cypriot leaders. It represents and explains the mind and motives of the other without once questioning the interplay of subjectivities ever-present in such a task. It makes almost every problematic methodological statement (personalising states, assuming omniscience, assuming epistemological and ontological security for the Greek Cypriot 'view of the world') possible, and of course, for any critical reader, its 'orientalist' premise is deeply troubling. It is rare that one comes across such a blatantly nationalist reading of a conflict in the English language were it not published purely for propaganda reasons, and by an 'official' agency. Though there is a lot of interesting material referred to in this study, it is deployed and analysed in an often insensitive manner, which at times verges upon the crass. Indeed, while the notion that Cyprus and in particular the Greek Cypriot population have been a victim of regional machinations is to a large extent plausible, this is well-known. This text undermines this argument through its crude exposition, rather than reinforces it.

Papadakis' text offers much more of interest to the critical researcher. It operates in standard ethnographic fashion, representing many years of research in Cyprus and Turkey, which are outlined almost in field-note form relating to various periods

spent in Turkey (Istanbul/Constantinople) and in Cyprus on both sides of the Green Line, with an analytical overlay denoting the author's unwillingness to accept the stereotypes and assumptions prevalent in these environments (and represented in *From the East*). It is nicely written and makes some fascinating, at times serendipitous, connections between the author's discovery of events and his own emerging analysis of them. The author also allows the voices of the people he meets in the course of his fieldwork to explain why seemingly marginal events or innocuous realities are so significant in the Cyprus context. At the same time he is also clearly shocked when these are contradicted or reinforced, illustrating how difficult it is for the field researcher to both acknowledge his or her role in the field or to establish a distance through which to frame his or her interaction with the conflict environment itself. Occasionally, he lapses in a more mainstream representation of the Cyprus conflict, which may or may not be ironic (when referring to 1619 missing from 1974, or using inverted commas to dispute any assertion of Turkish-Cypriot officialdom).

As the text progresses, we see how Greek and Turkish identities have been constructed as opposites, and yet how difficult this binary is in reality to sustain in the face of ethnographic exploration. For example, he is perplexed by the fact that on his first visit to the hybrid city, Istanbul/Constantinople, he is regarded as little more than one would expect of a visitor, rather than as an enemy. Later he finds that there are other more significant identity distinctions that preoccupy the people he meets. When he crosses over the Green Line in Nicosia he is surprised to learn that he does not have to 'sign' anything in what might have represented a researchers'/ethnographers' Faustian Pact with sovereignty. Furthermore, he discovers that external depictions of a conflict environment often ignore the 'normality' that may often be found in them (as many other field researchers have also found), and that being assigned a local 'guide' is far from the liberation it is often represented as.

Perhaps the most significant discovery occurs when he is in Lefkosa and hears for the first time about what the Turkish Cypriots called 'Kanli Noel' or 'Bloody Christmas' of 1963, which contradicts the Greek Cypriot notion that 'war' only occurred in 1974. Of course, any researcher who had examined primary sources would have known about this, but for the discovery to have been made ethnographically is indicative of both the barriers between Cypriots, the self-censorship that predominates, and the problems caused by disruptions in communication created by cease-fire lines and other political boundaries. Ironically, though this book is predicated upon the author's decade-long experience of not being able to move or think freely across or about the Cyprus divide, his surprisingly mundane depiction of the opening of the green line in April 2003 shows how much more there is to do in order to unravel the Cyprus conflict psychosis.

These many aspects of this study lead to ontological and methodological problems which are doubly-amplified by the fact that he is both alien and yet 'at home' in his chosen field sites. His text reinforces the premise that there is much in this conflict which is manufactured and a product of representational and discursive practices that can be overcome given the underlying ontological assumption that conflict is somehow abnormal. In juxtaposition to Yennaris' text this assumption is thrown into doubt, not necessarily because of the argument made that 'Turks' have always had designs on Cyprus, but more because this is such a dominant assumption amongst Greek Cypriots and indeed, may be hard to dispute in any concrete fashion. However, in general and in my view, more can be learned about the nature of the Cyprus problem and why it has continued for so long by reflecting upon Papadakis' text than the many standard omniscient and rationalist derivative analyses in the field of IR which rest upon politicised or ideological empiricism, of which Yennaris text is indicative.

These observations give rise to some interesting propositions about conflict literature more generally. Given that Cyprus has been identified as a conflict zone and has been subject to such study for so long, it is possible to see a series of patterns in research on it, as well as their benefits and pitfalls. Many attempts to work on Cyprus are clearly positivist (and indeed Copernican!), taking official actors as the key sites of power, and the contestation of their interests through their relative capacities as the modus operandi of the conflict itself. They represent the conflict as resting on an historical teleology in which past patterns explain current trends, and determine the future. This has become a common psychosis in conflict zones, understandably perhaps given the intensity of the experience of fear, threat, and violence. But such strategies are unable to contribute to any sort of meaningful settlement in terms of the norms that are increasingly expressed within the practical and discursive environment of domestic and international politics. Within a territorially bounded world, 'sovereign man' is destined to look for enemies and suspect the worst from them, as Yennaris explains. There are far fewer works extant on Cyprus that are notable because they endeavour to pioneer a way around the so-called immutable truths and enmities peddled in mainstream literatures. Papadakis' work represents perhaps one of the most concerted efforts at understanding this terrain in the context of the Cyprus conflict. If we do not develop new ways of understanding such conflict, they may well endlessly replicate themselves. Papadakis' superb study makes this point all too clear.

Oliver Richmond