Abstract

The paper discusses how national and local identities interact in our contemporary world considering the introduction of a recent phenomenon: the regional organization of the European Union. Considering the theoretical work on the formation of national identities during the 19th and 20th Centuries in Europe, and the burgeoning literature on the recent process of “Europeanization,” the paper discusses how the European Union is aiding the deconstruction of national identity by indirectly encouraging a renaissance of local/regional identities. The paper uses a specific case study, the Historical Museum of Crete in Herakleion, to analyze this trend.

Introduction

Nationalism, though a comparatively recent phenomenon, is so widespread and prevalent in the daily lives of people across the globe that many individuals take nationalisms as somehow natural or deeply rooted in history. Historians and other scholars know, however, that nationalism is a product of the relatively recent past, and have begun to ask how and why nationalism has become such a profound force across the world. Though nationalism is a powerful influence on contemporary life, there have been growing factors that scholars believe will decrease the relevance of nationalism, including the increased globalization of the world economy and the rise of regional organizations – the best example (because of its size, structure, and goals) being the European Union (EU). Recent scholarship, however, is lacking in describing exactly how the EU will replace nationalisms, and what will replace the older nationalisms (if anything). Though various EU programs exist to create a new “European” identity and decrease national identities, the “European” identity seems to be weak for all citizens across the EU member-states, and especially in Greece (European Commission 2001:11). Rather than creating a strong “European” identity, it seems instead that the various EU programs are helping to emphasize older regional identities to the detriment of the national identities of Europe. Using the island of Crete as a case study, the cultural policies of the EU, specifically the funding of local cultural projects like the Historical Museum of Crete, apparently directly (though perhaps not intentionally) aid the promotion of regional identity at the expense of national identity. This case study is part of a much larger project to analyze the changes that integration into the European Union is making on the politics, economics, and culture of the island of Crete.
Theoretical Issues

The historiography on nationalism has grown exponentially in the last twenty years, driven perhaps by the rapid growth of nationalist movements during the decolonization period and in wake of the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe. With inputs from anthropologists, political scientists, and social psychologists, historians have grappled with the why and how of nationalism in two broadly defined ways. Also, a recent process, the integration of the European nation-states into the EU is beginning to be studied intensely, which is broadly defined as “Europeanization.” Because Europeanization, especially when it relates to culture (the creation of a feeling of “Europeanness”), is a new area of study, and because the older nationalisms and a new European identity are in direct competition, any study of the Europeanization of identity needs to build upon the theoretical framework already developed for nationalism.

Identity Formation

The first school of thought concerning the why and how of nationalism is best represented in the work of Clifford Geertz and Anthony D. Smith, whose position on the origins of nationalism has been labeled as a “primordialist.” Geertz writes that there are “primordial” ties that exist amongst individuals which function predominantly in creating individual identity. He differentiates this primordial tie from the desire to be part of the modern state, which he labels as civic ties. By creating this dichotomy, Geertz provides an analytical space in which the explanation of how modern nationalism is created can be found (Geertz 1994). Using this formulation and attempting to fill out this analytical space, Smith writes that nationalism builds upon an organic foundation called the ethnie, a group of people that have common ground in shared names, the belief in a common ancestry, a common history and cultural framework, and an association with a shared “homeland” (Smith 2005). The ethnie becomes a nation (and is used in nationalism) by a conscious construction by the intelligentsia, marginalized in pre-capitalist society, in order to gain access to power. According to Smith, nationalist ideas first gained prominence in education through the influence of the intelligentsia, and the desire for nationalism became associated with the desire for wider political and social change. As European societies adjusted to capitalism, the new middle classes, educated with nationalist ideas and newly empowered by the new economic order, adopted a series of symbols from the earlier ethnie and promoted those symbols as evidence of the nation. It is this process that creates nationalism and makes it possible for nationalism to spread – the incorporation of organic symbols to promote the specific political project of educated elites. Another factor in this debate is the issue of local identity, and what role local identities play in the larger nationalist project. Recent scholarship on local identity suggests that earlier local or regional identities played a large role in the manufacture of national identity. Alon Confino, for example, believes that local identities were the main constituent part in the creation of national identity. Using local imagery, Confino believes that German nationalists were able to abstract local images and appropriate them for nationalist ends, such as the depiction of regional symbols (such as the Alps or notable architecture) as all parts of a national Heimat, or homeland (Confino 1997). This was done to both build on the earlier symbols of identity and to manufacture a national symbolism that could be used to transfer the emotional attachment between the individual and the region to the nation.
The alternative school of thought to the “primordialist” school of Smith and others is labeled the “modernist” school. Proponents of this school have varied specific details in their answers to the why of nationalism, but all agree that the how of nationalism is that, unlike in the primordialist vision, national identity is created from completely invented traditions, rather than earlier symbols. As John Breuilly suggests, key intellectuals in Europe in the 18th Century (such as Johann Gottfried von Herder) create romantic nationalism as a negative response to the rapid changes brought about by modernity. Romantic nationalism is the fiction of such intellectuals of an “authentic past” which can be discovered in folk traditions and in linguistic analysis, all with a view to find a “pure” national tradition, devoid of outside influence (Breuilly 1994). By “uncovering” the “authentic past” in linguistic analysis and through the collection of various folk traditions, the individuals who cull the linguistic and oral traditions of their chosen subjects make a series of important decision that leads to the invention of a tradition rather than the discovery of older traditions, as in the primordialist school. By eliminating certain tales, objecting to various words or phrases, and categorizing influences as “authentic” and “foreign”, the romantic nationalists manufacture a national identity that omits beliefs, practices, and even the language used by the supposed nation that the nationalists are defining. The modernist school differs on the why of nationalism. Eric Hobsbawm, for example, has written that nationalisms were created in order to mobilize the masses behind the creation of the bureaucratic nation-state, which privileged the intelligentsia as the only class educated enough to run the new state (Hobsbawm 1994). John Breuilly believes that instead of a specific goal (creation of the bureaucratic nation-state), nationalism was used across Europe to support numerous reforms, and that nationalism is so effective because its language can be used to gather support for (and, was then seen as accomplishing) many goals, such as economic reform, enlargement of the franchise, and social mobility (Breuilly 2005).

Europeanization

Europeanization – the adjustment of the various nations and their citizens to European norms and regulations – is a recent development, and one that has attracted numerous scholars and commanded the attention of European policy-makers. There is a burgeoning literature on the idea of Europeanization as it applies to institutional change as national governments adapt to EU regulations. However, few scholars have fully addressed the idea of Europeanization as a cultural phenomenon, and fewer still that analyze the conscious role that EU officials play in the process. An exception is the work of Cris Shore, whose book Building Europe: the Cultural Politics of European Integration began the process of constructing an analytical framework with which to assess how the numerous policies and programs of the EU affect cultural life for Europeans.

Shore’s work suggests that EU programs are designed with the primordialist’s view of national identity formation in mind. Shore documents how EU officials are assiduously attempting to cultivate a larger European identity by manufacturing symbols of identity – the Euro, the EU flag, the architecture and sculpture of different EU buildings – and that these symbols are adopted precisely with the hope that a European identity will be created (Shore 2000).

Though there is certainly an attempt to create a European identity through symbolic means, there is more effort (certainly in terms of funding and work-hours) in creating a European identity by two broad changes: encouraging the mobility of highly educated labor and by funding
massive public works projects to modernize the economies of lesser developed member-states and/or their specific regions. In terms of labor mobility, the EU (and its predecessors) allow for the free movement of workers and students across the EU. This is creating a highly educated intelligentsia who, in the opinion of Dirk Jacobs and Robert Maier, have careers which “have to kick off with a research position abroad” or see working outside their home country as “an inevitable stepping stone” (Jacobs and Maier 1998: 20). In terms of public works projects, Greece as a whole, and Crete specifically, have been major beneficiaries of funds designated under the Regional Development Funds and under Cohesion Funds, which are making a huge impact on the modernization of the economy in Greece and in other lesser developed nations of the EU.

Results

Theoretically, then, Europeanization follows both trends prevalent in the literature on nationalism. There is an attempt by EU officials to create a European identity with the methods that the primordialists say earlier nationalisms used: the creation of common symbols for a new European identity, such as the flag. Additionally, many EU publications cite a common historical lineage, beginning with ancient Greek democracy and philosophy, continuing with the precedents of Roman law, and the shared influence of Christianity (Jacobs and Maier 1998: 19). All of these attempts are intended to evoke a common history, much as the nationalists used the symbols of the ethnie to create the nation.

Beyond a common symbolism, however, the EU does more to create a sense of Europeanness spends billions of Euros in Structural and Cohesion Funds, like the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which are intended to aid the development of the poorer regions of Europe (European Commission 2009). This investment is helping modernize the economies of these regions, a similar goal to earlier nationalisms according to the modernist school. Also, the increase in worker mobility, especially of highly educated workers, is perhaps creating the intelligentsia of the new Europe, who might, as the modernists described, be the harbingers of a European identity as the earlier national intelligentsia were for nationalisms (see Shore 2000).

A potential theoretical problem still remains, however. As mentioned above, a part of the primordialist argument is that nationalists appropriated local or regional identities and symbols to create national identities. In many ways, this process would be very difficult for a European identity to replicate, since using national symbols for the purposes of promoting a European identity would only reaffirm the power of the national identity that Europeanness wishes to replace. Instead of incorporating national symbols into European symbols, EU policy works instead to privilege local and regional authorities by granting to them greater power over economic development (through use of EU funds) than the national governments. For example, in Greece, since 2000, the regional governments have exercised complete authority over the “preparation, implementation, and monitoring of the Community Support Framework (CSF)” (Cassimati 2003: 8), a large part of the ERDF program. Though the intent of this funding is to aid development in poorer areas of Europe, it has the effect of encouraging the decentralization of the national governments which in turn lets loose other, unintended effects. One of these unintended effects is the reemphasis on regional identity. Though this is perhaps a Europe-wide phenomena, this paper presents one (of many potential examples) case study, that of the Historical Museum of Crete in Herakleion.
Sites of Identity Formation: The Historical Museum of Crete in Herakleion

The Historical Museum of Crete (Ιστορικό Μουσείο Κρήτης) was founded in 1953, a part of the efforts of the Society for Cretan Studies (Εταιρία Κρητικών Ιστορικών Μελετών) to encourage the growth of historical and ethnographic studies of Cretan culture since the Byzantine Empire (Historical Museum of Crete, 2005). The three floors of the museum, recently renovated and expanded with funds from the European Regional Development Fund’s (ERDF) Community Support Framework (CSF) III (2000-2006) grants, have exhibition space devoted to cultural artifacts dating from the late Roman/early Byzantine Empire to recent times. The founders of the museum wished to preserve archaeological and ethnographic material related to Cretan history after the fall of the Roman Empire (Historical Museum of Crete 2005), and the museum now serves as one of the largest museums in Greece devoted to modern history.

Structure and Layout of the Museum

The first floor of the museum is devoted to the display of artifacts from the periods of Byzantine rule (430 CE – 828 CE; 961 CE – 1204 CE), the Arab conquest (828 CE – 961 CE), and especially the Venetian period (1204 CE – 1669CE). The Venetian period is the most prominent, with the largest exhibition being a model of the city of Herakleion circa 1660 CE. The displays of artifacts are also heavily weighted towards the Venetian period, with a number of architectural pieces (door frames, columns, fountains, etc.) used to show the Italian Renaissance influence on Cretan architecture. The text surrounding the exhibition focuses on daily life and political issues surrounding all four periods, but with an overwhelming amount on Crete during Venetian rule. One display notes: “the Cretan population responded to the violence of foreign occupation with a series of rebellions between 1211 and 1528. These movements were of a marked social and national character…urban Cretan society showed homogeneity: the people spoke a common language and shared a sense of national identity.” Besides the attempt to demonstrate the historical origins of Cretan culture, the museum also tried to draw the connection between Crete and European affairs. The first floor has many artifacts devoted to the Cretan War (1648 CE – 1669 CE), the struggle between the Ottoman Turks and Venice for control of Crete, and the text accompanying the artifacts explains “the Cretan War was the first time in history that the European powers joined forces against a common foreign enemy. With the forging of a common defensive policy…we can perceive the first attempts at collaboration in European politics.”

The second floor is dominated by an exhibition of the various artistic achievements of what is labeled “the Cretan School” of iconographers of the 16th Century. As the text accompanying the display of various icons explains, “the Cretan icon…continues the Palaeologue tradition and, despite the Cretan School’s receptivity of Western influences, remains foreign to Western art.” The second floor also has two rooms devoted to the Ottoman period (1669 CE – 1913 CE) and the rebellions of the 18th and 19th Centuries against Ottoman rule. The text accompanying the artifacts from this period is quite explicit in its definition of Cretan culture. The text explains that “the unbearable oppression of the occupiers led many Greeks to denounce Christianity and espouse the Muslim religion. The Christian population shrank…the infamous Turko-cretans emerged at this time. Cretans by origin, customs and language, but
Muslim by faith. They often proved themselves to be more savage and cruel than the Turkish Muslims.”

The third floor is dedicated to a large display of artifacts from the Battle of Crete (1941 CE) and the resistance to German rule during the occupation (1941 CE – 1945 CE). Common in all the displays is the uncommon valor of the Cretan fighters in resisting the Nazis and helping British and other Commonwealth forces to escape the island safely. In addition to the Battle of Crete display, there are a few rooms dedicated to the career of Nikos Kazantzakis (1883 CE – 1957 CE), the well-known Cretan author. Finally, the third floor is completed with a number of rooms dedicated to an ethnographic representation of an “authentic” Cretan household, with model rooms depicting peasant life, customs, and occupations.

Analysis of the Museum

The broad theme of the museum, reflected in both the visual layout, prominence of certain artifacts, the textual explanations accompanying the artifacts, and especially certain omissions, is that Cretan identity (as separate from Greek identity) is a long-standing and deep historical tradition. While some of the exhibition space attempts to draw the connections between the Cretan narrative and the wider world (both Greece and Europe), the vast majority of the museum is devoted to the display of Crete as a unique place, and the Cretan culture as separate and distinct.

This is reflected physically and textually, both in what is displayed or recorded and also by what is omitted. The museum’s collection on display is markedly skewed towards the Venetian period of Cretan history, and that period’s importance to the overall narrative of the museum seems best exemplified in the approach that the museum takes to what is labeled “the Cretan Renaissance.”

The Cretan Renaissance (mid-16th Century to mid-17th Century) saw a marked growth in the cultural production, especially in visual art and in literature, on Crete. For example, Domenikos Theotokopoulos (better known as El Greco), was born in and was trained on Crete, and the first major work in modern Greek literature, the Erotokritos, was written by Cretan author Vitsentzos Cornaros (Detorakis 1994: 219 – 224). The museum takes pains to show this cultural flowering, explained by Professor Theocaris Detorakis as emanating from “a blending of the conservative Byzantine tradition with the influence of Italian painting” (Detorakis 1994: 224), as a purely indigenous creation, with little influence from Western art. By explicitly labeling the Cretan Renaissance as “pure” and immune from outside influences, the museum creates the impression of an early “authentic” Cretan culture.

This process is especially noticeable in the third floor of the museum, where there is a display of ethnographic material organized to demonstrate an “authentic” Cretan peasant household. Continuing in the romantic nationalist tradition, the museum’s display consisted of various household implements, furniture, and ceremonial costume with jewelry, all crafted to promote a certain ideal of Cretan peasant life. The privileging of this ideal, along with the omission of any displays of city life or of the life of non-Christians in Crete, demonstrates a similar search for an “authentic past” common in earlier nationalist projects.

The omission of non-Christian influence is most striking throughout the museum. The negative mention of Muslim Cretans, along with the absence of artifacts from the non-Christian population, gives a skewed vision of the influence of these “Others” on Cretan history and culture. In fact, the only artifacts displayed that are of a noticeably Muslim character are a series
of tombstones, which are not in the museum, but rather inconspicuously placed outside the museum in the fenced backyard. In the ethnographical display of “authentic” Cretan village life, the explanatory text states that Muslim Cretans “left Crete for good” in 1923 as part of the population exchanges, and mentions that while Muslims lived in Crete “few villages were mixed.” Considering that the text also makes it clear that Muslims made up the majority of city-dwellers (“cities were 82.4% Muslim”), the absence of city-life in the museum multiplies the effect of omission – Muslims appear as oppressors and traitors, hard to believe if almost half of the island’s population was Muslim (as the text explains: “in the early 19th Century the population of Ottoman Crete is estimated to have been...213,000...113,200 Christians, 99,764 Muslim).

It should be noted, of course, that a museum faces structural and physical problems (such as space concerns, funding problems, and lack of appropriate artifacts due to neglect or physical deterioration) that can explain the omission of certain historical themes or the emphasis on a certain period. However, the way in which a museum is organized, and how the narrative of the artifacts on display is written, remain within the hands of the museum organizers and staff. The purpose of the museum is to memorialize a certain conception of Cretan history, and a truly comprehensive narrative would be difficult to do under the best of financial circumstances. As a private institution, the Historical Museum of Crete lacked large amounts of public funds with which to create the museum, and financial pressures made difficult choices inevitable. However, with injection of EU funds under the Community Support Framework (CSF) III (2000-2006) of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the financial difficulty of the museum was largely mitigated. The end result of the restructuring and renovation of the museum is reported above, and the impression is left that key omissions (such as the Muslim Cretans) and interpretative choices (such as the emphasis of the Cretan School as “pure” indigenous culture) reflect a particular interpretive schema and are not the affect of physical or financial difficulties.

Conclusion: The Centrifugal Force of the European Union

In the theoretical debate over the origins of nationalism, the questions of why and how divide scholars into two camps: the primordialists and the modernists. The division is caused most by a divergence of views about how nationalists created national identity – did they appropriate preexisting symbols (the primordialists) or did they simply invent the symbols of the nation through a process of pruning and omission (the modernists)? This debate has wider ramifications than simply as an analytical tool to better understand the past, since our contemporary age has seen both the renaissance of nationalist fervor (leading to violence) and a rise in seemingly anti-nationalist movements, such as regional organizations like the EU. With the development of the EU, and especially its growing competencies in directing seemingly local affairs through funding grants and legal convergence, a growing need to study this process, labeled as Europeanization, is increasingly relevant. Scholars studying the EU and Europeanization note that EU policies are seemingly tracking the ideas of both primordialists and modernists in the attempt to forge a European identity – the creation of common symbols with appeals to a supposedly shared European past, along the lines of the primordialists, and the development of a pan-European intelligentsia, which, combined with modernization funds from the EU, might create and spread a European identity much as the modernists believe earlier nationalists did for national identities.
If scholars of Europeanization are correct – that is, if EU policies are directed towards the fostering of a European identity – then this trend begs the question of success. Given that few Europeans seem to respond to the common symbols of the EU as much as supporters of a common European identity would like, would the “modernist” track of providing EU funding for modernization, coupled with creating a pan-European intelligentsia, be more successful at creating a sense of Europeanness?

Using the Historical Museum of Crete in Herakleion, whose expansion and renovation is due to ERDF CSF III funds under the direction of the regional authority of Crete, as a case study to test this hypothesis, it seems doubtful that, at least in the short term, the success of a European identity will be provided through this angle. Instead, we can see an interesting unintended development from the adoption of these policies, which is that instead of fostering a European identity, these funds are used to develop and strengthen regional identities. This is perhaps not an unforeseeable consequence of regional policy – indeed, what can you expect if you give money to a regional government in order to foster regional development and culture? While these programs seem to help lessen the pull of national identity, the void is not being filled with a new European identity, but rather the breakdown of national identity might help the reassertion of its constituent parts – local and regional identities. I would call this the centrifugal force of the EU, since the EU is largely a centralized political authority whose actions, it seems, encourage the decentralization (a pushing outwards, hence the term “centrifugal”) of national identities.

Bibliography


