

"Greeks in the UK, and the World the Spring of 2009"

Report of a Listening Post at the University
of Essex, Colchester held on 10 June



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In part 1 of the Listening Post the members were invited to share their experiences and preoccupations in a variety of social roles that they occupy in their everyday life. This part was also of usefulness in 'breaking the ice' between the members of the whole group, as the event was an unknown experience for all members involved. A dynamic atmosphere soon developed and most members shared several of their everyday thoughts and concerns.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

The aim of part 2 was to collectively identify the major themes of Part 1. The group was temporarily broken up in four, smaller sub-groups and subsequently these sub-groups later reported their identifiable topics to the original large group. Among the themes brought back by each of the smaller sub-groups, three predominant clusters emerged:

1. Identity

The first theme was particularly predominant and focused around the area of 'identity'. This was initially discussed in terms of student versus non-student identity, university member versus member of the surrounding community and lastly Greek versus non-Greek or native British identity. The group reported that identity occupies a large part of our experience as members of the British society, much larger than what it was and would have been if group members were residing in Greece. Some members reported how differences with fellow-Greeks were not as vivid and intense as they might have been in the Greek context. For example, different or polarised political positions/beliefs amongst fellow-Greeks were not experienced as creating equal animosity outside of Greece as they would inside of the country. Political rivals, who would hardly be on speaking terms in Greece, found themselves casually interacting with each other when outside the country. Furthermore, the group questioned the closeness of the Greek community with the local, British society ("how [closely] related are we with the community around us?"). Members were troubled with the physical isolation of the university ("a bubble") as well as with the collective urge to identify and attach oneself to a familiar way of life. These experiences were associated with the perceived lack of interest of the Greek community in the recent European elections (almost all members abstained from voting for MEPs and local councils): "[political and social] action here is individual while in Greece is [felt as] collective".

2. Participation and Alienation

The second theme was very much a continuation of the first as it debated the area of 'participation versus alienation'. In this area the conversation revolved around the feeling of being a citizen and being Greek, the former being more prominent when in Greece while the latter when residing in the UK. Moreover, members discussed how when living abroad one has the opportunity for a new beginning or to almost create a kind of 'new self'. The absence of all these known structures (feeling of citizenship, commonly known and acknowledged self/persona/personal identity) were felt as particularly anxiety-provoking as well as inherent to the experience of residing in Britain.

3. Racism

The last discussion theme was concerned with racism. Interestingly enough, the topic was not examined based on personal experiences of racism in the UK but by drawing on experiences of members while living in Greece. That is, when the aggressors were Greeks and the victims non-Greeks. So, on one hand, the members concentrated on the differences between them and discriminated minorities in Greece – such as, our Turkish neighbours and Albanian refugees. While, on the other hand, the group reflected on its similarities with both minorities (especially the Turkish one) and how most group members have actually descended from Greek refugees who were living and were later expelled from what is for almost the last century considered Turkish territory (i.e. Turkish Aegean coastline or Asia Minor).

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post members were working with the data gathered from Parts I and II, with the aim to collectively identify the underlying dynamics – conscious and unconscious – that may be predominant at the time of the group meeting. As well as developing hypotheses as why they might be occurring at the moment. As such at this point the members are working with their 'psychological' or 'internal' world.

This part proved the most challenging and tiring for all group members. But all were committed in making their best effort, through an engaging discussion, to make sense of this experience. In this last part the group agreed on two main hypotheses that bear significant relation to each other:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: The first two themes were considered to be inter-connected to such a degree that the group chose to include them both under one hypothesis. The theme of identity was closely associated with a feeling of security and the sense of being special (as a member put it, "a haven"). Its prominence in the discussion was deemed as some kind of emotional reaction to the increased contact with cultural differences and variations that Greeks experience when living in the UK. The close proximity to such cultural variety in the UK society was seen as a crucial factor in, on one hand, the preoccupation of the group with Greek identity and, on the other hand, the experience of Greek identity outside of Greece in such a uniform way. The latter was also seen as closely related to the theme of 'participation versus alienation' which was deemed as a defensive reaction from the loss of familiar points of reference. As a group member put it, "[Greeks in the UK sometimes resemble] a crying infant that has just left its mother's belly." The latter image was associated with feelings of panic and insecurity as well as questions on the meaning of things following the loss of the feeling of 'being unique'.

Hypothesis: The increasing cultural variety in the British society and the everyday contact with its many facets seems to stir up primitive, existential anxieties in various social groups which experience the loss of known points of reference. In defending against the acknowledgement of difference and, even more so, of sameness between cultures and nations, society seems to encourage the regression to national cultures and the ways things were perceived in countries of origin. This haven-like psychological structure may provide temporary relief and security but is also fuelling alienation and non-participation, which in turn only serves to exacerbate the initial feeling of overwhelming difference.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: The third theme of racism was also connected to the previous hypothesis, particularly in terms of experiencing an increasing individualism as well as feelings of suspicion. Interestingly enough, in exploring this theme the group reflected on its own actions when in Greece and drew upon the members' views of themselves as not being racist but being from a society (Greek) where racism is rife; the latter particularly so by the (Greek) state which provides very little legal and practical framework for the protection of minority groups (such as, economic immigrants and non-Christian member of society). This experience was contrasted with the UK situation where the state is seen as particularly progressive and caring while society itself is seen as moving at the opposite direction (e.g. recent rise of the BNP). The fortification of national identities in UK society, as discussed above, was coupled here with feelings of paranoia and possible existence of internal threats.

Hypothesis: The strengthening of national identities in UK society and the recent support for nationalistic politics bring to the surface a split between a 'caring state' and a 'potentially hostile or aggressive society'. Society reacts to this shift by denying its own potential for self-aggression as well as its own responsibility in the evolving dynamics, all of which only serve as to increase feeling of threat from external and internal persecutors.

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