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Settling protracted social conflicts:

Trust, identity, and the resolution of the ‘Cyprus issue’

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In the contemporary world of inter- and intra-state relations the ‘Cyprus issue’ has a regrettably special place: because of the duration of the divisions in Cyprus itself between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots (formalized since 1983 by a disputed international border across the island); because of the involvement of two foreign countries, Greece and Turkey, for which the ‘hyphenated’ Cypriot communities form proxy (and for the most part, willing) battalions in their ongoing feud; and because of the failure of the United Nations’ longstanding efforts to resolve the conflict. Such is the depth of feeling among many Cypriots

that simply trying to describe the last fifty years of Cyprus's history is a minefield for the unwary, each side seeing the progression of events in highly partisan terms. Likewise, suspicion is the primary lens through which every attempt at reconciliation continues to be viewed. This essay will provide an overview of the 'Cyprus issue' against which to discuss the role of identity in the creation of a relatively harmonious community that forms the ballast of a modern state. The necessary condition for a resolution to the 'Cyprus issue', I argue, is the creation of a Cypriot identity and thus a national interest that can supersede existing loyalties to external states, cultures and traditions.

As an island in the eastern Mediterranean, and a welcome port of call for sea-borne trade (not to mention convenient destination for conquerors and settlers), Cyprus has been subject to diverse cultural influences for thousands of years. In 1489, to mention only more recent times, it was captured by the Republic of Venice; in 1570, the Ottomans invaded; and in 1878, the island was transferred by the Ottomans to the control of the United Kingdom. After a period of rising clashes with the British in the postcolonial era after the Second World War, Cyprus became independent in 1960. Despite the machinations of the island's communities during the struggle for independence, including a failed proposal for unification with Greece, it is essentially from the time of independence that the 'Cyprus issue' emerges. Violence between the Turkish-oriented and Greek-oriented communities led ultimately to the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force in 1964, the start of the longest-ever UN intervention that continues to this day. Ten years later, just days after an attempt by the Greek military junta to unite the island with Greece, including ousting the Cypriot President, Makarios, Turkish troops invaded on 20 July 1974 (on the grounds of protecting the Turkish Cypriot community) and divided the island; in 1983 this division was formalized by the

declaration of independence by the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus'. Thousands of Greek Cypriots were displaced southwards by the invasion; thousands of mainland Turks were subsequently resettled in northern Cyprus. The international community does not recognize this 'Republic', but is constrained in acting against it; the displaced population and their descendants continue to feel aggrieved at their loss; and the passage of time conspires to normalize the status quo.

The 'Cyprus issue' has been aggravated, if not fundamentally created, by the interference of colonial and other external powers. Indeed, it is the burden of Christopher Hitchens' passionate but incisive analysis that:

Only four years after they had painfully achieved independence [in 1960], the Cypriots became the victims of a superpower design for partition. This partition reflected only the strategic requirements of outside powers, and did not conform to any local needs ... The imposition of partition [from 1974] *necessitated* the setting of Greek against Turk, and Greek against Greek.¹

In Hitchens' view, Cyprus reached its current impasse by a series of external manoeuvres, by Greece, Turkey and Britain, often with willing Cypriot accomplices, but exploiting and fanning ancient rivalries. The two most important things to know about Cyprus in the last couple of centuries are first how it fitted into grand power strategy and second, that the people of Cyprus have rarely if ever been consulted about their fate. Hitchens insisted:

that before 1955 there was no history of internal viciousness in Cyprus ... In his book *Years of Upheaval* ... Dr Henry Kissinger ... speaks of "primeval hatred of Greeks and Turks", "atavistic bitternesses" and "a lethal cocktail" ... In doing so, he perpetuates a fairly widespread and commonplace view of the island's troubles; a fatalistic view of the incompatibility of the communities that insults both of them.²

Meanwhile the UN's efforts—both at keeping the parties from taking up arms once again, and at a long-term settlement of the division—continue. In the literature on conflict resolution, the peacekeeping success of the UN in Cyprus has been rightly noted: there has been no open warfare since 1974. Bercovitch and Jackson point out that UN peacekeeping 'has acquired an important reputation for impartiality and professionalism.'³ But the UN's many efforts at settlement have thus far signally failed. The current efforts by the UN Secretary-General's Special Adviser, former Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer, seem unlikely to break this dismal mediation record. While it might be easy to blame Downer himself for incautious comments, as the Greek Cypriot side has recently done,⁴ criticism of his mission reflects rather the extent of the distance and suspicion between the two sides. The apparent readiness of the parties to the dispute to misinterpret Downer's statements must have him bemused, or perplexed.

The story of mediation in Cyprus can be told in terms of recurring cycles of hopes raised and then dashed. The most recent cycle can be charted in a series of reports by the International Crisis Group (ICG). In June 2008, the ICG declared the 'Best Chance Yet' for the reunification of Cyprus on the basis of the election of Demetris Christofias to the Greek Cypriot presidency. By September 2009, it described the state of play as 'Reunification or Partition?' if the opportunity for a settlement was not reached by April 2010 (the date of the then-forthcoming Turkish Cypriot elections). By February 2011, the ICG was urging 'Six Steps towards a Settlement', premised on the notion that 'the Cyprus reunification negotiations under way since 2008 [are] at an impasse'.⁵ The stalemate continues.

Though there are a number of factors that affect the outcome of any conflict mediation, Ott has argued that success or failure 'is largely determined by the nature of the dispute'.⁶ What,

then, is the nature of the Cyprus dispute? Certainly the remaining issues over property lost in the partition bedevil the chances for a lasting peace and an end to the island's division; as does the baleful influence of outside players (notably Greece and Turkey, who have strategic interests in Cyprus, but who have also used the 'Cyprus issue' periodically as a convenient distraction from internal problems). But the fundamental problem in Cyprus is that it has not been allowed—it was not given a chance—to build a Cypriot nation after its independence from the United Kingdom in 1960. The absence of such a Cypriot identity was, in a sense, conceded by Rauf Denktaş (a former leader of the Turkish Cypriot community), who was quoted in the 1990s as saying that 'in Cyprus the only thing that is Cypriot is the donkey'.⁷ Perhaps the most important lesson to draw from the series of ICG documents cited above is not to place excessive hopes on particular individuals, governments or rounds of negotiation. The task in Cyprus is long-term; it may be assisted by the disposition of particular individuals, but the long-term work is the creation of a people. This means acknowledging the nature of the conflict as a protracted social conflict, and beginning the steps for building a new Cypriot sense of community.

Bercovitch and Jackson have argued that following the end of the Cold War in 1989 conflicts involving identity—ethnic and religious conflicts, in particular—took the place of the previous conflicts related to competition and scarcity. They add that:

Denial of identity can lead to feelings of victimization that may lead to conflict, and conflicts that are based on identity are inherently more complicated and harder to resolve than those over resources. Moreover, ethnic conflict will usually take place within a community, and often in a community with a history of hostility, the situation is further complicated. Hence, words such as *intractable* and *protracted* have been employed to describe these new types of conflict.⁸

While noting that the Cyprus issue long pre-dates the end of the Cold War, it seems to prefigure these new types of conflict and should be approached in similar ways.

In countries achieving independence in the period of decolonization, and in many of those democratizing in the 'third wave' since the mid-1970s, one of the key desiderata is the creation of a 'people' out of the human material at hand, be it divided into tribal, or ethnic, or religious communities. British lawyer and educator, Sir Ivor Jennings, once insightfully pointed to a key issue in a democracy: that 'the people cannot decide until somebody decides who are the people'.⁹ This means above all that in any social system where politics, rather than force, decides public issues, 'the people' must have some sense of common purpose and destiny. They must partake of a common spirit to the extent that they do not wish to withdraw from, or wreck, the system when it decides against a part, or parts, of the people. Political decisions involve losers as well as winners, and the longevity of the system depends on a continuing commitment on the part of the losers. This may be addressed, to some extent, by the notion that winners on some issues will be losers on others: in other words, that losers are not consistently losers. If there is some group, or groups, that continually 'lose', then the ability of the political system to fulfil its purpose without serious disruption is impaired.

A level of trust is something that must operate in all continuing human groups where simple fear and necessity have been overcome. And it is an elementary fact of the sociology of enduring democracies. That a democratic political system 'represents' all the population, and not just those who voted for the incumbent government, is commonly (and properly) the message of elected leaders when they win power. But if problems are constructed in the absolutist terms of identity, rather than as an appropriate business for negotiation and compromise, their resolution becomes far more difficult than ordinary politics can often

process, and the way is opened for those who want to dominate or wreck the political system. Whether or not identity (especially minority identity) is protected in constitutional documents, as it was in Cyprus in the institutional arrangements of 1960 that included inter alia a constitutional guarantee that the Vice President would be a Turkish Cypriot, the formalities themselves are symptomatic of continuing division and the paucity of common ground. Yet intercommunal trust is essential in the building of any viable political community, and a powerful factor in their disintegration is the fear of one side or the other that it will be bested even despite formal guarantees.

The Cyprus conflict falls into the category of what Edward Azar labeled 'protracted social conflict' and what John W. Burton referred to as 'deep-rooted conflict'.¹⁰ The length of such conflicts stems from their connections to deeply-felt issues including identity, ideology and the frustration of basic human needs. As Wittig explained, long-term transformation is thus required, and 'settlements reached [merely] between the political or military elites of the conflict groups fail to address the needs of the conflict societies [as a whole] and thus impede an effective conflict resolution'.¹¹ But Wittig's research in Cyprus almost a decade ago concluded that 'conflict resolution approaches' had produced a transformation only among the Turkish Cypriot community, not in the Greek Cypriot community. The primary evidence she adduced was the former community's support for, and the latter's rejection of, a referendum proposal in 2004 to allow Cyprus to join the European Union as a united country. But to conclude that conflict resolution has failed on this basis does not take into account the other factors influencing the referendum results, especially when there was arguably much more for the Turkish Cypriot community to gain from unification.

Azar's analysis emphasized that 'the source of protracted social conflict is the denial of those elements required in the development of all people and societies, and whose pursuit is a compelling need in all. These are *security, distinctive identity, social recognition of identity,*

and *effective participation* in the processes that determine conditions of security and identity'.¹² It underlines the importance of 'a people'—and thus trust—to the building of a political community, when people are divided into 'identity groups'. The quest to find a Cypriot identity—to go beyond the identities grounded in a particular view of history and in loyalties to elsewhere—has been undermined by the machinations of Greece and Turkey, for whom the island populations of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots became a proxy for the larger, long-term dispute between these two countries, extending back for more than a century. This spoiling process has involved external interference but, even more importantly, a manipulation of identity on the island. Loizides argues that 'Historically, both Turkish and Greek Cypriots have experienced strong feelings of "motherland nationalism", namely, a sense of primary loyalty to the "national centers" of Ankara and Athens, respectively.'¹³ While the strand of island patriotism has waxed and waned, and 'motherland nationalism' may be on the decline, he has found that that 'the major focus of identity of Cypriots is identification with their respective ethnic communities in the form of Greek Cypriotism or Turkish Cypriotism',¹⁴ a mid-way point that increases the possibilities for success for those proposals that meet these particular constituencies.

Presenting the 'Cyprus issue' as a challenge of identity suggests parallels with recently emerged democracies. All democracies are confronted to some extent with the challenges of diversity; democratizing countries, too, face this issue in ways that often threaten to affect or even derail their transition. Most of the latter countries have emerged from periods of colonial dependence, which may have had adverse effects on their economies, but also affect their political development. Their borders, for example, may be colonial impositions or accommodations, with little reference to the realities of geography or ethnicity on the ground. Scooping up different tribal and ethnic groups, as well as different religious groups, the arbitrary boundaries often created by colonial powers have led to significant political

challenges. Such challenges may not have been so evident when the major political objective was to remove the colonial overlords, but they became obvious when the question of ruling—and the real or imagined spoils of ruling—came to be managed, or divided. The major challenge of post-independence was to build a sense of one people; this challenge has been addressed in many places in terms of nationalism.

Nationalism is perhaps the most important type of ‘glue’ that holds modern political systems together; it is particularly important in modern societies which—by virtue of their large extent, and thus the general anonymity of citizens one from another—cannot rely on personal ties to bind. It creates a virtual, national ‘family’. Yet the pervasive success of nationalism consists in that this—essentially modern, constructed form of identity—is considered to be both natural and timeless.

For Cyprus, many solutions have been suggested to satisfy the interests of the two major sides in one united state, from the (failed) 1960 constitution itself through subsequent suggestions for a federated republic and variations thereupon.¹⁵ But change produces fertile ground for ‘spoilers’. Machiavelli put this point succinctly in 1513:

taking the initiative in introducing a new form of government is very difficult and dangerous, and is unlikely to succeed. The reason is that all those who profit from the old order will be opposed to the innovator, whereas all those who might benefit from the new order are, at best, tepid supporters for him.¹⁶

The success of any institutional arrangement in solving the ‘Cyprus issue’—and I have no elegant plan to offer in this regard—will depend on the foundational work done in building confidence between the two sides and in creating the sense of a Cypriot future. There lies the best chance of overcoming the spoilers and naysayers.

There is, among some Cypriots, a recognition that continued division is a continuing wound. The Cyprus Friendship Programme youth bicomunal group, for example, gathered together at the centre of the island in early 2011 to proclaim their hopes:

This is a time to declare that forgiveness and reconciliation are not the desires of just a few, but the powerful voice of the people of Cyprus ... We embrace caringly everyone who has lost a dear one as if we are members of the same family.¹⁷

How widely this view is shared I cannot tell, but protracted social conflicts are associated with underdevelopment and social and economic disparities. In short, Cyprus and its peoples are the poorer for their conflict.

Protracted social conflicts are also, by definition, not easy to resolve. Yet in my view, acknowledging the centrality of a lack of trust rather than a historic and irreconcilable ethnic divide is essential to its eventual resolution. There is a fundamental lack of trust between the two communities on the island of Cyprus. Negotiations between the leaders of the two sides have tended to be exercises in posturing and serve rather to bolster the leadership of their different constituencies than to resolve the problems. Good leadership will be important on the road to an eventual resolution, but a structural shift in the way that identities are imagined is essential.

Every successful modern nation is a palimpsest of peoples, cultures and DNA, usually subscribing to unifying nationalist myths. Ultimately, nationalism is a choice; as Ernest Renan explained in 1882, nationalism is 'a daily plebiscite'.¹⁸ And if nationalism is built in part on a 'rich legacy of memories', it is also built in part on selective forgetting.¹⁹

Resolution of the 'Cyprus issue' will necessarily involve government to government negotiations that address the difficult property and other issues raised by the division of the island, as well as interactions between civil society groups and individuals on both sides to

reinforce the baseline of shared humanity; it may involve some innovative institutional arrangements; but it must also involve the recognition in some form that a Cypriot identity is something still to be created, debated and negotiated. Sadly, the timeframe for such a recognition, and for the development of such an identity, is beyond my reckoning.

Endnotes

¹ Christopher Hitchens, *Hostage to History: Cyprus from the Ottomans to Kissinger* 3rd ed. (London: Verso, 1997), 11-12.

² Hitchens, 47.

³ Jacob Bercovitch and Richard Jackson, *Conflict Resolution in the Twenty-first Century: Principles, Methods and Approaches* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 81-82.

⁴ 'Cyprus parliament rebukes UN envoy Alexander Downer over perceived bias', *The Australian* 3 February 2012, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/cyprus-parliament-rebukes-un-envoy-alexander-downer-over-perceived-bias/story-e6frg6so-1226261490418>.

⁵ International Crisis Group, *Cyprus*, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/turkey-cyprus/cyprus.aspx>.

⁶ Mervin C. Ott, 'Mediation as a Method of Conflict Resolution', *International Organization* 26 (1972): 595-618, at 597.

⁷ Cited Neophytos G. Loizides, 'Ethnic Nationalism and Adaptation in Cyprus', *International Studies Perspectives*, 8 (2007): 172-189, at 173.

⁸ Bercovitch and Jackson, 5.

⁹ Sir Ivor Jennings, *The Approach to Self-Government* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1956), 56.

¹⁰ Edward E. Azar and John W. Burton (eds), *International conflict resolution : theory and practice* (Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 1986).

¹¹ Kerstin Wittig, *People United in a Country Divided: Bi-Communal Activities in Cyprus*, Masters thesis, Eberhard-Karls-Universität, Tübingen, 2005, http://www.peace4cyprus.net/PeopleUnited_Chapter_1.pdf, 2.

¹² Edward E. Azar, 'Protracted international conflicts: Ten propositions', *International Interactions: Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations*, 12 (1985): 59-70, at 60.

¹³ Loizides, 173.

¹⁴ Loizides, 172.

¹⁵ Maria Hadjipavlou-Trigeorgis and Lenos Trigeorgis, 'Cyprus: An Evolutionary Approach to Conflict Resolution', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 37 (1993): 340-360.

¹⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (edited Q. Skinner and R. Price, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 20-21.

¹⁷ LiberalPeter, 'Cyprus: People united in a country divided', <http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-580337>; posted 26 March 2011.

¹⁸ Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?' in *Becoming National: A Reader*, eds Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 41-55, at 53.

¹⁹ Hitchens, 164.