

LITTLE SCRAPS OF WISDOM: TOWARDS DECONSTRUCTING GREEK-TURKISH ENMITY

*Even though the last war between Greece and Turkey ended nearly 100 years ago, the ill feelings generated by the conflict are still quite common in both societies. In this article, the author traces the roots of this enmity, analyzing the effects of the resultant “us vs. them” dichotomy in perpetuating pervasive misperceptions. By sharing examples from her documentary film *The Other Town*, which she made in collaboration with Hercules Millas, the author points out the ways in which “myths” have become constructed that have led both peoples to think in a certain, and certainly detrimental, way about the “other.”*

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I remember being struck by a quote from Umberto Eco’s book *Foucault’s Pendulum*:

“I believe that what we become depends on what our fathers teach us at odd moments, when they aren’t trying to teach us. We are formed by little scraps of wisdom.”

I lived through a similar developmental experience while studying at Ankara University’s Faculty of Political Science in the 1990s. I learned many valuable things at events organized at school that were possibly more useful than what I learned in the classroom. One of the most memorable occasions was a concert by the Ankara State Opera and Ballet Chorus. At this concert, the group played selections from Byzantine hymns and Ottoman classical music, and pointed out that some of the tunes were very similar. I remember not being able to sit still in my seat because of the happiness I felt for learning something completely new. I also remember asking myself why nobody had taught us similar things in lessons at high school or university. Making documentary films about the similarities as well as the differences between the nations emerged in my mind in those years.

A few years later I went to Glasgow to study for a master’s degree in “Media and Culture”. I had many Greek friends there. In Glasgow’s cold environment, Greeks and Turks became good friends, cooked Mediterranean food together, and listened to the same songs in two different languages. Nevertheless, when it came down to discussing politics or relations between the two countries, it seemed like there was a high wall erected between us. In those instances, both sides were using sentences they memorized at school. The Turkish side, including me, was saying things like: “Greeks are the spoiled children of Europe;” “Greeks were living happily under the Ottoman rule but they were ungrateful and wanted to break away from the Ottoman Empire;” “Greeks have irredentist ambitions because of their *Megali Idea* (Great Idea);” and “They want to take Istanbul and Izmir back.” One can still hear such comments in Turkey.

From my Greek friends, I heard these memorized sentences many times: “Nefin, we like you personally, but we do not like Turks in general;” “Turks’ culture is different than ours,” An even more extreme example I heard was, “Greeks were blonde until the Turks came!” Also, “Turks invaded Cyprus and they would invade Greece right away if they had the chance.” I remember being completely taken aback when hearing especially this last statement. I did not have any intention to invade Greece personally. I remember not being able to give an answer to this claim and therefore feeling mute, because we never heard these claims about

Turks in the Turkish media, around us, or at school in Turkey. What our neighbor thought about us did not reach us.

More importantly, all these *cliché* sentiments were being uttered by young people who were abroad studying for a graduate degree and who were from “good families.” What struck me most was that almost nobody had any doubt about the validity of their claims, and repeated the similarly structured sentences over and over again without once stopping to reflect on what they meant. Then, I realized that “us”, the Turks, were doing the same thing: repeating the same sentences. But only when I

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saw that the “other” was also using stereotypes did I comprehend the mutual nature of the situation. The claims we made seemed normal to us, since we had heard them repeatedly uttered by our media, families, and in our education system throughout our developing years. On the other hand, we were hearing Greeks’ claims for the first time in our lives. The realization that our views about the “other” are so entrenched in our subconscious was a second motivation for me to make documentary films on this subject matter.

Years later while I was studying documentary filmmaking in the U.S., I made a documentary film called *Rebetiko: The Song of Two Cities*. In this film, I focused on the roots of the musical form Rebetiko. I wanted to show that the connections between the peoples who lived in this region were deep and that these connections profoundly influenced their musical traditions.

I wanted to continue exploring the subject of Greek-Turkish relations, so I sent my film on Rebetiko to Hercules Millas. I knew him from his books (especially *Tencere Dibin Kara – The Pot Called the Kettle Black*) and respected him for his publications on Greek-Turkish relations. I proposed to him a joint documentary film project on Greeks and Turks, which culminated in the production of *The Other Town* in 2011.

In this film we chose two towns that represented the larger experience we hoped to capture, one in Greece (Dimitsana) and one in Turkey (Birgi). We spent about a year in both towns, filming history lessons in schools, capturing national and religious holidays, visiting museums, and filming people’s comments about town monuments.

We tried to see how history was being perceived in both towns, and how they see the “other”. In the end, after filming 80 hours of footage, we created a 45-minute film.

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In making *The Other Town* we wanted to explore the following questions: “Why is the past interpreted so differently in the two countries? When and how did these mutual prejudices arise? Is our hatred and distrust of one another the result of what happened in the past, or a reflection of what we have been told at school, at home, or on television?”

Filmmakers learn many things while making their films, sometimes more than their audiences. For example, during this film’s production I “learned”

that there were supposedly secret schools in Greece during Ottoman rule. According to this myth, Greeks secretly sent their children to these schools to avoid Ottoman persecution and to have their children learn the Greek language, which was forbidden by the Ottomans. I even filmed a poem being recited about secret schools (my tiny moon / light the way / to go to school), and a place claimed to be a location of one of them. I also filmed a painting made by Nikolaos Gyzis in 1886, which depicts young children listening to a monk and being protected by a Greek man holding a gun against probable Turkish attacks. All of these poems, paintings, and street signs pointing to the Secret School were quite convincing. Nevertheless, I also learned that this story was a myth in its entirety. Nevertheless, almost everyone participating in our film declared this myth to be true, retelling the same story to our camera in very similar sentences. There was only one person who said that he did not believe in this story when we interviewed him at a cafe: “I don’t believe in those things. How would it be possible to hide a secret school from the Turks? We shouldn’t fool ourselves.” We have included him in our film, to allow for optimism about self-reflection. What was more interesting for me was that even though almost every Greek recited this story to us without hesitation, very few Turks are aware of the existence of this myth.

Similarly, most Greeks are probably not aware of the myths that are being told in Turkey about them: “Greeks burnt down everything here and killed the inhabitants;” “The priests told Turks it was sinful to work. [The Turks] were servants to the Greeks;” and “The Greek is the only infidel I know.” Not knowing what the “other”

is thinking about us hampers our ability to hear each other and perhaps realize how stereotypes and resultant ill feelings about the “other” are constructed on both sides.

Most of the people we interviewed expressed ill feelings against the “other” –perhaps even more than we anticipated– but our findings did not really shock us. The history lessons, speeches, poems, and military parades illustrate where these stereotypes about the “other” are derived from. In the film, we placed the history lessons of both sides next to each other, in order to make the comparison and mutual nature of the issue clear. In Greece, for example, the teacher tells the students how the Greek army lit a fire when it was dark and had the soldiers pass in front of it to fool the Turks and have them think that the Greek army was more numerous than it actually was. In this way, the Greek army wins the battle. In the next scene we show the Turkish history lesson, where the teacher tells the students that the Greek army, upon the heavy Turkish firing, thought that the Turkish army was much bigger than it actually was, and so the Greeks attacked with a heavy force. In other words, in each case, their own side is more clever and the “other” quite *naïve*.

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In the same history lesson, on the Greek side we hear another story. According to this one, a priest betrayed a Greek general by telling the Turks where he was hiding, and the Turks burnt his house together with the soldiers in it. Right after this story a student in the classroom says “They burnt them alive! Unbelievable! And now some Greeks want the Turks!” We edited a scene right after this one in which the teacher in Turkey tells the students how the Greek army burned down the town and razed all the houses and killed anyone who escaped while running away from the Turkish army. We interviewed students right after the class, asking if they would want the Greeks who used to live in this town before the population exchange of 1922 to come back. One student said: “No. They are bad. We still remember what they did.” In both of these scenes, we had a firsthand account of how the image of the “other” is being shaped in the minds of young students.

It is also just as important to examine what we do not know about the “other”. I asked a young student in Turkey whether “Turkey or the Ottomans ever invaded Greece.” Her answer was: “We haven’t learned about that. We know they invaded us, but not if we invaded them. Maybe we did.” Similarly, Hercules Millas asked a young woman in Greece about the privileges that the town was given by the

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Ottomans, since this town was a religious center for Greeks at the time. The woman, who was quite knowledgeable about other aspects of the history of the town, wanted us to cut filming for a second because “she cannot remember [the facts about these privileges] right now.” This is an incident that shows how the past is constructed selectively to be in harmony with the general national theme: by exaggerating the negative side of the “other” and “forgetting” its positive side.

Such prejudices and national perceptions are not unique to these two towns. We used these towns as microcosms of the two countries. One can hear similar *clichés* in most areas of both countries, including big cities. The history books prepared by the relevant ministries in each state are taught in every school in these two countries, and the military parades, marches, poems, and national ceremonies are very similar all around the country.

I personally remember having not so positive feelings toward the Greeks and singing the military march of Izmir that contained lyrics like “*bozulmuş Yunanlar yel gibi kaçar*” (defeated Greeks flee like the wind) with a lot of emotion while in primary school. The Turkish Independence War was some 50 years in the past at that time but the image of the Greek still was associated only with negative feelings in my mind. It took me decades, and a lot of conscious effort, to get rid of these prejudices that were injected into me along with the hundreds of thousands of other Turkish schoolchildren. Now, in 2014, even though the last war between Greece and Turkey concluded nearly 100 years ago, these ill feelings are still quite common in both societies. When we screen our film, we often receive the question: “So, shouldn’t we teach our kids our history?” Our usual response is that what we are being taught is not actual history, but rather stories that were fabricated, with some parts exaggerated and others silenced; it is usually not the whole story but a selective one in which “we” are exalted and the “other” is degraded.

To give two very poignant examples from our film, in one scene Hercules Millas asks school children in Greece about a painting on the wall. The painting depicts the Tripolitsa massacre in 1821, in which thousands of Muslims died when Greeks captured the city. There are children among the dead in the painting. When the students

are asked what they see in the picture, they say: “[The children] were killed by the Turks. They killed women too.” All they can “see” is what they were trained to see: the “other” killed “us;” the “other” is the uncivilized.

Similarly, in Turkey, when the children are questioned about what happened when the Beylik of Aydınoğulları defeated the Byzantines in the 14th century; they immediately raise their hands and state the “fact” that “Greeks all had to leave. When they fled after being beaten, they burned down all the houses.” The students are confusing the events of the 14th century with the events of 1922. Bemused, Hercules asks: “Did this happen 700 years ago?” The children respond: “Yes. About 800 years ago.”

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Our documentary reveals that our education systems do not teach students that there can be an alternative to this situation. Consequently, there is no suggestion that relations between Greece and Turkey can be different. Similarly, we do not learn about the good sides of the “other,” or that we can celebrate the “virtues of a free and democratic country of equality and peace.” Instead, we enact wars between the two sides during national celebrations. After going through this education system, we forget that there can be other perspectives.

Despite this general negative outlook, there were also some “little scraps of wisdom” in these two towns. A man in Greece pointed out: “Unfortunately, history is molded to serve certain aims on both sides. They praise our side and deplore the other. I suspect they do the same on the other side.” Another man, this one in Turkey, stated: “For years now, our history books have taught us hatred and hostility. I wish the books hadn’t been written like that. As long as history books are written like that our children will always see the Turks and Greeks as enemies.”

How is it that these two men were able to think differently from others in their town? Probably, they were able to observe the dynamics that lead us to think in certain ways about the “other.” They were able to detect the indoctrination carried out by the media, schools, and education in a broader sense (museums, national celebrations, monuments etc.). Perhaps they were lucky that there were people around them

that helped them see the mechanisms that condition us to think in a certain way. Perhaps their ability to feel empathy for the “other” was higher than the average. We wanted to end our film with a hopeful note in tune with these “wise” men.

When I was studying at the Faculty of Political Science in Ankara in the early 1990s, it was almost unimaginable for a middle class student to study abroad. Today, many students go abroad as a result of programs like Erasmus or Work and Travel. Additionally, the Internet allows people –and especially young people– to communicate and share ideas without the interference of a mediator. In short, people of both countries visit the “other” country more often than in the past – either in person or “virtually.” One can see tourist buses full of Greek visitors maneuvering through Istanbul’s busy streets. Turkish people visit Greek islands more and more thanks to visa-free travel opportunities. Turkish TV series are extremely popular in Greece, which allows Greeks to see a different image of Turkey in Greek media. Currently, most people in both countries are no longer obliged to learn about the other only through traditional media and education. These developments created changes in the old way of thinking in both countries.

Recognizing the problem is the first step toward improving conditions, and in our film *The Other Town* we presented a picture of how the shared history is taught in both countries. Many refuse to accept the fact that there are problems with the way we think about the “other.” Numerous examples of such attitudes emerged from interviewees in both countries in our film, such as: “Things are getting better, more normal, as the years go by. We don’t say the Turks killed or hanged us as we once used to. Being a member of the EU is gradually changing things.” Another man claimed: “[Promoting Greek-Turkish enmity] may be true of Greece, but I do not believe that such a thing happens in Turkey. That isn’t what our schools tell students. Nor is it how our people talk among themselves.”

We completed our film in 2011, and have screened it at nearly 70 different venues with Q & A sessions following the screenings; the reaction to our film is almost always positive. I suspect this is mainly because we screened the film in locations where the spectators would most likely agree with us, such as at documentary film festivals and universities. Our responsibility now is to show this film for the officials and teachers who are responsible for molding education practices and policies in both countries. We also need to show the film to audiences that are more traditional, conservative, or nationalist and would not necessarily agree with us. Even though it is easy and comforting to show our film to those people who are likely to agree with us, if we want real impact, we need to reach out the “others.”

Nevertheless we are grateful for the countless film festivals and educational institutions that were willing to show our film. After screening the film at the festivals and finishing the festival circuit, we will make the film available online at no charge in order to reach a broader audience. Creating a dialogue with a broader audience with the help of our film is important as it is seen in a striking scene in the film in which Hercules Millas talks to a gentleman in Greece about Ancient Greece.

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The gentleman says: “We yearn for Ancient Greek civilization. We love Socrates and Aristotle. Turkish civilization is different.” Hercules Millas comments: “We don’t *remember* 1821. Memory is what we are told. It isn’t the same as remembering our childhood. We need to be careful about what we mean by memory.” And then something unusual happens. The gentleman understands the problematic aspect of his thinking and says: “So you’re saying the Greek identity is associated with Ancient Greece, so what I was just talking about isn’t really a memory” and laughs at his mistake.

There is a similar instance in Turkey. A young girl asks us what we thought of a show that was part of ceremonies commemorating the “liberation from enemy occupation.” As response, we say to the young girl, “It would have been better to have some ‘peace’ in the ceremonies.” The young girl gets our point immediately, saying “There was only fighting in our show. If you ask me, peace was missing.” These interactions show us the need to show the film more widely and build constructive discussions.

It is important to continue making documentaries (and of course writing articles and books, organizing seminars, and using other tools) to help overcome prejudices against the “other.” Circulating ideas related to this self-reflection more extensively will allow us to understand the past not only through an “us vs. them” dichotomy, but with a more comprehensive perspective.

In this vein, I am currently working on a new documentary film about the Ottoman Empire during World War I. As in my previous work, I encounter stereotypical expectations here as well. When I mention that the film will be about WWI, most

people automatically assume that it will be about Gallipoli or Sarıkamış, famous battles well known to Turks. However, the film will focus on an Austro-Hungarian soldier who was based in Istanbul during the War and was later sent to the Palestinian front. The film will be based on the extensive memoirs he wrote during the 1940s. Through this film, I aim to engage the audience with issues of how people belonging to different nations lived before, during, and after the War in Istanbul; what life was like for soldiers from different nations in the Middle East; how life went on for all of Istanbul's population during situations such as the city's occupation; and how newly emerging nationalisms affected many populations in the Ottoman Empire.

Most of the films produced about WWI in Turkey, just like in the history lessons about the War, focus on how life was like for the Turks. While this is of course a very important aspect of the War, we need to also start looking at how other people lived through the War in order to create a dialogue amongst all, not just amongst ourselves. For this reason, I am looking forward to finishing this new film during the centennial of the Great War, and to creating a productive discussion with a broader audience.