

Evaluation of Laura Brody's Doctoral Thesis entitled "*Memories of an Aegean Borderscape: Belonging to Imvros (Gökçeada/Ιμβρος)*"

Georgios Tsimouris
Emeritus Prof. of Social Anthropology
Panteion University

23 March 2024

The thesis fulfils all requirements of a successful PhD thesis and therefore I recommend the defense of the Thesis. It is a doctoral thesis of high quality. I expect to attend the oral defense of the Thesis by the candidate and the discussion with the colleagues at the examination board to decide if the grade that I wish to allocate is a "pass" or a "pass with distinction", according to the regulations of the Universities involved.

The doctoral thesis is an original contribution for understanding the condition of minorities in the era of nation states in general and specifically the treatment of non-Moslem minorities in the context of building the Turkish nation state in the territories of previous multi-religious and multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire. While the Treaty of Lausanne was criticized on legal and humanist grounds on the issue of the compulsory exchange of populations, those which were exempted from the exchange program were faced by the nation states as undesirable citizens and sought to get rid of them. It is an original contribution to border studies, memory studies and to social sciences in general. It is based on multidisciplinary research methods including grounded ethnographic research, interviews and mental maps of diverse, in terms of age and gender, members of the Imvriot diaspora, in Turkey and Greece. It is a well-organized text with coherent documentation and adequate analysis allowing the reader to attend, to a great extend, the argumentation and theoretical analysis. Particularly the section of methodology is original and innovative. I liked the way in which the candidate positioned herself in the context of her research project and her self-reflective approach in setting out the limits of interpretation, in the analysis of the ethnographic material.

In several parts of the dissertation, including the abstract, the introduction and the conclusions (p.239), the candidate employs and juxtaposes the concepts 'hegemonic borderscape' and

‘counter- hegemonic borderscape’ eras to make sense of the competing narratives regarding the recent history of the island. According to the author, while the ‘hegemonic borderscape’ is “linked to [the state actions for] the forced displacement of the island’s ethnic Greek inhabitants primarily between the 1960s and 1980s” and to the official narrative disseminated by Turkish state and state-institutions, “the ‘counter- hegemonic borderscape’ era occurred on Imvros roughly in the early 1990s”. It is not clear to me why ‘hegemonic borderscape’ and ‘counter- hegemonic borderscape’ do not co-exist in time but are developed in different time periods as they refer to the same subject matter. Those who were forced out in the 1960s and 1970s due to discriminatory measures and oppressive policies of the Turkish state, return back in their villages from early 1990s onwards. As the candidate makes clear, this change is understandable in the light of the improvement of Greco-Turkish relations and not just because the members of diaspora changed their minds and decided to return and therefore to challenge the Turkish state policies.

In this respect, I am confused by the way that “hegemony” is used in several parts of the text. In the thought of Gramsci, the hegemonic state imposes both violence and seeks to ensure consensus among the population concerned. Not surprisingly, the people of diaspora never accepted the narrative of the Turkish state for the discriminatory measure taken against them. On the contrary, they believe that there was a secret “program of dissolution” [eritme programi, in Turkish] aiming to get rid of them as the most unwanted minority. While the thesis is contextualized historically, a close examination of the Greco-Turkish relations since 1923 might clarify further these issues. It is important to consider that the Turkish state faced the non Moslem population, culturally oriented towards Greece, of this border island as a possible threat.

In my understanding, ‘hegemonic borderscape’ and ‘counter-hegemonic borderscape’ are competing narratives coexisting in time. The argument that, “each imbued with unique socio-political myths” (p. 39, see also conclusions) is likely to equalize the violence exercised by state institutions with the practices of people who have suffered from this violence. However, in many parts of the thesis the author substantiates state exclusionary policies that compelled the Greek speaking, Christians of the island to seek refuge in Greece and elsewhere.

In my view, the candidate instrumentalises these and some other relevant key concepts such as “the hegemonic border imagination ... linked to Turkish nation-state borders and sovereignty over Imvros since 1923, the non-hegemonic border imagination of *Ιμβρος* has in turn been linked to the collective diasporic imagination of Imvros through the lens of a typical diasporic ‘lost homeland’ myth” p. 240. The consequence of instrumentalisation is that does not contribute to the specificities of forced displacement and the theoretical analysis of ethnographic materials. For example, in the above lines I don’t understand in what sense it is used the expression [‘lost homeland’ myth]. In what sense, the reported loss of their homes and lands, as they were forced out of the island, is just a myth. While, in the first chapter there is a reference on the work of Lefevre and others and their usage of “myth” it is not always clear in what sense it is used in several parts of the text both for the people and for the state.

Further, expressions such as ‘border imaginations’ and ‘sociopolitical myths’, used both for the state and for the people run the risk to equalize institutional violence with human suffering. While for the inhabitants of Imvros these concepts make sense, according to clarifications provided in page 15, it can be misleading for the Turkish state’s because sovereignty is not just about imagination but it is defined in concrete geographical coordinates and provokes institutional action if challenged. In this sense it is not the same with ‘border imagination’ of the displaced persons. The quotation of E. Said is referred to the relation of displaced persons to places lived as imagined homelands not to state sovereignty and state violence. Similarly, the title of the first chapter “socio-Political Myths of Belonging to Space/Place” can be misleading with regard the displaced persons as their sense of belonging in the island draws on their direct or indirect experience of loss and to the fact that it is the place of their ancestors. I understand that myth is always implicated in our understanding of homeland, but it is not just about myth if it is associated to our experience. Peasants in particular, have a strong attachment to their homeland as they don’t like to move. The expression “competing border imaginations on Imvros” might also be misunderstood, as glosses over the highly unequal power relations between the state and the people.

I appreciate the fact that the researcher is very conscious of her in-between position and its impact on her findings. As I am familiar with the issues negotiated in the text through my own

research 20 years ago, I consider this research as a fair attempt to understand the reasons of depopulation of the island from its Greek speaking, Christian community. There are many instances that the analysis is very coherent with regard the research findings. However, I face with skepticism the idea that social research could be completely neutral even when this is the main concern of the researcher. To the extent that we as researchers fail to conceive the complex impacts of state power on the decision making especially of “minor”, subaltern people we run the risk of reiterating the truth of the nation state. To echo the historian Eric Hobsbawn, the real challenge for researchers is to make sense of the truth of those who suffered from the nationalist principle and not to truth of the nation.

In the conclusions there is a comprehensive summary of the thesis and to a certain extent repetitions of previous arguments. I consider that in this part the candidate could be more creative especially with regard to the relation of nation-building processes and the displacement of people in the context of two highly antagonistic nation states.