‘They will never become European!’: Perceptions of Europe and Europeanness through Othering processes in Greece

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The paper draws on data collected in project, which investigated issues of Turkish-Greek relations from an identity perspective. The data collection process regarded attitudes towards the Turkish TV series on Greek television and included the distribution of 100 questionnaires and the conduction of 10 semi-structured interviews with permanent residents of the city of Thessaloniki, in Greece. In this paper I present only a part of the qualitative part of the study, which was analysed thematically. More specifically, I focus on the way participants perceive ‘Europe’ and the terms under which they negotiate their belonging to it. The findings demonstrate that Europe is associated to notions like education, democracy, Christianity and open-mindedness. At the same time, Europe is constructed in the minds of the participants as the positive pole in the binary opposition Europe-East. Their position though in terms of Europe-East lies somewhere in the middle.
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Introduction

Othering processes have been argued to be a mechanism for identity production and maintenance. This applies to both self and group identity. Positioning someone as ‘the other’ is a fundamental part of collective identity construction and of national narratives. This becomes particularly relevant when it comes to countries with troubled past such as Greece and Turkey. Against this backdrop, the paper draws on data collected in 2013-2014 in the context of a project on Greek people’s attitudes towards the Turkish TV series broadcasted in Greece. The analysis focuses on the ways in which the participants constructed the image of Turks through instances of Othering in the interview context. The paper pays special attention to the construction and negotiation of European identity and ‘Europeanness’.

Turkish-Greek background

During the twentieth century crucial historical facts resulted to strained relations for the Greek and Turkish populations. The takeover, or catastrophe and disaster (depending on who’s view is cited), of the city of Smyrna by Turkish forces in 1922 with the following exchange of Greek and Turkish populations under the terms of the Lausanne Convention had as a result a huge migratory wave that settled in Greece with huge effects in socioeconomic level (Hirschon 2003; Kontogiorgi 2003). The pogrom against Greeks of Istanbul in 1955 and the final deportation of 13,000 of them in 1964 after tensions in Cyprus worsened the situation and transformed Turkish - Greek relations to a sensitive topic to touch (Oran 2003; Vryonis 2005). During the 1990’s the conflicts over the Aegean islet of Imia, the Greek support to Cyprus in the installment of S-300 anti-aircraft ballistic missiles and the revelation of the fact that Abdullah Ocalan had found refuge in the Greek Embassy in Nairobi had only worsened relations (Grigoriadis 2012: 120). The climate between the two countries during the last century, thus, was especially hostile and turbulent.

Towards the end of 1990s, however, the picture began to change and the relations between Turkey and Greece entered into a “period of rapprochement” (Rumelili 2007:107). In 1999, the Kosovo war constituted the reason for the Foreign Ministers of Greece and Turkey, George Papandreou and Ismail Cem respectively, to co-operate and institute steps for the improvement of the two countries’ relations (Grigoriadis 2012:121). This attempt of rapprochement was further facilitated by a natural disaster, the earthquakes that hit Turkey and Greece in August and September 1999 respectively, which gave the opportunity to the two countries to show mutual sympathy and compassion, acknowledging the fact that they share common risks (Ganapati et al. 2010). The change of Greek policy on EU-Turkey relations, announced at the Helsinki Summit in December 1999, was a “milestone” (Grigoriadis 2012:121) for the further enhancement of Turkish-Greek relations. Despite the still two unresolved issues of Cyprus and the Aegean, the rapprochement of Turkish- Greek relations is a fact; that is indicated also by the signing of 33 bilateral agreements between the two countries during the last decade (Ganapati et al. 2010; Rumelili 2007).
The choice of Turkish TV series

The presence of Turkish TV series in Greek television was chosen as a stimulus for the initiation of discussion around Turkish-Greek relations. The choice of Turkish TV series served the purposes of the research for a number of reasons. First of all, the phenomenon of the Turkish TV series broadcasting in Greece was at the time recent and powerful. The series started being massively imported in 2010 and entered the Greek television with remarkable success causing debates in social media and every-day discourses on the interests they serve (Moore 2013). But they also brought to the foreground the recognition of similarities and differences of the two populations, making relevant the common and troubled past of the two countries (Papailias 2005). Turkish TV series thus seems a well suited stimulus for a project that investigates identity construction in the given context.

Theoretical premises

In the present paper I am going to focus on part of the results which refer to the conceptualisation of European identity and ‘Europeanness’ of the participants. Identity is understood under social constructionist terms, as something constructed and negotiated in discourse (Angouri and Marra 2011; De Fina 2011). It is conceived as dynamic, multiple and multi-faceted (Wodak 1999) and as constructed along multiple complementary relations (Bucholtz and Hall 2005).

In the given Turkish-Greek context, a concept that becomes prominent for the understanding of the practices participants follow is that of Orientalism. Said defines Orientalism as ‘a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the “Orient” and most of the time “the Occident”’(1978:2). Said implies that the notion of Orient played a significant role in the formation of a European collective identity, by defining the ‘us’ the Europeans against ‘them’, all non-Europeans (Said 1978). Orientalism constitutes an essentialist concept as it views all the members of a society under simplistic labels as if they were an undifferentiated mass (Holliday 2011). The term raises issues of power too. It implies a ‘flexible positional superiority’ of Westerners upon the subjugated Orient world (Said 1978:4) that waits for them to be liberated (Holliday 2011). Orientals are constructed as the European uncivilized Other and become the vehicle for confirming the rational European identity as ‘irrational’ Other presupposes (and is presupposed by) the ‘rational self’ (Edgar and Sedwick 1999: 266).

The ‘us/them’ or ‘self/other’ distinction referred to above, seems to consist a common mechanism for creating identity according to relevant literature (see Angouri and Efthymiadou, forthcoming, for a detailed overview) and is employed by participants of this study too, as the findings will show. The constructive power of self/other distinction for identity formation processes is better understood when placed in a wider framework of categorization. Categorization works as a strong tool in the understanding of the world, in first place, and, consequently, in the building of a sense of self. Its strength derives from the fact that ‘it satisfies a basic human need for cognitive parsimony’ (Abrams and Hogg 2006). Identity scholars have acknowledged the concept’s robustness in relation to identity and have drew on it in the development of their theories. Indeed, some of the most influential identity theories, like Social Identity Theory, encompass the concept of categorization.
According to Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner 1979) the social identity of an individual derives from his knowledge of belonging to a certain social group or category and from the value and emotional significance that results from this group membership (Tajfel 1972; 1978). People grow up in families and communities and come to identify with the groups in which they are socially located (Fligstein et al. 2012). Every social group to which one belongs provides a definition of one’s self, a prescription of the way he is supposed to think, feel and behave (Tajfel and Turner 1979). A core concept of the theory is the social categorization process. Individuals through psychological processes and in an attempt to make life simpler tend to organise the environment into categories, groups of persons, objects, according to their common shared features (Tajfel 1972). Each element of every category is characterized by the features shared by all the subjects of that category. Categorization implies an emphasis on differences between categories and similarities within the same category.

Methodology

The project applied a mixed-methods approach. The distribution of 100 questionnaires and the conduction of 10 semi-structured interviews with permanent residents of Thessaloniki in Greece, were combined for the elicitation of data. The main research question of the project was: How do the participants construct the image of Turks? Here I present part of the qualitative part of the study, the interviews, which were analysed thematically (Brawn and Clarke 2006).

Discussion

The first stage of the thematic analysis of interviews led to the emergence of four themes in relation to the perception of Turks (for an overview of the themes see appendix); here I will discuss only one of the emerged themes (Turks as non-Europeans), which refers to the non-European character of Turks. The specific theme reflects the practice of participants to present Turks as different to Europeans, or in other terms to Otherise them when compared to European citizens. The specific practice apart from revealing the way participants perceive Turkish people, it is also insightful for the way participants perceive Europe and ‘Europeaness’. Throughout the data set there is an obvious tendency to differentiate Turkey from Europe in many aspects. Participants construct Turkey and Europe as a binary opposition, and they ascribe negative and positive traits to each of them respectively. Europe is related to notions of democracy, freedom, respect of human-rights, modernity, a place of enlightenment, while Turkey is given the label of a backwarded and uncivilized place, where women are not treated equally to men and where Islamic religion has the first say towards all aspects of life. Some representative quotes of the above categories are the following:

‘They abstain from Europe from every aspect: religious, economic, cultural, whatever you can imagine…. The economic development alone does not make them equal. I don’t believe for example that they have the same culture with the Dutch people’ (Transcription 2, excerpt 109, 113, 117)

‘There is not freedom of speaking. They haven’t shown that they want to walk towards the European culture. This is the one. And the other is that I am very concerned about the Islamic issue and the way they practice their religion, the way their religious beliefs affect their standing as political beings. How could a society that is so fanatically man-based and undermines woman be considered European considering that Europe promotes the equity of the two sexes, the right of the woman to work, to be politically active, to evolve professionally and in the
social level. These things are unconceivable for their society. I don’t believe it could work.’ (transcription 9, excerpt 24)

The above examples, which are quite representative of the whole data set, consist a clear case of othering.

First of all, from the above positions it becomes evident that Turkey in the minds of the participants fulfils the role of the European Other. That seems to validate previous results of identity studies on the construction of the image of Turkey in Europe. Numerous studies like those of Hulsse (2000), Schneeberger (2009), Aydin-Duzgit Senem (2009), Morozov and Rumelili (2012), Azrout et al. (2010) and Arcan (2012) used as reference point the Turkish membership to the E.U. and found Turkey to be constructed across several European countries as Europe’s Other. That common practice could be best understood through theorising identity as a relational process. According to Hall, any term can be defined only through its relation to what it is not, to an other (Hall 1996). As Schneeberger (2009) argues in her paper on European identity construction, the existence of an Other is of crucial importance in all identity processes, both in personal and in collective level. Drawing on Orientalism, in the case of European identity formation, the defining Other is East (Delanty 1995; Hay 1957). The Orient (or East) has contributed to the definition of Europe (or the West, or the Occident) as its contrasting image (Said 2003). In the present case Turkey represents the Orient in the minds of the participants and is positioned vis a vis Europe, as Europe’s Other, contributing actively to its definition. Europe and Turkey, hence, become mutually exclusive. Furthermore, it could be argued that this juxtaposition implicitly contributes to the definition of Greece and ‘Greekness’ too, given that Greece constitutes part of Europe. The above discussion could be depicted in the following way:

In their comments participants also underlined the Christian character of Europe. Europe is conceptualised as a purely Christian space and this acts as a means of legitimization for their opposition against Turkish European membership. That seems to correspond with Hay’s (1957) old argument that Islam formed the Other against the Imperium Christianum in the construction of a European identity in the past. From the analysis it becomes prevalent though that the opposition between Islam/Christian Europe is still valid today. The data seem to confirm Cardini’s argument (2001:1) that the relationship between Europe and Islam is “a kind of continuation or renewal of the (historical) clashes between Christianity and Islam”. Islam and Christianity are presented thus as another binary opposition in the data set. Islam is negatively connoted and is related to Turkey, while Christianity is positively connoted and is associated with Europe and Greece. The above discussion could be depicted as following:
The conceptualisation of Turkey/Europe as a binary opposition offers many insights on the way Europe and European Union are constructed by the participants as well. First of all, Europe is presented as a homogeneous entity, as a uniform actor that is facing Turkey. Going a step further, considering the fact that opposites in binary oppositions are categories of the same level, it becomes apparent that Europe is conceptualised as a nation-state entity that goes beyond a supranational organization. Furthermore, with regards to the conceptualisation of European Union (EU), one could argue that European Union is equated with Europe in the above discourse. Thus, EU seems to be defined in geographical-cultural terms than in mere political ones. These results correspond with those of Hulsse (2000) in his paper on the othering of Turkey in the German discourse in relation to Turkey’s possible EU accession.

The data set offers insights also on the way participants construct their own identity in relation to Europe. Despite the fact that participants seem to follow relatively similar patterns when conceiving of Europe, their own position in relation to Europe seems to not reach a consensus. Due to space restrictions, I cannot offer a data view here (for a more detailed overview look at (Angouri and Efthymiadou, forthcoming). In brief, participants position themselves in different ways in relation Europe. Interestingly, there are two contradictory main claims: that Greece is a core European country and that Greece has never actually became a European country, but it has preserved instead its Balkan character. Participants thus seem to follow different identity trajectories. Multitude identifications co-exist offering several identity choices. Participants seem to navigate around them in their talk and negotiate their belonging to them in different ways.

Conclusion

As evidenced from the above discussion, Turkey is conceptualized as Europe’s Other in the data, contributing to the construction of the European identity. Europeanness is related to notions of democracy, peace, respect towards human rights, education and Christianity. Participants do otherise Turkey in relation to Europe, however, they do not ascribe unanimously themselves a European identity. Instead, different conceptualisations of their Europeaness co-exist, revealing the multi-faceted character of identity construction processes. Evidently, these findings are drawn from a small symptomatic sample of 10 participants. However I consider the findings important as they capture the protean character of positioning processes and identity formation.
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Appendix

Themes that emerged in relation to participants’ perception of Turks

Perceptions of the Turks

- Turks and Greeks look alike (co-existence, language, corruption, Balkan traits, cuisine, reminiscence of a lost identity)

- “The Turk can never become friend”-Turks as Greeks’ other (perennial enemies, Ottoman oppressors, mistrustful, provocative, barbarian)

- The 2 facets of Turkey: Western and Eastern (development, Europeanisation, woman, everyday people)

- “They will never become Europeans”: Turks as non-Europeans (culture, old-fashioned, Orientals, geopolitics, Islam, human rights)