

De-ethnicising the Ethnography of Cyprus: Political and Social Conflict between Turkish Cypriots and Settlers from Turkey

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In Y. Papadakis, N. Peristianis, & G. Welz (Eds.)

Divided Cyprus: Modernity, History, and an Island in Conflict

Indiana University Press

Bloomington, 2006 (pp. 256)

ISBN:978-0253218513

Introduction

Yael Navaro-Yashin's chapter, *De-ethnicizing the Ethnography of Cyprus*, published in *Divided Cyprus: Modernity, History, and an Island in Conflict* (Indiana University Press, 2006), offers a significant intervention in the study of the Cyprus conflict. Moving beyond conventional analyses that frame the island's division as a binary ethnic struggle between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots, Navaro-Yashin challenges the assumption of internal homogeneity on the Turkish side.

This review argues that Navaro-Yashin's work makes a significant contribution to the analysis of the Cyprus issue in terms of internal social tensions and the reshaping of daily life, but that is flawed due to its one-sided ethnographic perspective and its failure to engage sufficiently with class and broader comparative frameworks.

Summary

Rather than reproducing the dominant narrative of interethnic conflict, Navaro-Yashin demonstrates that the primary tensions shaping Turkish Cypriot daily life emerge from within their own community. Specifically, she highlights the strained relationship between native Turkish Cypriots and settlers from mainland Turkey following the island's division in 1974.

Her ethnographic findings reveal that Turkish Cypriots' anxieties are less directed toward Greek Cypriots and more toward demographic change, cultural differences, and the pervasive influence of the Turkish military presence. The official discourse portraying settlers as 'compatriots' or 'saviours' is contradicted by everyday practices that construct clear social and cultural boundaries between the two groups.

Through interviews and observations, Navaro-Yashin shows how Turkish Cypriots perceive settlers as culturally different and, at times, socially disruptive. These perceptions are expressed in complaints about changing social norms, rising crime, and feelings of alienation within their own homeland. A striking example is the comparison made by an interlocutor who describes coexistence with Greek Cypriots as more predictable and secure than living alongside settlers -illustrating how ethnic categories lose coherence in lived experience.

The study also foregrounds the role of militarisation in shaping everyday life. The omnipresence of military symbols, restricted zones, and hierarchical authority structures produces a sense of constraint and subordination among Turkish Cypriots. This environment fosters what the author interprets as a form of learned helplessness, where individuals internalise their limited agency under military-political dominance.

Finally, Navaro-Yashin explores how cultural practices -such as language use, secular lifestyles, and gender norms- become markers of distinction and tools for identity preservation. These practices evolve into a political stance against perceived assimilation, encapsulated in expressions like ‘Turks come and go’ which reflect resistance to demographic and cultural transformation.

Critical Analysis

One of the key strengths of Navaro-Yashin’s work lies in its methodological and theoretical innovation. By grounding the Cyprus issue in ethnographic detail, she shifts the analytical lens from macro-level geopolitics to micro-level social relations. This approach reveals how power operates through everyday practices, perceptions, and spatial arrangements.

The use of Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts -particularly *habitus*, *cultural capital*, and *distinction*- is especially effective. Navaro-Yashin demonstrates how Turkish Cypriots construct cultural hierarchies that symbolically differentiate themselves from settlers. Everyday judgments about manners, domestic practices, or speech, become mechanisms through which social boundaries are reproduced. These forms of distinction function not merely as cultural preferences, but as strategies of identity preservation in a context where political autonomy is perceived as limited.

However, the study would benefit from a more explicit engagement with broader theoretical traditions, particularly postcolonial and settler-colonial studies. The dynamics described -settler influx, demographic engineering, cultural hierarchies, and perceived loss of autonomy- closely parallel patterns observed in other contexts.

Situating the Cyprus case within this comparative literature would strengthen the analytical depth of the argument and clarify its broader relevance.

In terms of limitations, the most significant issue is the one-sided nature of the ethnographic perspective. While the study powerfully captures Turkish Cypriot narratives of marginalisation, it does not sufficiently incorporate the voices of settlers themselves. Their motivations for migration, experiences of exclusion, and strategies of adaptation remain largely unexplored. This absence weakens the claim to ethnographic completeness and risks reproducing the very asymmetries the study seeks to critique.

Additionally, the analysis underplays the role of economic structures. Many settlers come from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, working in precarious or seasonal jobs. As a result, the cultural distinctions drawn by Turkish Cypriots may also reflect class-based hierarchies rather than purely cultural differences. The derogatory labeling of settlers can thus be interpreted as a form of class prejudice, where ethnicity, nationality, and socioeconomic status intersect. A more explicit engagement with this intersectionality would significantly enrich the analysis.

Conclusion

Navaro-Yashin's chapter makes an important contribution to the sociology of conflict by demonstrating that ethnic divisions are neither fixed nor exhaustive explanations of social tension. By uncovering intra-community hierarchies and everyday forms of power, the study challenges dominant narratives of the Cyprus issue and opens new avenues for ethnographic and sociological inquiry.

At the same time, its analytical potential is constrained by a limited engagement with comparative theory, economic factors, and the perspectives of settlers themselves.

Ultimately, this study serves as an example of how ethnography can challenge simplified ethnic frameworks; however, its lasting contribution to sociology lies in paving the way for the interpretation of multifaceted narratives and the relationships between settler and indigenous populations in Cyprus within the context of social stratification and broader global patterns.

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