



**SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN
STUDIES AT OXFORD
(SEESOX)**

OXFORD SYMPOSIUM ON (TRANS)NATIONALISM IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Oxford, 26 – 28 May 2006

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The *Oxford Symposium on (Trans)nationalism* is an annual event organised by South East European Studies at Oxford (SEESOX) and convened by Kerem Oktem and Dimitar Bechev, which inquires into the dynamics of creating and crossing territorial and identity boundaries. It explores the phenomenon of transnationalism, understood as cross-border movement of people, goods and ideas, in relation to the process of nation-state building. Seen from this perspective, transnationalism is not just a recent trend exemplifying the processes of globalisation but also an experience deeply rooted in history and geography. Many transnational communities in or from the Mediterranean (Armenians, Kurds, Jews, Palestinians, Anatolian and Pontic Greeks, Assyrians, Albanians, Turkish and Greek Cypriots, Balkan Turks, etc.) are, in fact, product of the homogenization policies of particular nation-states. Therefore, transnationalism is, paradoxically, a product of the drive to build and maintain homogenous and territorially delimited nation-states. Furthermore, this vision has shaped the political profile of many diasporas engaged in nationalist mobilization around exclusionary identities.

In 2006 the Oxford Symposium was brought under the umbrella of the RAMSES Consortium which deals with the history, politics and society of the wider Mediterranean region. The conference opened on Friday, 26 May with a workshop on memory, borders and conflicts attended by RAMSES researchers from the universities of Oxford, Alicante, Tunis and Aix-en-Provence. It included a presentation on the concept and practice of *travail de mémoire* (tentatively translated into English as *memory work*) by Dimitri Nicolaidis (Aix-en-Provence). Building on multiple cases along the Mediterranean (France, Algeria, Palestine, Greece), the paper explored the way significant 'Others' are represented or erased from collective memory. Following the remarks of the discussant Dimitar Bechev (Oxford), the debate focused on the notion of recognition of Others touching on issues such as the role of state institutions vs. society at large; the dynamics of remembering and forgetting; the narratives of conflicts vs. the conflicts of narratives; the opportunities, obstacles and costs for coining common stories of traumatic pasts. This was followed by two presentations by Renee Hirschon and Kerem Oktem (both from Oxford) which discussed the cases of Greek-Turkish relations through the experience of the 'exchangees' under the 1923 Lausanne Convention, and the memory of the extermination of Ottoman Armenians in 1915. The ensuing debate concentrated on the usages of the genocide discourse in the two contexts. Rather than a basis for

revisiting histories of conflict, Genocide has become a powerful rhetorical tool used to solidify hitherto fluid identity boundaries for the purpose of political mobilization.

The Oxford Symposium was officially launched with welcoming speeches by Kerem Oktem and Dimitar Bechev. They were followed by a short exposé by Thierry Fabre (Aix-en-Provence) who reflected on the clashing images of the Mediterranean as a tourist paradise and as a border space defined by social inequalities.. This was followed by the Tsakopoulos keynote lecture delivered by Eftychia Voutira, a social anthropologist from the University of Macedonia in Thessaloniki, and chaired by Kalypso Nicolaidis (Oxford). Dr Voutira dealt with the case of Pontic Greeks, a transnational community dispersed in the turbulent 20th century from the Black Sea littoral, to Central Asia and the Caucasus, to Greece, Australia and North America. The lecture discussed the ambiguous notions of 'homeland' and 'repatriation' with a reference to the Pontics migrating from the former Soviet Union to Greece in the 1990s.

The first session of the Oxford Symposium on 27 May, chaired by Katerina Lagos (California University, Sacramento) addressed issues of history-writing and nationalism. Giorgos Antoniou (European University Institute, Florence) presented a paper on the historiography of the Holocaust in Greece exploring the constraints in bringing the experience of Greek Jews into the ethnocentric national narrative. An interesting comparative case was presented by Angel Chorapchiev (Haifa) who portrayed the development of dual nationalist sentiments, Bulgarian and Zionist, in the Jewish community within interwar Bulgaria. A paper by Elizabeth Angell (Oxford) on *The invention of Hatay: nationalism, minorities and colonial politics in the Sandjak of Alexandretta* described the process whereby nationalist ideology transformed a unique, even by Ottoman standards, multi-religious and multi-ethnic space into part of the Turkish nation-state. Finally, Mehmet Ali Dogan (University of Utah) gave a paper on the activities of American missionaries in the Mediterranean during the 19th century showing how this transnational network's educational activities fuelled national sentiments across the Ottoman domains.

The second panel chaired by Ipek Yosmaoglu (Princeton) started off with a presentation by Naor Ben-Yehoyada (Harvard) on the intertwined history of Jewish and Arab fishermen in the port of Jaffa in pre-1948 Palestine as well as on the Zionist modernising project of the 'Jew of the Sea'. Ugur Ungor (University of Amsterdam) discussed the competing claims staked by various nationalist movements over Eastern Anatolia in the course of the 19th and 20th century. Seda Altug, lastly, elucidated how the memories of deportation and resettlement alongside the Syrian-Turkish border during the decades of the French mandate shaped the contemporary Syriac Christian identity . It also described the tangled relationship of Syriacs vis-à-vis the nascent Syrian state dominated by conflicting dynamics of participation as survival and closure.

The sessions that followed brought to the fore 'classical' issues of transnationalism such as diasporas, migration and border crossings. The Oxford Symposium's third panel, presided by Renee Hirschon, set off with Efsevia Lasithiotaki (American University of Beirut) who presented the case of the Greek-speaking community in Tripoli (Lebanon), descendant of Muslim migrants from the island of Crete, and their social networks spanning through the borders of several states: Lebanon, Syria, Cyprus and Greece. Sossie Kasbarian (School of Oriental and African Studies, London) looked at the Armenians in Cyprus interrogating the complex relationship between host state, host society and the Diaspora community itself, Anahit Helin of

Middlesex University offered additional insights into this issue with a reference to the Turkish Armenians residing in Britain.

The theme of movements across borders was central to the following panel chaired by John Loughlin (University of Cardiff). A paper by Henk Driessen (Nijmegen) dissected the history, politics and social practices around the borders of Ceuta and Melilla, two Spanish enclaves planted in Morocco. It paid a special attention to the conflicts and tensions resulting from fifteen years of clandestine influx of African migrants into 'Fortress Europe'. Cedric Parizot (IREMAM, Aix-en-Provence) analysed the ongoing mobility and exchanges of people in the region between the Northern Negev and the West Bank. More specifically, his presentation demonstrated how rigid and exclusionary border regimes create underground practices of border-crossing and new socio-economic hierarchies. Jaka Repic (University of Ljubljana) presented his research on Argentinian 'returnee' migrants in Spain and Slovenia. In both countries, Argentinians are not even considered 'real' immigrants nor perceived as cultural foreigners which, for Repic, demonstrates how European societies engage in selective exclusionary politics *vis-a-vis* migrant communities.

Migration, identity politics and cross-border economies dominated the debate at the last panel for the day which was led by Olga Demetriou (Oxford). Sertac Sonan (University of Duisburg) examined the politico-economic processes underpinning the construction of a particular Cypriot Turkish identity. He argued that economic shocks coupled with the impact of the European Union played a crucial role in changing identifications amongst Turkish Cypriots. The theme of Europeanisation associated with regimes of mobility of people, but also with exclusion and relations of power, was at the centre of the contribution by Ramona Lenz (University of Frankfurt). She described how migrant workers in Cyprus and Crete reproduce the touristy images of the Mediterranean for the benefit of the growing class of (northern European) tourists. Lenz drew attention to the symbolic resources, which migrant workers can mobilise to alleviate their position *vis-à-vis* the various groups they encounter, hence challenging the image of subordinate immigrant subjectivity. For her part, Eleni Tzirtzilaki (Athens School of Architecture) dwelt on the lifeworlds of immigrant 'urban nomads' in Athens and the modes in which they remake space and confront social marginalisation.

The sixth session of the Oxford Symposium (Sunday, 28 May) was entitled *Transnational Public Sphere(s)?*, and contained a range of papers dealing with the flow of ideas, discourses and representations across borders. It was chaired by Dimitri Nicolaidis and Dimitar Bechev. Daniel La Parra (Alicante) presented a research project on the representations of world politics by state news agencies in Arab countries. He argued that the data shows the persistence of former colonial ties with European countries like France and Britain, the salience of issues related to Iraq, Palestine and US foreign policy. Katja Kobolt from the University of Munich discussed the ambiguous relationship between the construction of separate linguistic fields and particularistic literary canons in the post-Yugoslav space and the overlapping narratives present in women's writing on war. In her paper, Nora Fisher (Oxford) addressed, albeit from a different angle, a similar debate about the dialectics of particularism/cultural exceptionalism and universalism. Looking at the issue of the headscarf ban in Turkey she examined the different attempts to link Islam and the discourse on human rights. Deniz Erkmen (University of Michigan) described how Turkish professionals involved in the multinational business world construct their identity. Her argument was that exposure to the transnational corporate world actually strengthens the sense of Turkishness,

though it also widens the perception of social distance towards ‘fellow Turks’ belonging to the less educated strata.

The last panel chaired by Kerem Oktem returned to the intertwined phenomena of nationalism and transnationalism by turning to the politics of diaspora groups. A paper by Sarah Keeler (University of Kent) posited Kurdish nationalism as a process taking place in a multi-local context. It demonstrated that the notion of Kurdistan is a very much contested one, arguing that rather than a territorial reality it represents a deterritorialised and transnational construct. Similarly, Besim Can Zirh (Middle East Technical University, Ankara) examined in the case of the Turkish Alevis’ migration to Germany and other western European countries since the 1960s. Changing configurations of push and pull factors in Turkey and the host country, he held, was the key factor in their transformation from ‘guest workers’ belonging to different non-Sunni groups into a coherent community characterized by a specific (quasi-ethnic) identity.

The conference ended with concluding comments by Mezna Qato, (Oxford). She reflected on the social role of scholarship in addressing the issues of divisive pasts, memory and borders with a reference to the preceding panels and her own work on Palestinian history writing. Her comments spurred a very lively discussion which was yet another proof that the *Oxford Symposium on (Trans)nationalism* had succeeded in pushing forward salient academic and political debates. The convenors, Kerem Oktem and Dimitar Bechev, encouraged all participants to submit their papers to the Working Paper Series run by the RAMSES Workpackage on Borders and Conflicts as well as to the edited volume tabled for the summer of 2007.