

GREEK NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE GREEK EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE AGE OF AUSTERITY

Maria Chalari and Thomas Georgas

This paper critically reviews discourses of Greek national identity and the role of the Greek education system first in a historical perspective and then in the current climate of economic crisis in Greece. It also discusses the reason why teachers and schools are key to tackling growing discriminatory social attitudes. The preceding nationalistic discourse and the historical forms of nationhood and education in Greece might help us unravel the difficulties Greek national identity faces in the current era of economic and humanitarian crisis and uncertainty with regard to the European Union project, its evolution, its struggles, the nature of its challenges and tensions, and the empowerment of its ethnocentric and racist sentiment.

KEYWORDS: Greek National Identity, Age of Austerity, Ethnocentric, Education System

INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, major political and economic changes have swept through Greece. These changes have generated growing complexity of the society, uncertainty in Greek people, unpredictability of the future and changing attitudes towards belonging and identity. The country every day is being driven into deeper and deeper recession, a fact that fuels xenophobic backlash (Amnesty International, 2012; Eurobarometer, 2012; EU-MIDIS, 2011). Many Greek people have started expressing racism more and more as a

Maria Chalari ✉
UCL Institute of Education, University College London
Email: maria.chalari.14@ucl.ac.uk

Thomas Georgas
UCL Institute of Education, University College London
Email: tgeorgas@ioe.ac.uk

result of their unemployment and their bad quality of life (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2011). Incidents of racial violence targeting indiscriminately aliens, based solely on their skin colour or country of origin have increased the last year, particularly in Athens. Migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers are reportedly attacked nearly every day by far-right groups in certain areas of Athens (Amnesty International, 2012). Apart from the escalation of racially motivated attacks there are many reports about failures by police officers to protect third country nationals from racial violence.

Current debates in Greece include discussions about economics, fairness, concepts of national identity and perspectives on 'outsiders'. In the Greek elections of April and June 2012 the political party with fascist and nationalistic ideology not only received enough votes to enter the Parliament but it was also the first party in a number of electoral districts, receiving more votes than any other single party. This situation raises fundamental questions about how the Greeks will treat present and future immigrants and how the immigrants will cope and respond to the already difficult situation in Greece. Greece, at this present time of financial crisis and accompanying social uncertainty, is a really important context and a fascinating place to study the evolution and nature of the challenges the education system and teachers face, how certain social ideas are communicated through schooling to young people and the role schools and teachers play in either enhancing or mitigating tensions of citizenship.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss Greek national identity and the role of education first in a historical perspective and then in the current climate of economic crisis in Greece, as well as to discuss the reason why teachers and schools are key to tackling growing discriminatory social attitudes. Looking at the preceding nationalistic discourse and at some of the historical forms of nationhood and education in Greece might help us unravel the difficulties Greek national identity faces in the current era of economic and humanitarian crisis and uncertainty with regard to the European Union project, its evolution, its struggles, the nature of its challenges and tensions, and the empowerment of its ethnocentric and racist sentiment.

This paper begins by discussing the Greek social and educational context. It continues with an overview of the discourses of Greek national identity. It briefly describes its genesis and its transition after the entrance of Greece in the European Union. Besides, it tries to shed light on what is going on in the present. Next, the paper engages with some important features of the Greek national education system with specific reference to its instrumental role in the formation of Greek national identity from the emergence of the Greek nation state until today. It also focuses on the key challenges for the Greek education

system and Greek teachers in this age of austerity. Moreover, it discusses the role of schools and teachers in the fight against xenophobia, racism, aggressive nationalism and related intolerance in Greek society.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

The entrance and settlement of waves of immigrants in many countries, especially during and after the nineteenth century, is a phenomenon that has given a diverse character to many societies in different countries all over the world (Lynch & Simon, 2003). Greece is among a number of European countries, that, as a result of immigration and asylum migration, have significantly and irreversibly seen its demography changed in social, cultural, economic, ethnic, racial and religious terms (Stratoudaki, 2008).

During the period following the 1990s, Greece not only witnessed a significant return of nationals to their homeland, but also experienced a shift from being a traditionally 'sender' country to a main destination country for immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (Rozakis, 2001). Rapid demographic changes that took place during the last two decades have led to an increasing participation of immigrant people in Greek society (Figure 1) and immigrant children in education (Stratoudaki, 2008).

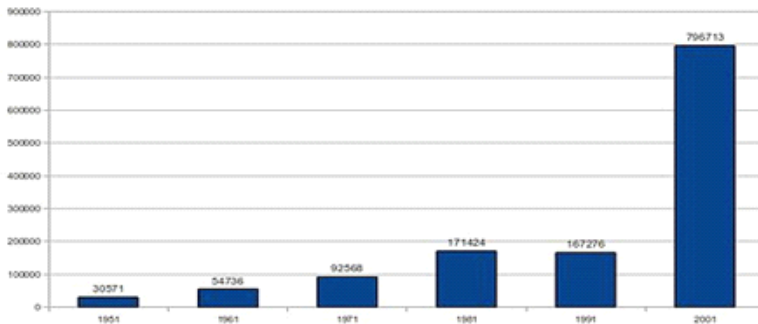


Figure 1. Population of Immigrants in Greece from 1951 until 2001.

Source: Greek Statistical Authority

This has resulted in a growing complexity in the Greek society and a dramatic change in its composition. The population has become progressively more heterogeneous and in turn this has affected the Greek national identity, which has grown more unconfident and xenophobic (Eurobarometer, 2012; EU-MIDIS, 2011). A significant proportion of the Greek population now expresses both antipathy and fear towards the immigrants, who were generally seen as the main cause of the significant rise of criminality in Greece

(Stratoudaki, 2008).

When the global financial downturn struck, Greece was badly prepared after years of profligacy, unrestrained spending, cheap lending, hosting the expensive Olympic games in 2004 and the failure to implement financial reforms. By the end of 2009, the Greek economy faced the highest budget deficit and government debt to GDP ratios in the European Union, which led to rising borrowing costs, ultimately resulting in a severe economic crisis, one of the worst in its history (Romanias, 2009).

Greece's fiscal and economic problems have left the country struggling with high levels of unemployment, especially among young people (Malkoutzis, 2011), and striving to pay its bills. The government in order to avoid a downward spiral has requested and agreed to a rescue package from the EU, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank. It has also begun to slash spending and has implemented very severe austerity measures that aim at reducing the deficit. It has applied tough tax evasion regulations, raised the retirement age by two years, imposed public sector pay cuts, closed schools and public hospitals; thousands of people have lost their jobs (Table 1) and more redundancies are planned (Vayanos, Meghir, & Vettas, 2010).

Table 1
Unemployment among 15-24 year-olds and 25-35 year-olds in Greece from 2006-2011.

Age group	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
15-24	24.8	23.2	18.6	25	32.5	40.1
25-35	12.5	10.8	9.9	11.2	15.8	22
National	9.2	7.7	6.6	8.5	12	16.6

Source: ELSTAT, 2014 Figures in %

The severe budget cuts and the savage measures adopted by the Parliament have led workers nationwide to stage strikes, closing airports, government offices and schools; Greeks to rally in central Athens to denounce politicians, bankers and tax dodgers; and a large number of Greek people to abandon the country and emigrate in search of better working and living conditions to the USA, Australia and other parts of Europe. Many Greeks are unwilling to accept the austerity measures, and are already showing dissatisfaction and public unrest. Economic reform in Greece has been met with protests, some of them quite violent, fortified by the belief of many Greeks that the crisis is being manipulated by foreign forces such as European central bankers and other financial speculators (Pappas, 2010).

THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

National education systems began to develop in post-revolutionary Europe in the late eighteenth century as instruments of state formation and tools for developing a common national identity within specific geographical borders (Wiborg, 2000, Green, 1997). As Durkheim argued, schools as social institutions had a purpose, which was to ensure social cohesion, unity and harmony (Pickering, 2006). Today, three centuries later the education systems still hold this role even though many other agents of socialization such as family, peer groups, mass media etc. influence students as well. Education systems everywhere, through their subjects, their textbooks and other activities seek to initiate young people into the traditions and cultures of their society and promote cohesion and a sense of national identity (Goodings, 1987).

In Greece the education system seeks to cultivate the Greek national identity and to educate Greek students in a 'natural' and 'normal' way, as if the conceptualization of national identity is fixed by nature and given by god, into the culture of their society (Stamelos, 2000). The Greek education system is highly centralized and the teachers in schools must follow the school curriculum and teach each subject exclusively from the Pedagogical Institute textbooks, which are state-endorsed (Avdela, 1998; Coulby & Jones, 1995; Massialas & Flouris, 1994).

For the Greek government teachers are civil servants and their professionalism is connected with their professional knowledge, autonomy and responsibility. Teachers in Greece are degree holders from a four-year university- level course and they have access to teaching posts in the state sector by examinations administered by the Supreme Council for Civil Personnel Selection (ASEP) (Eurydice, 2010).

The public regulation of teaching in Greece controls both what is taught and how it is taught, lessening in a way teachers' professional responsibility and autonomy (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1988). But although the government determines the professional identity of teachers, this identity is also mediated by teachers' own experience in and out of school as well as by their beliefs and values about what it means to be a teacher (Sachs, 2001).

Today, within the context of financial crisis in Greece, the speed of socio-economic change, the multiple political restructurings and uncertainty, more problems have been added to the chronic inefficiencies of the Greek education system (Paraskevopoulos & Morgan, 2011). According to the Law 3833/2010 ("Protection of Greek Economy-Urgent measures for the treatment of fiscal crisis") the initial government's annual budget has been reduced by 10% for all

ministries including the Ministry of Education. This has resulted in huge cuts in teachers' salaries, a reduction of the already limited resources, an abatement of intervention programmes for schools with large number of students of migrant parents, and in many other problems (Christodoulakis, Leventi, Matsaganis & Monastiriotis, 2011; Paraskevopoulos & Morgan, 2011).

The 'New School' reform introduced in 2010 in Greece seems to be a product of the socio-economic crisis and not a reform aimed at educational improvement. Nevertheless, the reforms that began as a necessity for the treatment of fiscal crisis may also become an opportunity to focus on educational improvement (Paraskevopoulos & Morgan, 2011). Maybe we could follow Giroux' words (2004) about a new vision of an education system in dangerous times, which must continually change to meet the needs of societies which continually change, an alternative vision of 'democratic education with its emphasis on social justice, respect for others, critical inquiry, equality, freedom, civic courage, and concern for the collective good' (p. 102).

One of the most important challenge for the Greek government and the policy makers today is how to organise an education system that will address in its policy and curriculum documentation the full implications of the recent political and economic changes; will meet the needs of teachers, learners, parents and the community (Bigelow, 2006); will inspire conciliation and peace, will promote an understanding of identity and diversity, construct a more tolerant conception of Greek national identity (Held, 2005; McKinnon, 2005; Tan, 2005) and 'transform antagonism into agonism' (Mouffe 1995, p.108).

THE EMERGENCE OF GREEK NATIONAL IDENTITY

The emergence of the Greek nation state happened in the 19th century and it was a result of a revolutionary uprising with the demand of the national revival (Myrogiannis, 2010, Stamelos, 2000). Greek national identity was invented and constructed in the turbulent and doubtful period of 1922-1974 after the collapse of the 'Great Idea' (1922) (Tsoukalas, 1982). The term 'Great Idea' appears for the first time in Kolletis speech to the first Greek parliament (1844). This term refers to the expectation of some Greek politics that some regions, which were under Turkish sovereignty, would enter the Greek state of the 1830. After the Asia Minor destruction (1922), as the treaty of Lausanne brings to an end this expectation, the 'Great Idea' collapses and the 'Greek' nation is forced to accept the imposed reality, the new narrow boundaries of 'its' land (Skopeteva, 1988).

Historical evidence shows that nationalism has been brought to Greece by the Greek speaking Diasporas (Myrogiannis, 2010). As it happened with most

national geneses the Greek-speaking intellectuals of the 18th and 19th centuries were greatly influenced by the spirit of the Enlightenment and carried it with them translated to the geographical, social and cultural environment of what was to become the Modern Greek kingdom. The above intellectuals believed in the superiority of the Greek nation and the Greek language at least in the Balkan Peninsula and Asia Minor, the need to hegemonize the Balkans with an educated class of Greek speakers, and the need to expand the Greek state (Chrysoloras, 2004). Many of them were clerics and understood Enlightenment through the Orthodox dogma (Ibid).

The Greek nationalist discourse was structured around a series of nodal propositions that prevail till today: a) there is a unified history of one Greek nation starting from the pre-Homeric era, through to Classical Greece, the Hellenistic epoch, the Byzantium, and continuing in modern Greece. b) The nation is bound together by geography, history, language, and religion. c) Being Orthodox Christian is an almost necessary pre-condition for being Greek. d) The Greek nation is superior to almost any other nation in the world since Greeks are the heirs of almost all the great civilizations of the West (Ancient Greek, Hellenistic, Eastern Roman/Byzantium) (Chrysoloras, 2004, p.17).

GREEK NATIONAL IDENTITY AFTER THE ENTRANCE OF GREECE IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

The entrance of Greece in the European Union (EU) brought the country closer to the 'European miracle' (Beck, 2005). The political project of the creation of the EU and the European citizen attempted to turn enemies to neighbours by dispelling from the horizon of Europe the threat of violence as a political option, whether between member states or against supranational institutions. The European Union also aimed to ensure the health of the member states and the economy, effectively dealing with unemployment, and encouraging a lively democracy through a cosmopolitan viewpoint (Beck, 2005).

Soon after joining the European community in 1981, the Greek government aimed to introduce secularisation, modernization measures and increase Greece's standard of living, and made considerable steps towards this direction, liberalising the economy, and trying to replace the old clientist politics with an effective bureaucracy. Greece also became the recipient of many grants from the EU to strengthen its agricultural sector and to build public works projects hoping to enhance economic growth (Dimitrakopoulos & Passas, 2004). However, even with the European Union's financial assistance Greece stayed behind many of its fellow EU members and remained one of the

least economically developed member countries in the European Union. In January 2001 Greece joined the EU's single currency (the euro), thereby allowing the European Central Bank govern its economy.

Although many Greeks were positive towards the EU motivated mostly by economic advantage rather than a desire for deeper political and cultural convergence, a large part of the Greek population criticised the European Union concentrating on the cultural rather than the political or economic aspects of the European unification, and felt more and more estranged from the new westernised 'image' of Greece. Besides, the Greek attitude towards the West has always been equivocal, and the functioning of western-type institutions has often been disharmonious, if not always problematic (Chrysoloras, 2004).

Many Greek people thought that the new European order undermined the role of national culture and the socializing of the state and family and saw the European Union as a threat against their imaginary collective identity. Those ideas have in effect prevented the full cultural and political integration of the country into the EU and its institutions. Under such social circumstances the nationalist discourse and especially that of the Greek Church found a fruitful background in order to develop. The Church presented itself as a cultural opponent to the forces of assimilation and homogenisation and the Greeks identified themselves strongly with it maybe as a reaction to the abovementioned 'threats' (Chrysoloras, 2004).

The Greek case is an example, which demonstrates that the forces of Westernization and European integration do not automatically make weaker the forces of nationalism in Europe (Fukuyama, 2006). Maybe it is because the Greeks don't feel secure and confirmed in their national dignity. As Beck (2005, p.114) argues, the more secure and confirmed Europeans feel 'the less they will shut themselves off in their nation-states and the more resolutely they will stand up for European values in the world and take up the cause of others as their own'.

GREEK NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE AGE OF AUSTERITY

Appadurai some years ago (1996) argued that the very epoch of the nation-state is near its end and nationalism enters a terminal crisis. Today, we see that nationalism not only doesn't enter a terminal crisis but also on the contrary in some countries is being revived. Even the most superficial examination of Modern Greek society reveals that the latest political and economical changes have fuelled xenophobic backlash in Greece, and that Greek nationalism has become even more racist, anti-Western, ethnocentric and looks at everything

from the national perspective, a fact that jeopardizes national prosperity and democratic freedom (Christodoulou, 2010).

Like many European nations, Greece is currently undergoing a dramatic transition and seems to be in a state of confusion, feeling threatened that Greek national identity is becoming obsolete. The financial crisis, which has developed into socio-political crisis, has called into question the existing national identity and it has given rise to emotional responses that 'resonate' within society (Christodoulou, 2010).

The media occupy a key site for the monitoring of the Greek self-imagining and the antagonistic relationship with the 'others' in this era of socioeconomic crisis. By observing the pages of tabloid newspapers or the TV shows we can see that negative language and misinformation for the 'others' -that are not anymore only the immigrants from the surrounding Slavic and Balkan populations, but also the European Union- is very common.

Very common also is the use by protestors, commentators, politicians, bankers of the narrative of the All-seeing Public Economist (APE) for Greece, which goes like this: 'Greece is a poor but honest country... The present crisis is a symptom of its exploitation by the European 'centre', whose essential nature is to be rich and exploitative. We poor Greeks were duped into entering the EU and adopting the euro. The cunning union gave us grants for our honest labour. Eventually, we were sucked dry: but the centre's greed is boundless, and now they want to gain more through usury and, if bad comes to worse, political domination...'(Doxiadis, 2011).

The aforementioned narratives, which are very similar to the narratives that have been used since the emergence of the Greek nation state in the 19th century, treat Greeks as immature children, ultimately irresponsible for their acts and their faults, who must demonise others rather than understand themselves. Moreover, they enslave them to their worst ethnocentric self (Doxiadis, 2011).

The economic crisis has given rise to a dangerous new form of nationalism. The Golden Dawn, the once-marginal extremist party, has won 18 parliamentary seats in Greece's general election by campaigning against austerity measures and immigration and by blaming undocumented migrants for the economic crisis. The above have contributed to the serious increase in violence and intimidation directed at Greece's immigrants. In a recent report, Human Rights Watch (2013) warned that xenophobic violence in Greece has reached "alarming proportions," and accused Greek authorities of doing nothing to stop the attacks.

In periods of social, political and economic crisis 'the others' provide for a 'distraction' from the real causes of the crisis and serve as a scapegoat and as a means for reasserting the positive identity of the nation against the odds (Triantafyllidou, 2010). If we look at the past we will see that the revival of extremist movements in periods of crisis was a desperation reaction of 'the disgruntled and the psychologically homeless, the personal failures, the socially isolated, the economically insecure, the uneducated, unsophisticated, and authoritarian persons at every level of the society' (Lipset, 1960, p. 175). The same probably is happening in Greece today.

THE ROLE OF THE GREEK EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE FORMATION OF GREEK NATIONAL IDENTITY

The Greek national education system has played and continues to play significant role in the formation of Greek national identity. Some of the main reasons why Greek national identity has resisted international pressures that are attempting to construct a European or a more cosmopolitan identity, which would replace existing ethno-nationalisms, are the predominance of the ethnocentric national history in the Greek national education system and the ethnocentric content of the books and the curricula (Stratoudaki, 2008)

The curriculum and the textbooks, especially in subjects such as History, Greek Language and Geography promote Greek nationalism by presenting an image of the Greek nation, which is based on the common agreement of its homogeneity and superiority (Avdela, 2000; Zambeta 2000). They also attempt to identify the modern nation state, 'via Byzantine Orthodoxy, with the city-states of the fourth century BC and thus with Hellenic civilization' (Psomiades & Thomadaki, 1993 quoted in Coulby, 2000, p. 92).

Students in Greece are exposed and become acquainted with other countries, as well as with the concept of Europe only in the context of warfare and hostility (Hamilakis, 2003; Flouris, 1995). The curriculum and the textbooks see the Greeks as the fountainhead of European civilization and focus on other states only through the teaching of the wars, expansionary policies in the past and hostile stances in the present (Coulby, 2000; Flouris, 1998).

Relevant studies about the Greek education system and its role in the formation of Greek national identity in the present rapidly changing era show that the Greek education system seeks to rationalize the curriculum and textbooks (Stratoudaki, 2008). But although different policies taking in account the current deep transformations, the new social conditions and the increasing and changing diversity are proposed, these policies do not seem to tackle the

problems of Greek society with sufficient breadth.

The Greek education system fails to address in its policy and curriculum documentation the full implications of the recent political and economic changes and, as many other education systems around the world (Kiwani, 2008), it continues to propose a single national identity, even though it is acknowledging the presence of a plurality of nations, to be based on exclusion rather than inclusion and on ethnocentrism rather than multiculturalism, and to be racist and nationalistic (Stratoudaki, 2008).

Even if the curricula and books have improved being more tolerant and understanding to 'others', they still present an ethnocentric national history and tend to be introvert; they are still conservative and oblivious towards matters concerning religion or other nationalities, those traditionally seen as 'enemies' and are still highly reluctant to accept the potential transformation of Greek society into a multiethnic society (Stratoudaki, 2008). It might be extreme to indicate that the Greek national education system encourages hostility and warfare; nonetheless it may be said that it undoubtedly does remarkably little to inspire conciliation and peace.

In short, having in mind the importance of education in the formation of the national identity, we could say that the predominance of the ethnocentric national history in the Greek education system and in general the ethnocentric content of the books and the curricula may be one of the main reasons of the anti-Western feeling and of the persistence of identitarian discourses like nationalism.

Nonetheless, we should be cautious when we make judgments about teaching from curricula and textbooks alone (Council of Europe, 1996). Brindle (1996) reminds us that 'we cannot assume that the content of the textbook is the same as the content of the lesson' (quoted in Goalen, 1997, p.2). Grosvenor (1999) argues that in order to come to some conclusion about the impact of the teaching in identity formation, we need to extend our vision of schooling to consider the cumulative effect of value messages in both the formal and 'hidden curriculum' and to look at the role of teachers.

CHALLENGES FOR THE GREEK EDUCATION SYSTEM AND GREEK TEACHERS IN THE AGE OF AUSTERITY

The education sector is probably one of the most sensitive and politically charged areas of public policy because of its important role in identity formation, national cohesion and its potential to prepare students for their roles as world citizens (Kenway & Bullen, 2000, Wiborg, 2000). The severe complexity of issues surrounding nationality, immigration and asylum seekers

suggests a need for conceptualizing new forms of citizenship identity that are more appropriate to these new times (Halpin & Moore, 2006), a need for responsible citizens who can 'assimilate the local to the national' and the supranational (Whitty, 2002, p. 95).

If the schools are to meet the challenge of educating the next generation in a way that equips them for their contemporary life and for their future, then they must change. The education systems should include a global perspective into the curriculum and teach in ways that encourage co-operation, critical thinking, democratic values of fairness and practices. They should help students deal with prejudice and value diversity; develop self-esteem and a commitment to justice and sustainable development (Whitty, 2002; Steiner, 1994).

The above improvement efforts cannot be realised without the involvement of teachers (Johnson & Hallgarten, 2002). Daily life in schools, and the experience of students, is determined by the beliefs and intentions of the participants. Improvement is necessarily a process of learning by all those involved and especially by the teachers (Levin, 2012). Teachers' role is crucially important; it is a very decisive and influential factor in social change (van Driel et al, 2001). As Fullan (2001) states any change attempted in society is strongly hinged on education and on what teachers think and do about it, and depended on public support, careful training of the teachers and teachers' improved status and professional identity (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1988).

Teachers' professional role cannot be seen to be a fixed 'thing', it has to be negotiated and re-established. In order for Greek schools to change significantly and start promoting citizenship education with an understanding of identity and diversity teachers should: be critical educators committed to human rights, actively seek to keep informed, use a range of teaching styles, encourage their students to be active and participate in the wider societal context (Down & Smyth, 2012; Kiwan, 2008; Bigelow, 2006). Teachers should also have high morale, self-esteem, trust to themselves, energy and positive motivation to innovate and develop practice that improves learning (Johnson & Hallgarten, 2002).

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