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NOSTALGIA FOR “BRITISH” CYPRUS**

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Nostalgia, Myth, Nationalism: The Postcolonial Nostalgia for “British” Cyprus

Ibrahim BEYAZOGLU¹

Abstract

This study opens up a vista onto the notion popular among a growing number of Turkish Cypriots that the British colonial period brought modernist enlightenment to Turkish Cypriots. Having been subject to heavy Turkish immigration from 1974, the Turkish military intervention into the island, onwards as well as the “dictating” Turkish nationalism by Turkish authorities over the native politics and value system, Turkish Cypriots have harkened back nostalgically to the British colonization for the universal standards of “metahistoric” civilization. In doing so, Turkish Cypriots structured a nostalgic nationalist movement called Cypriotism, an “identity of difference” that stands in opposition to the so-called “backward” immigrants to the island from Turkey and Turkish nationalism. Using postcolonial nationalist theory this study critically analyses the constructions of nostalgic nationalism in local Turkish-Cypriot media in the light of historic landmarks and milestones.

Keywords: nostalgia, colonialism, nostalgic nationalism, white mythology, modernist thinking.

Introduction

The nostalgia for British rule is integral to the discourse of modern Turkish-Cypriot identity. Since the late 1970s, many (but not all) Turkish Cypriots have fascinated by their former colonizer for no reason other than Britain’s self-promoted reputation for being the “universal and supreme civilization,” which has always produced awe among Turkish Cypriots, demonstrating a “positive attitude toward the colonizing mission” (Said, 2003: 11). Accordingly, frames of reference such as discipline, orderliness, justice, contemporariness, and civility have, in the postcolonial period, become interwoven with the collective imagined memory of “the time of the British” in Cyprus. One powerful narrative put forward

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by Turkish Cypriots is that it was the historical experience of being colonially subordinate to the British Empire that made postcolonial Turkish Cypriots modern subjects in the contemporary world. The Turkish-Cypriot print media's connectedness with this notion of colonial enlightenment is underpinned by the deeply rooted figure of future progress, conditioned by the modernist exigency whereby humanity is understood to move inexorably towards higher levels of civilization, with Britain, of course, in the vanguard.

Without following a linear-historic succession, the present article seeks to contextualize the advent of Cypriotism and its counterpart Turkish nationalism, shedding light on the continuing memorializing dialogue between "British Cyprus" and the postcolonial Turkish-Cypriot news media. By invoking the "halcyon days" of the colonial period in the mainstream media, Turkish-Cypriots critical of Turkey's policies attempt to counter the ethno-nationalist discourse of Turkey, dominant in Cyprus since 1974, by crafting a nostalgic version of the nationalist movement called Cypriotism, forging it into a key marker of ideological difference, wherein the Turkish-Cypriot self sees itself as more Western than the immigrant population from Turkey.

In the present study, priority has been given to mainstream Turkish-Cypriot news media, especially print-media and the work of recognized professional journalists. The centrality of the print media to post-colonial identity may be expressed in Anderson's words: "print-capitalism gave a new fixity to language" to naturalize the "continuity" of national identity (Anderson, 1983: 47). Given the fact that the postcolonial Turkish-Cypriot newspapers (16 dailies) are influential in differentiating native Cypriotness from Turkishness, the media-constructed nostalgia under discussion here discursively consolidates the modern Turkish-Cypriot self on the basis of Cypriotism.

The key newspapers in this paper fall into two groups: on the centre, there is the widely-read, gatekeeping *Havadis* (News). Ranged against this are the self-professed, Cypriotist newspapers such as *Yeniduzen* (The New Order) along with *Kibrisli* (The Cypriot). The time frame of the analysis is April 2000 to April 2014. In this period Cypriotists opened a "new" historic chapter, departing from the orbit of the Turkish nationalism that had prevailed since before 1974, developing a grass-roots movement for the first time with respect to pre-1974 colonial Cyprus.

Clarification of concepts

The argument that follows will be built on the following critical terms and intertwined concepts: "modernism", "nostalgia" and "White Mythology." An important point regarding such leitmotifs is the specific constructed meanings they acquire in the Turkish-Cypriot context. The Cypriotist press and grassroots movements shore up modernisation, an inevitably westward march towards

civilization, “the virtue of the modernist timeline tendency, in this fashion, is immersed in “the idea of a linear chronology itself being “perfectly modern” (Lyotard 1993: 76). Postcolonial is still marked by colonial memory, modernist reason being a magnet for Turkish-Cypriot’s nostalgia for the British and a desire for further westernization. “Nostalgia,” not surprisingly, is a “modern feature” (Walder, 2011: 10).

While *nostos* (return) and *algia* (yearning) signify a state of yearning for the past, there are important distinctions to be made between restorative and reflective nostalgia (Boym, 2001). According to Boym, reflective nostalgia, affiliated with *algia*, is about the yearning itself. In Boym’s words, reflective nostalgia “delays the homecoming,” while restorative nostalgia works “as truth and tradition” (2001: xviii). Here, however, the character of nostalgia is different from traditional nostalgia insofar as Cypriotist nostalgia functions as a source of “self-evident” historic truth, for the conservation and discursive legitimization of an invented “prestige”, invoked by means of the British “civilizing hero” myth. Such nostalgia is reinforced through daily practices in support of a strategic resentment towards Turkish “parochialism” to value Cypriotness over Turkish nationalism. Nostalgia therefore is a “corrective” term that fosters communicative integration and a politically “significant site for articulating social critique and protest” (Bissell, 2005: 225-239). In another sense, nostalgia risks to provoke a reactionary force in envisioning a unitary past.

The second term is the concept of myth. Myth here is an umbrella term and includes two constituent parts, not mutually exclusive. Firstly, myth may be understood as an “authoritative past” (Bruce Lincoln, courses) meant to accommodate the need for status through assumed or future projection which is otherwise a strategic exigency. Society crafts “legitimizing” myths in surmounting “untenable situations” and “crises” to give a sense of “comfort” and security to the self (Mardin, 1999: 112). At times, the “threatened” cultural order can be held together in the face of an “invading culture” by reinventing a “golden past” through symbols in order to “lay claim to prestige” (Mardin, 1999: 113-183). This pattern is repeated by Turkish-Cypriots when they express displeasure over Turkey’s homogenizing culture and politics. The prevailing knowledge among Cypriots forms an asymmetric binary oppositional loathing of Turkish ethno-nationalist values by weaving a myth justified through the “prestige” of British cultivation. Secondly, the word “myth,” in its complementary context, needs to be seen in relation to Derrida’s “White Mythology.” Derrida sheds light on how myth generates binary oppositions, with the result that western-centric “universal white Reason” amounts to teleology. (Derrida, 1982: 213). The mythology that Derrida lays bare hinges on the hierarchical dualism between the “civilized-white” as the Self and the “backward East” as the incorrigible *Other*. Following Derrida, it is possible to argue that the postcolonial Turkish-Cypriots who claim to be “defenders of civilizational values” are placing Turkey in an “inferior” position when

viewed through the lens of White Mythology. In the same way, such a narrative counters Turkey's nationalist historiography in Cyprus, which glorifies an "indivisible" ethnic unity despite the fact that such ethno-nationalism place Turkish Cypriots on the "fringe" rendering them "not-so-Turkish".

Short History

Since the arrival of the British on Cyprus, Turkish Cypriots have understood their imperial and colonial motives according to the "two-sides-of-a-coin" metaphor. In the vision of Turkish-Cypriots, unlike colonial nostalgia which promotes the colonialism as "coveted life style", the imperial relation of Cyprus to the British refers to political motives. The notion of *Pax Britannica* was equivalent to the security of Turkish Cypriots, largely because Greek-Cypriot Enosis, a nationalist campaign to annex the island to Greece, encouraged them to seek survival in the idea of British rule. The British presence in Cyprus began in 1878. Until 1960 the British played both the Enosis and the Turkish-Cypriot minority cards to protect their imperial interests.

In 1950s the view of the Turkish-Cypriots was that they did not want to risk their "loyalty" to Britain for reasons connected to their survival, taking the view that sticking to the British was a matter of life and death. Meanwhile, in the late 1950s, Turkish nationalism developed into an institution while at the same time championing the *Taksim* project to annex the island to Turkey. The British era officially ended in 1960 when the island assumed the status of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC). The republic lasted only three years due to the structural incompatibility between the two ethno-nationalisms. The years 1963-1974 saw periodic inter-communal killings, with Turkish-Cypriots retreating into enclaves. In 1974, the island saw the beginning of what has become lasting partition when Turkey sent in its army and took control of the northern part of Cyprus. After 1974, in the initial euphoria of events, Turkish nationalist thought was embraced by most Turkish-Cypriots as a messianic arrival. But Turkish nationalism put in place an oppressive policy towards native Cypriot historic identity whose purpose was to obliterate cultural differences that bound Greek and Turkish Cypriots (Vural & Rustemlim, 2006; Vural, 2012).

The Discursive Roots of the Nostalgia for the British Colonial Nostalgia

As in other colonial situations, un/der/development is perceived as the anti-thesis of westernization and it was, and is, in this aspect that the discourse of orientalism carries weight with Turkish-Cypriots. Euro-centric orientalist representations rest on the “ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” with the emphasis on “a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 1978: 2-3). In this orientalist dichotomy, the West personifies what the East cannot be: modern, civilized, scientific and sovereign. In a similar vein, placing the “oriental” native self within a notion of an idealized civilization, combined with a fear of backwardness, is what constitutes the Turkish-Cypriot zeal for modernity: “Civilization was defined in contrast to the backward [...] In the Turkish case... [b]ackwardness implies a self-critique” (Bryant, 2006: 59-60). Even violently diverging opinion leaders, both the Kemalists² and conservative Anglophones regarded orientalist colonialism as benevolent and inevitable. Appropriating the British colonial inheritance to the self was a remedy for “self-backwardness” and lack of progress. For instance, during the final period of the Kavanin (The Council of Laws), for example, in 1930-1931, the notion of “civilization” became a leitmotif centring on the British. A statement made by Dr. Eyyub about the Turkish-Cypriot plea for a peaceful British order is an example of the tendency to equate colonialism with a state of self-respect. As a representative of British colonial-based modernity, the Kavanin member, Eyyub, trumpeted the developmental march towards modernity without compromising the spirit of nationalism. For Eyyub, British colonization “aiming at bringing a civilization” could be sympathized with (Samani, 2011: 51). In Kavanin, he orientalised and proposed as the “manifest prerequisite of the idea of progress the development of the standards of one’s own self” (Samani, 2011: 51).

² After all, Kemalism too, like British colonial modernization, remained a moral ideal of the “rhetoric” for progress. In the early 1920s, however, and proud of modern Turkey in its infancy, populist intellectuals tinkered with the idea of Turkish nationalism, much to the vexation of the British colonial administration. The waves made by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s mission “to catch up with the standards of the contemporary civilization” captured the imagination of elements of the Turkish-Cypriot intelligentsia.

Reasons for the Crisis in Turkish Nationalism and the Emergency of Cypriotism

Colonial and postcolonial experience had shown Turkish-Cypriots that they were far from being sovereign subjects. Turkish penetration continued in the form of authoritarianism on the part of the commanders of mainland (Ram, 2015). Indeed, discontent with Turkey's programme of settlement and rule in Cyprus came soon after the 1974 and from high places. Former Vice President of the RoC, Dr. Kucuk (1978), differentiating eastern Turks from the more "civilized" white, western Turks of Turkey, spoke of "uncivilized Eastern Turks" who would have "to be repatriated" for their lack of modernity, fearing that their establishing "Eastern sultanates" in Cypriot villages prevented them from living amongst the "civilized" Turkish-Cypriots (1978: 1-2). Dr. Kucuk's contempt is the prototype of the orientalist texture amongst the wider political spectrum that emerged in the newly founded state and prefigured the culturalist, Cypriotist tapestry to come. Also in 1989 left-wing Republican Turkish Party politician, Ozgur (1989), made the following defiant claim: "What is happening in northern Cyprus is even beyond assimilation" (pp. 3-7). Ozgur's rejection of Turkey's cultural policy is an historic milestone. Until Ozgur uttered them, words such as "assimilation" or "colonization", were taboo.

Poised to do battle over self-sovereignty and "hereditary" Cypro-centric values, the largely culturalist imagination of Cypriotism politicized a shared-past common to both Turkish Cypriots and Greek-Cypriots. The new nostalgic nationalism was a product of "a politicization of the cultural community" channels (Mondal, 2003: 17) through "social communication" (Muro, 2005: 574). Since its inception in the early 2000s, Cypriotists have woven narratives of "actual biological ancestry" (Smith, 2003: 148) constructing notions of Cypriot selfhood with its "imagined community" and "narration" (Anderson, 1983; Bhabha, 1994) of deeply rooted Cypriot cultural-space. Cypriotism's self-identification became organized into ethno-symbolist components such as the idea of a shared culture, alien and inimical to that of mainland Turks. Moreover, in this frame of reference biological dissimilarity and origin have become markers ontological status (linking ethnicity to being) and social acceptance. Hence, being born to a Turkish-Cypriot mother and father bestows on an individual the status of "true Cypriot". The modernist colonial inheritance is now syncretised through the monogenic purity of origin with the imagined homeland-culture open to the Western civilization. In recent years, the tension between Turkish settlers and the Cypriotists has been exacerbated by the latter's fear of being absorbed into an ethnos of Turkishness, transmuting into an anxiety of cultural "extinction". Social network sites meanwhile have come to be a kind of virtual "home" to Cypriotists who organize to exalt their identity as "true" Cypriots, edging towards the racist in their expressed fears of extinction at the hands of the "settler colonialism". The

slogan “we are only a few on this island”, heard on social media, is a pessimistic expression of the conventional defense mechanism of the Cypriotist who feels he or she is being “swamped” by an alien culture. As an anonymous young Cypriot laments, “We are the Last of the Mohicans” (Yashin, 2006: 94). Cypriotism, to sum up, is a culturally constructed national “wall of resistance” against Turkey’s attempt to isolate the natives from their endogen ethnicity and bi-communal past.

In 1980s and 1990s, under the pressure of nationalist media campaigns, Cypriotism was still in the business of “dissent”. But the 2000s yielded a palingenesis. Cypriotism metamorphosed into an institutionalization against Turkish nationalist red lines. For example, the “This Homeland is Ours” platform, one of many such NGOs, is a prominent resistance grouping that defies the identity prescribed by Ankara. Historic events took place during this decade, such as the rise of the left-wing Republican Turkish Party to power (2004-2009). The momentous era of the Annan Plan coincided with the election of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey who provisionally embraced a milder Cyprus policy. Another formative social change in Cyprus was the opening of the borders in 2003 with a remarkable number of Turkish and Greek Cypriots coming into direct contact. The initial rapprochement with congenial Greek Cypriots, after something of a journey into a one-time “forbidden world”, tended to be of overwhelming importance to Turkish-Cypriots, regardless of the ethno-nationalist blackmail coming from Turkish nationalist redlines. Those Turkish Cypriots, including Cypriotists, who were in favour of a solution to the Cyprus problem based on the 2004 Annan Plan, defined themselves as “progressive-Europeans” and delineated the other binary pole as reactionary guardians of the status quo. This encounter with their European Greek-Cypriot neighbours triggered amongst Turkish Cypriots a nostalgic, colonial passion for western-centric progress, tempered and frustrated, of course, by the coming to power in 2009 of the nationalist National Unity Party.

Colonial Nostalgia

Under Turkey’s subjugating nationalist programme, the period of British rule came to signify, in a linear binaristic logic, “the good old colonial days”, while the arrival of its polar opposite, tutelary Turkish politics, featured as “the “bad new days. However, as the dream of being “master in one’s home” faded, hostility towards “uncompromising Turkish officialdom” accelerated the formation of a nostalgic nationalism (Navaro-Yashin, 2003; Navaro-Yashin, 2006). *Havadis* columnist Hasan Hasturer (2013) sets an incisive example of this ambivalence, setting off issues of domestic order against what he sees as the “efficiency” of the British justice system. British justice in Cyprus, Hasturer asserts, was superior to the current internal workings of Turkish-Cypriot justice. He inveighs against “clumsy governors and legislators” operating “in [the] pseudo democracy” of

postcolonial Turkish Cypriots: “As long as our governors have rationality [...] this country can be effectively governed with the 50 year-old Colonial Law. We need neither reform nor revolution” (2013: 10).

Turkish-Cypriots approach the image of British colonial nomenclature with all the due reverence that British imperial glory was believed to have contained, at the same time, making the implicit comparison with modern Turkey’s perceived very lack of the same. The nostalgia at play here repeatedly asserts itself as the strategic vantage point from where Cypriots become able to envisage themselves on the Western side of the White Mythology and orientalised Turkey by projecting the latter at the inferior end of the civilization scale. Copeaux (2009) remark, “Turkish-Cypriots who had contact with British culture over a long period in the island entitled themselves to feel more secular, more westernized, simply supreme to the Turks” (2009: 242). This nostalgia is not simply the absorption in a kind of false sentiment. Rather, it serves a threefold ontological function in the life of Cypriotism: it provides a sense of “rightful” audacity to the advance of modernity through the association with past British civilization; a native sense of rootedness; and a “symbolic capital”, “whose objective truth is [however] misrecognized” (Bourdieu, 1996: 172).

As has already been indicated, the above “practical” nostalgia is also shaped by the belief in Turkey’s presumed inferiority in comparison to the image of the retroactive British contemporaneity. But the ambivalence felt towards Turkish ethno-nationalism contextually dovetails with the nostalgia felt towards this strategic nostalgia for the British. This is brought into relief by Mutluyakali (2013) in the “Shakespeare Avenue” controversy that unfolded in 2013. In this incident an element of the Turkish renaming programme undertaken in post-colonial Cyprus is brought to book and an attempt is made to rectify it. Mutluyakali complains that the changing of a street name from Shakespeare Avenue to a Turkish name suggests that Cypriots failed to “cherish” their colonial heritage. Moreover, Mutluyakali deplores the Turkish nationalism that deprived the Turkish-Cypriots of their very own “William Shakespeare”:

Shakespeare, was the name of the most popular avenue in Nicosia! They changed the avenue’s name. Why? Because it was said to be a ‘British colonial leftover’. However [...] today [...] nobody really knows the name of the avenue [...] Isolation [...] everywhere and later ‘they will swallow us’! (Mutluyakali, 2013: 9)

The significance of the column is that Mutluyakali penned it in response to the Istanbul-based Shakespeare commemoration of April 23, Characterizing Shakespeare, which described the bard as “the greatest literary artist that literature and the world have ever seen” (2013: 9). Mutluyakali undermines Turkey’s right to host such an event, seeing it as an illegitimate appropriation, by jealously mapping “this great artist” onto Cypriot culture, making clear that the proper place for Shakespeare in the region is Cyprus and only Cyprus. From a modernist point of

view, Mutluyakali's swipe at Turkey, denying it of any credit by association with the image of Shakespeare, thrives on the "prestigious" values of British colonial lifestyle. The nostalgia encoded by Mutluyakali vindicates the validity of exposure to "long-lived western civilization" in Cyprus, a stratagem that facilitates the evasion of the humiliations hurled at Turkish-Cypriots by the Turkish process of modernization. Moreover, and despite the evident absurdity of such a dispute over a "Shakespeare Avenue" in an Eastern-Mediterranean city, the column must be seen to be at loggerheads with Turkey's policy of de-historicizing pre-1974 native Cypriot history.

In fact, the post-1974 process of Turkifying the names of public places in Cyprus in ethno-Turkish nationalist historiography played a core role in assimilating Turkish Cypriots to what many came to see as "eastern inferiority". There are two subtexts to Mutluyakali's nostalgia: critical engagement with process of de-culturation, or cultural deprivation, explicit in the Turkish nationalist repression; and the re-inscription of the untold Cypriot past from "below" so as not to remain nameless and forgotten by the "universal" history of the future. Mutluyakali's pragmatic solution to the problem demonstrates in an almost comical way the predicament of the Turkish Cypriot. Unable for obvious political reasons to change the street name back from the Turkish-sponsored Mehmet Akif Ersoy Avenue, named after the composer of the Turkish national anthem, Mutluyakali exhorts the Mayor of Nicosia to erect a retrospective signpost indicating present union with the past memory of the Avenue:

Maybe changing the avenue's name is hard [...]. However, I don't think it is hard to put a sign somewhere in the street bearing notice that this street used to in the past bear the name of the master of the World Literature, William Shakespeare (Mutluyakali, 2013: 9).

It should be kept in mind that the Cypriotist imaginary is conditioned in part by a present-day "underdevelopment" complex. In the current global climate, under/development gives rise to a deep need for a modernist form of self-recognition, something that is provided by the colonial social identification model. According to Young, the image of the "colonized has been constructed according to the terms of the colonizer's own self-image, as the 'self-consolidating other'" (Young, 2004: 49). The over-arching model for this, Anthony D. Smith argues, is widespread in today's world: a "restorative" mythologization strikes a chord in variously applied nationalisms by projecting "present needs to future hopes through a reference to [...] the past" (Smith, 1988: 2).

The backlash against the nationalist Turkish policies in Cyprus reaches a peak of intensity when in 2012 it was proposed that the Turkish Cypriot secondary school education system be "developed" through the imposition of elements of the Turkish state secondary education system, thus rendering the system in northern Cyprus Turkish in curriculum, pedagogy, administration, ideology, politics, and

law (Vural, 2012). Such an intervention was considered especially intolerable by Cypriotists. Hence the harsh language of Kartal Harman (2012), columnist at *Kibrisli*, who is keen on propagating the myth of “continuous” British Colonial modernism. To Harman (2012), the colonial heritage obstructs Turkey’s deepening penetration of Turkish Cypriot politics and culture:

While you [Turkey] had no idea of what Britishness was, our elders were being cultivated in the British schools. How earths then are you are going to introduce us education? All you can do is to humiliate Turkish Cypriots [...] while you are used to wearing “Mekap” shoes; we were in a position to even despise Nike sports shoes. Our elders used to consume the kind of food, beverage and chocolate in Cyprus under British Colonial Rule in the 1920s that you guys have only recently come to know. That was exactly 90 years ago. How come you forget those days when you guys used to cram your many travel bags with electronic goods, tea from Cyprus in order to fill your shelves [back home]? [...] How is it that you don’t remember the days you would come to Cyprus and wait in the queue to buy blue-jeans? Stop humiliating us. Take a look in the mirror. And reconsider your proper place and progress until now. (Harman, 2012: 7).

This quote, in its historic peculiarity, protests against Turkey meddling in matters of vital interest to Turkish Cypriots. Harman’s anachronistic nostalgic nationalism constitutes the Cypriot Self by externalizing Turkey as the “outside” other, using the either/or mechanism, in addition to the vitriol, to do so. Moreover, the reference to British colonial heritage employs an anti-Turkish orientalist rhetoric that states: No matter how Turkish-Cypriots are humiliated by the Turkish nationalist civilizationalism, they may always take comfort from the fact that in terms the linear timeline of historic progress, they have “left Turkey far behind”. The memory of the British heritage works then as a form of redemption in times of crisis. After all, it has become the case that the postcolonial Cypriotist narrative reads like an underplayed Cinderella story, which realizes itself in the permanent pursuit of a restoration of honour.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the issue of the kind of “reality” that could be created through nostalgic nationalism and the legitimacy such a construction would have in Turkish-Cypriot media opinion. What Cypriotism has shown us is that the nostalgic nationalist discourse could serve as a repository of “truth” for the politics of hope, indicating the way to a politics of self-esteem. The singularity of Cypriotism is that it eschews nostalgia as a self-serving value symbol, moral model or redemptive ideology, instead opting for the subversive textures of nostalgia, evident especially in its “contempt” for the dominant national Turkish discourse (Ramm, 2006). Having said that, it must be noted that at certain points,

the exemplary uniqueness of Cypriotist closure lies in a largely black-and-white ethos of a “them” and a privileged “us”, thus becoming complicit in the reductionist logic it claims to oppose.

Moreover, the anachronistic dimension of nostalgia remains inescapable; the evocation of the “golden age of the British empire” masks the strategy of establishing a claim to European Cypriot identity and demonstrating a “repressed supremacy” under Turkish nationalist modernization. There is also a marked lack of worldliness here: in a sense, by putting the intact British Civilization cart before the horse of exigencies of the present time, there is the danger of producing distorted myths to explain the nature of Cypriot identity. Indeed, the danger is of the sought after ontological homogeneity risks being frozen in colonial past. After all, nostalgia is not an “objective natural” state but a performative act and a subjectivity-producing process, taking effect in present.

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