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The role of 'us' and 'others' as reflected in teachers' celebratory speeches on national holidays

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Introduction

Most research on racism and xenophobia centres on perceptions of social groups (Fragoudakis and Dragona, 1997; N. Poulantzas Association and Council of Europe 1999). The importance and usefulness of these aside, we think it also necessary to review those suppositions which support, legitimate and make these practices acceptable. Those who transmit and actualise these perceptions and practices do not do so in either a social or a theoretical void. Perceptions and practices are supported through generally accepted suppositions, and thus contain a specific ideology. Whether this consists of myths (Mavrogiorgos, 2003b) or is based on 'social representations' of social, cultural and national minorities, a review of these is valuable.

Educational structures enable the study of xenophobic and racist practices and perception at a number of distinct levels, such as educational policy, school and teaching practices, and the content of school books (Avdella, 1997). In this paper we examine teachers' celebratory speeches made on the national holiday of 28 October, which commemorates the Greek people's refusal to accept the invasion of Italy in WW2. Analysis of these speeches is based on their

1. reference to a relatively recent historical event and therefore, contemporary reality
2. use of official representations of schooling's social functions
3. character – a mix of educator's and audiences' perceptions, representing the 'point of convergence' of suppositions of the broader strata of Greek society (Mavrogiorgos, 2003a,b).

The 2004 speeches were analysed by thirteen educators, four from urban areas, four from suburban locales and five from agricultural areas. The analysts' teaching experience varied from less than ten years to over twenty. They were selected from a larger group on the basis of their teaching citizenship education in their schools.

The research data was the written versions of the celebratory speeches provided by the teachers. Content analysis of the documents located and reviewed the types of relationships seen in content, expression and structure (Berelson, 1971). These were compared to data collected by observing the teachers during the citizenship education course.

The categories analysed were:

- a) 'Us-others' dichotomy
- b) Greek national and social homogeneity
- c) bipolar references to 'National-European'
- d) reference to the 'special' nature of the nation

e) national history as a 'mission'

Data presentation/analysis

'Us-others' dichotomy

Analysis of the material indicated that

1. most speeches adopted a dichotomy of 'us' and 'others' (Konstantopoulou et al, 2000) which comprised
 - a) the value of racial characteristics, such as 'our race has always stood out from its neighbours because of our civilisation',
 - b) the superiority of Greeks and an expressed inferiority of 'others', for example 'for centuries, while other peoples lived in darkness, the Greeks were the guiding light of humanity' and
 - c) the villainous nature of 'others' who took advantage of Greeks, such as 'our small population of highly gifted people trod a path surrounded by many enemies and managed to survive'.
2. a small portion (two teachers) did not adopt this dichotomy, referring clearly to the fight of the people against leading powers. These speeches adopted a class-based approach which differentiated the character of various groups and sides with the oppressed. They made specific references to the joint fight of suppressed social classes, such as 'fascism was fought in brotherhood by the Greeks in the mountains of Albania and at Gorgopotamos, the 20 million dead of the USSR and the thousands of freedom fighters who were either executed or rotted in jail in fascist countries'.

Thus

- the majority of the speeches adopt a dichotomy which contains hierarchies, orderings, and evaluative judgements of peoples and is supported by the majority of the speeches which, from a character standpoint, are considered to be 'innate and unchangeable', and therefore tend to 'naturalise' social, civil and national differences (Alexiou, 1998)
- a minority of the speeches dismiss this approach.

Greeks' national and social homogeneity

Here we see that

1. the great majority of speeches presented Greek society as undifferentiated by class, society or culture. Society is presented as unified and unchanging in both space and time. These speeches adopt an asocial and unhistorical approach to Greeks, characteristically expressed in references such as 'the Greeks created the bases for humanity's civilisation'. The nation is presented as having a non-class related, time-tried value, above all other values and unifying characteristics which exist in all Greeks (Kouzelis, 1997). They stress that 'even when the interests of foreign or domestic groups broke the contiguity of the people, the nation's call brought them back together again to do great things'.

2. the portion of speeches that differentiates itself (2) attempt the definition of national-cultural characteristics based on an historic-social viewpoint. This does not include irrelevant dimensions for history and events, and makes distinct references to the various roles and distinct practices of social groups and classes, without amalgamating them into the meaning of 'national'. These speeches note the various stances taken by political parties, while not disregarding the existence those Greek individuals and political factions that sided with the Fascists. In this way, the fact that 'our people, who sighed under the dictatorship of Metaxa' and that 'the resistance was an act of the peoples' power against the planning of the political powers' is given greater importance.

Thus

- the majority present Greeks/Greek society as undifferentiated by society, class and culture
- they connect Greek resistance to a cultural role model; considered unified, joint and undifferentiated in both space and time
- they contain specific perceptions of the nation as a subject of social, class and cultural differences, indirectly denying anything that cannot make up a portion of 'great Greek civilisation'. They refer directly to the necessity of accepting the leading cultural role model; something above and unrelated to definition of the 'other' cultures.
- the connection of the timeless-ahistorical, leading and joint cultural role model to a coordinated perception of the nation contains a clear perception and evaluation of 'others' (Bullivant, 1997; Dragona, 1997).
- the two contrasting speeches adopt an historical approach that does not ignore the social and political conflicts throughout Greek society, in which the overriding 'national' character was nonexistent, and they do not exclude the 'others'.

Bipolar references to 'National' and 'European'

All the speeches contained references to contemporary reality, consisting for the most part of the dangers of contemporary reality, discerned mainly in references to the relationship between Greece and economically or politically strong countries. All speeches refer to the relationship between Greece and the EU.

The analyses show

1. Greece's relationship with the rest of Europe is regarded both as a danger and as an opportunity. The danger is apparent in the differentiation of the national identity and Greek civilization, thus 'knowledge of history and tradition is the only way to avoid change as a nation in the great European family'. At the same time, Greece's relationship to the European Union is described as an opportunity: 'today if we take advantage of the endless forces of the nation, we can take the position we deserve in Europe'.
2. The majority of the speeches refer to other peoples' indebtedness to the Greeks. They present Greece as the legal inheritor of its glorious past, to which Europeans owe their advances and well-being, rather than to its contemporary reality.

Characteristically, 'it would be best if our associates in Europe did not forget they owe both their freedom and their lack of subjugation to barbaric invaders to the Greeks, from ancient history, Byzantium, to today'.

3. The majority of the speeches contain an evaluative critique of European peoples. 'Europe' refers to the economically and politically powerful countries, while peoples such as Albanians and Bulgarians are not considered as European peoples, but are treated as lesser peoples who desire to emulate the superiority of European civilization. For example, these speeches stress that 'Greece was the matrix of European civilization. This is the civilization into which all of this continent's contemporary peoples strive to be accepted'.
4. Finally, the majority of the speeches clearly attempt to adopt a specific perception of the relationship between 'cultural others' and Greece. 'Others' are obligated to become a part of the leading 'national role model' and contribute to 'national endeavour'. 'Our country, always hospitable, accepted all those who searched for a better life there. But it will never accept a differentiation of its culture and national characteristics' and 'anyone living in this country must, regardless of decency, understand that they reside in a holy land and must respect its history. Greece treads a road deeply etched in its culture and orthodoxy'.
5. Both contrasting speeches refer to Europe as an area of disagreements, conflicts and inequalities and make special note of the appearance of cases of fascism, nationalism and racism in other European countries.

In brief

- the approach to the 'national-European' relationship, based exclusively on cultural characteristics, leads to a coordinated reaction to social-political developments.
- there is a disassociation and disregard for those social incongruities, conflicts and differences which define the relationship between Greece and the EU; the relationships between power, subjugation and hierarchy are converted to variations in 'power', 'acceptance' and 'recognition' and project 'national' goals, defined by the leading social powers of a class-based society.

References to the 'special' nature of the nation

Reference to the 'special' nature of the nation is an important element of the majority speeches. The Greek nation is considered the carrier, sole inheritor and defender of lasting and time-honoured values: 'the singularity of Greek civilization, which is based on spirit and not on matter', and the consideration of historical development as a unified and continuous path of the Greeks through time, since 'our three thousand years of history could not be interrupted by invaders and conquerors. The flame of the Greek spirit burned unendingly...and showed all peoples the path to victory against fascism'.

The majority of speeches also connect Greek civilization to Orthodoxy. Greeks are 'a rich people', 'a blessed people', 'a people who attained the merging of human and the divine, combining Greek culture and Orthodoxy'. Adoption of this approach attributes the historical procession of the Greek nation specifically to the intervention of supernatural powers. 'The heroic battle of the Greeks was not a human act. God was with them...'

Two speeches adopted a different approach and contain no references to this special nature, nor to supernatural collaboration, but allude to the battles of all peoples against fascism.

Data analysis indicates that the majority adopt basic perceptions of the so called 'Graeco-Christian civilisation'. Historical facts are perceived as expressions of a pre-existent 'specialisation' and 'singularity' neither due to nor derived from specific historic and social conditions. These characteristics are attributed to the Greek nation as 'inherent' characteristics of the merging of the 'Greek nation and Christianity'. This approach takes on a different function under the conditions of European unification and coexistence within the national state, and requires special attention.

National history as a 'mission'

Analysis shows

1. The historical procession of the 'Greek nation' appears to contain a specific logic to which all acts are compared and results evaluated.
2. The Greek people are regarded as carriers of an historic and metaphysical mission. The future of the Greek nation depends on the completion of this mission. This position is dictated by its glorious past, which is transformed thus into a measure of the present and a lens through which events are reviewed.
3. 'History as mission' can be found in most speeches. Phrases such as the 'mission of the Greeks' and 'we must prove ourselves deserving of the mission of the Greeks' are found verbatim in the majority; appearing more than once in each.
4. 'History as mission' makes up the 'national identity', differentiates the Greeks from 'others' and discourages the historical-sociological approach, since its criterion is completion of the 'mission'.

The majority of the speeches make statements like 'the Greeks realise their grand mission. At critical moments in the nation's history they constantly proved themselves equal to the mission' or that 'history enlightened this small people with the grandest mission. To defend higher values' and even 'heroic moments can be found in the histories of many peoples. Such a long and timely procession of higher ideals and civilization is solely the possession of the Greeks!'

The minority of speeches contain no references to 'history as mission' and attempt to present the common characteristics of peoples' struggles as well as their common cultural traits. They reference 'the people's struggle for freedom...the content...and civilization, show their common passions and the hopes, which bring them together'. This approach apparently defines space/time as the capability of coexistence, understanding and common creation while not focusing on differentiation but rather the communal nature of these elements.

Teaching citizenship education

Comparison of our analysis with educational practices and samples of teachers' opinions helps an understanding of the relationships between citizenship education textbook content, educational practices and teachers' opinions.

A review of both practices and opinions was conducted by observing a citizenship education unit taught by participating educators. Teaching was observed over three to twenty days, before the celebratory speech delivery. We observed the teachers during the teaching of the same unit, relevant to our research topic and the content of the speeches (that is, 'State and Nation', pp: 16-18, 5th Grade citizenship education textbook).

The citizenship education course was observed on the same axes as our analysis categories. The results are as follow:

- a The majority of the educators (eleven of the thirteen), assisted by the course content, made a special issue of the difference between the Greeks and 'others', the continuation of which was connected to future progress of the Greek nation.
- b The teachers treated the national-cultural homogeneity of Greeks as a given, unchanged throughout time. Greek society was not described as one of antitheses, interests and conflicts, but rather as an idea beyond both time and space. When references were made to antitheses and conflicts, these were treated with disparagement and condescension or as the interference of 'others' who took advantage of both the history and future of the people.
- c Greece's participation in the EU was referred to in nine of the thirteen classes observed. A common characteristic of all these references was an emphasis on the need to preserve Greek civilisation and national identity. The danger of differentiation made up one facet of the teachers' speeches and was complemented by stressing Europe's debts to Greek society.
- d The special nature of the Greek nation was stressed mainly in relation to tradition and Orthodoxy. The 'others' were always referred to as enemies or as neglecting their debt to Greece. Finally, following the overstressing of the 'national idea' by the text itself, the historical nature of events was disregarded and described as 'a debt', 'a responsibility' or 'a requirement'. The preservation of the 'national tradition' and Orthodoxy stressed 'us' as an opponent hostile to 'others'.
- e Only one teacher made mention of the multiculturalism of contemporary societies and multinational formations (EU).

Data interpretation

The data presentation and analysis allows us to identify the some relationships between the paradigms.

1. The content of the majority of the speeches was made up of the paradigms of a specific perception of 'national'. Even today, the majority of these paradigms make up the basic axis of perceptions of leading social powers in Greece.
2. The majority of speeches adopt paradigms connected to a specific perception of social, cultural and national differences. Their projection as values beyond space and time and their lack of relation to the social conditions that gave birth to them can easily allow the legalisation and acceptance of nationalist practices in the name of protecting the nation. The adoption of evaluative judgements in the case of the 'others' may lead to the acceptance of political discrimination. In total, these

speeches' language does not take a firm position on phenomena and paradigms of differential racism.

3. The data indicates that the overwhelming majority of the speeches adopt a specific approach to cultural differences with specific socio-historical conditions reduced to cultural characteristics. The antitheses and conflicts of Greek society are 'culturalised', being seen as characteristics of race, nation and people. An evaluation of cultures results in a hierarchical cultural differentiation which orders, classifies and excludes 'others'.
4. The coexistence of Greeks and 'others' in our national state and the EU is regarded as both a threat and an opportunity. This perception may lead to confrontational strategies for the threatened 'identity', 'uniqueness' and 'mission'. As a result, practices of incorporation and subjugation of 'others' may be developed. It is difficult, however, to develop practices of respect of difference, cooperation and coexistence.

Our research leads us to recommend further review of perceptions and, more importantly, practices supporting and transforming perceptions of practice as well as reviewing those factors contributing to the cultivation of these perceptions. The analysis of the teachers' language indicated that they adopt the paradigms contained in the textbook. Projection of these through the formal organisation of academic knowledge is the only explanation of the composition of the teachers' speech. The role and importance of the textbooks stresses the need for review of the relationship between the direction educational policy is taking and the composition of the teachers' perceptions.

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