

## **/ Ethnic Partition: A Gender Analysis based on Cypriot Women's Perspectives**

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For «Womanoeuvres», Zurich, May 2003

This talk falls within the theme of 'borders', and I'm going to deal with a rather extreme and particular kind of border, an ethno-political partition line. I plan first to deal with factual events concerning the partition of Cyprus; second, to tell you a bit about an action research project involving a group of Cypriot women I've been working with over the last two years; and third to discuss some of the concepts that have seemed to us useful for thinking about women and gender in relation to cultural racism, armed conflict and partition. And I would like to say at the start that I wish very much some of my Cypriot colleagues was here, and how much what I say today leans on what I've learned from them.

### **Recent events in Cyprus and the background to them**

As you've probably picked up from the media, Cyprus has been experiencing some quite extraordinary events lately. The Partition Line drawn across the island of Cyprus in 1974 has been a highly rigid and closed border that's kept Turkish and Greek Cypriots almost completely out of touch for three decades. Only the south is under the control of the legal government of the Republic of Cyprus. The north is a self-declared and unrecognized state, the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus. On April 16, the Republic of Cyprus was accepted for membership of the European Union, without a peace agreement that could bring the northern part of the country into Europe at the same time. Then suddenly, on April 21, the leadership of the northern entity announced that the Partition line would be opened for day crossings, in both directions. Why? Nobody understood.

Two days later I was down at the only point of passage in the Green Line, the Ledra Palace checkpoint in Nicosia, to watch the extraordinary spectacle of thousands of women, men and children streaming through the buffer zone. 350,000 (equivalent to more than a third of the population) crossed in the three weeks I was there. The atmosphere was wonderful. People were astonished, ecstatic, breaking into conversation with complete strangers. (And you have to remember that their common language is mainly English. After all these years apart, not many speak the other's language.) But from the start, along with the excitement, there was suspicion of the politicians' intentions. A lot of people told me they felt angry with the politicians – that what they wanted was not day trips, like tourists, but a secure peace agreement.

You can only really understand the significance of the 'opening' by knowing the conditions the new measure has ruptured. So I'll go back a bit. Until the mid 20th century the island was a British colony. Around four-fifths of the population was Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians, around one-fifth was Turkish-speaking and Muslim (though rather secularised). Tensions between the two ethnic groups increased towards the end of the British colonial regime. The anti-colonial movement of Greek Cypriots wasn't a Cypriot independence movement, but rather a Greek nationalist movement - demanding union with Greece (enosis). Turkish Cypriots took this as highly threatening, since Turkey and Greece have a lot of spilled blood between them in the past and Turks already had bad experiences of being a minority in Greece itself.

To avoid enosis, Britain and other international actors organized Cypriot independence, endowing Cypriots with a constitution that provided for power sharing between the two ethnic groups - but which in practice proved unworkable. Turkish separatist feeling increased in the years that followed, exacerbated by Greek Cypriot ethnic violence against them but also engineered by their own nationalist leadership who even then had a project of taksim or separateness. To prevent more bloodshed, a Green Line of partition was at first drawn through the capital city Nicosia, in 1963. You may remember that a fascist junta came to power in Greece in 1967. The junta inspired a coup d'état in Cyprus against the left-leaning President Makarios in the summer of 1974. This seemed to

threaten Turkish Cypriot lives and was taken as a reason by Turkey to launch an intervention across the water. For many Turks who participated, the action was altruistic: to save Turkish Cypriots. But the Turkish military had always wanted a foothold on the island to protect the country's southern flank. They secured the northern third of the island and drew a line from shore to shore that would, until today, require a United Nations peacekeeping force to patrol it.

That summer of 1974, around 200,000 Greek Cypriots were expelled from the north while about 45,000 Turkish Cypriots eventually moved northwards. Only small minorities, a matter of hundreds, stayed on either side. The Republic of Cyprus continued and continues to claim its sovereignty over the whole island. The 'Turkish Republic of North Cyprus' has never been internationally recognized. A lot of UN resolutions have demanded the withdrawal of what is effectively a Turkish occupying army. Turkey and its loyalists in the TRNC have deepened their control over north Cyprus by settling scores of thousands of Turks from Anatolia. The main tension on the island now isn't so much between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots as about hatred for the hidden hand of Turkey controlling the north, with Turkish settlers seen as its pawns. Thus, the ethno-national relations on the island now involve not just two important communities but three: Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots and Turks.

The Partition of Cyprus has been very thorough. Permissions to cross from north to south have had to be applied for one by one from the regime, who have granted them only rarely. So, apart from diplomats and a trickle of foreign tourists on the permitted day-trips to the north, there's been very little traffic through the single checkpoint over a period of 29 years and the two infrastructures – phone lines, air flights, don't connect.

So, the Partition has been a kind of literal apartheid, in the sense of separate development of two regions in total isolation from each other. Greek hasn't been taught in northern schools, Turkish hasn't been taught in the south. In fact what schools have taught is nationalist ideology and ethnic hatred.

Two entire peoples have lived within a few kilometres of each other, and a whole generation has grown up, with minimal mutual knowledge and a good deal of angry fantasizing in its place.

There've been sporadic negotiations between the two leaderships, under UN auspices, looking for some kind of permanent political settlement of the conflict. The main demand of the leadership in the north is for full recognition as a legitimate political entity - ideally an independent state, although they might settle for a bizonal arrangement so long as the 'umbrella' state has few powers. The main demand of southerners is 'to get our land and our homes back' and to reunify the island, although their leadership has always considered compromises. These last few months everyone held their breath while the UN made a last attempt to get a peace agreement before the Republic of Cyprus was accepted into the European Union. It failed just six weeks ago, in mid-April.

So now the line has been arbitrarily opened by the Turkish Cypriot leadership. It's brought a new sense of freedom. All the same, the structures of state, militaries, property ownership and so on remain just as the war left them. The future still waits on a proper peace agreement. We've begun to see more clearly in this time how the Partition never was reducible to the barbed wire fence. The Line may be breached, but Partition remains.

### **An action / research project in Cyprus**

My research in Cyprus from March 2001 to May 2003 has tried to establish a women's standpoint from which to make a gender analysis of the recent history, present realities and possible futures of the ethnic relations of the island. This has proved a conceptually difficult thing to do. In Cyprus everyone is obsessed with 'the Cyprus problem', as they call it, which boils down to ethnic relations. That inhibits the possibilities of seeing the situation in gender terms. Actually, the effect of partition was to entrench two sets of thoroughly patriarchal authorities each in its own domain. Despite modernization, Cyprus north and south are still very unequal societies for women in relation to men. There's a national machinery concerned with equality and women's rights in the south, and talk of something similar in the north. A small minority of women belong to women's NGOs - but very few are autonomous – the large and important women's organizations are, formally or informally, wings of particular political parties, of both left and right.

But very, very few women in Cyprus, north or south, organize actively as autonomous women for societal change. Those that do so tend to address conventional women's issues - like domestic violence. And of course these are important. But what there hasn't been is autonomous women addressing what's called 'the Cyprus problem' from a feminist perspective. The movement for rapprochement, with rare exceptions, has tended to involve mixed sex bi-communal groups, without a gender analysis of the situation.

The reason I've tried to deviate by wearing a feminist hat to address the main political issue in Cyprus calls for some explanation. First of all I suppose I begin from a personal conviction that religion, capitalism, nationalism - in short politics with a big-P - are a women's issue. And a couple of years ago I met a handful of women in Cyprus who do also feel like this. In March 2001 some of them asked me to come to Nicosia to facilitate a bi-communal seminar - that is, for both Greek and Turkish Cypriot women - which the intervention of the British High Commission made possible. The theme was 'what women can do about divided societies'.

A new Cypriot women's organization resulted from the seminar. Around 25 of the women who attended, from both sides of the Line, went on to form a group called Hands Across the Divide (HAD). Some of the key activists had been involved in bi-communal activity in the nineties. HAD owe their survival entirely to the availability of e-mail. At irregular intervals they have been able to organize a meeting in the buffer zone. Also, we got funding for a four-day workshop in London (22 of the members flew over) and a meeting for some of the women in Vienna where they met with feminist activists from Greece and Turkey. But it's really E-mail that's enabled them to jump over the Partition line and work together.

My relationship with the group and with Cyprus continued after the seminar was over. I obtained their agreement to setting up a two-year action research project in which I'd support the group, from within, as a participating member like other members. I'm not the only member who isn't Cypriot and/or who lives elsewhere. There is a very big community in London, so I share this particular identity of 'Londoner' with many Cypriots. The Cypriot diaspora being very big and Cypriots continually mobile, it was necessary anyway to have an overseas membership possibility in HAD, as well as a local one. My Cypriot colleagues agreed to help me gain access to Cypriot women to interview and set up discussion groups. In raising funding for my research I also asked funders for money to support practical projects that HAD would be likely to evolve over the coming two years. But the whole project has been very low-cost. We've been doing things on a shoe string.

Although it is a small group, facing great practical difficulties and has at times in the last two years seemed on the point of collapsing, it has survived till today and is, I think, unique in three important ways. There've been a lot of Cypriot bi-communal groups in the past (i.e. involving both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots) but since 1990 they've all tended to be mediated by professionals in conflict resolution. The first difference is that HAD is not externally mediated. Secondly, HAD's unique in being one organization, not two linked groups one either side of the line. They've achieved the almost impossible in Cyprus and set up a unitary organization. Legally and even physically it isn't possible to form a genuinely 'Cypriot' NGO and base it one side of the line or the other, so what we did was to form an Association under British law and endow it with a London PO Box number for an official address and a London bank account.

Third, HAD's different from previous bi-communal exercises because it 'acts out' politically. Most bicomunal groups have set up social things like a choir, or youth encounters or links between particular professions. By contrast, HAD's mode has been to lobby and to demonstrate on the street, typically with placards to the political leaders saying «Sign or resign». The hope was: if we could get a solution before going into the EU the northerners would benefit enormously. If we didn't get it the north would remain adrift and illegal in the east Mediterranean for who knows how long, and might well be annexed by Turkey.

But the cost for HAD of hurrying into activism on the 'Cyprus problem' as it's always called, has been (in my view, at least) that they've forfeited their own internal political development, the creation of a really viable space between them in which to explore and find a solid and secure consensus on a

wider range of political values. I think they've been able to hold together by making their focus narrow and simple: it's «peace now», in a way. But on the details of a future Cyprus, they've never really explored what they do and don't have in common.

There have always been some women in HAD, especially the southern, Greek Cypriot members, who would have preferred not to be absorbed entirely with the Cyprus problem. Some have wanted to do more typically 'women's' activities – addressing classic 'women's issues' - in short to try to build a women's movement in Cyprus. But it's always seemed as if it had to be either/or - doing women or doing politics. What's always till now been somehow impossible is to harness the feminine / feminist impetus and the pro-political solution impetus into one trajectory, one well thought-through project. Anyway, in approaching my research in Cyprus I tried to think through the logic of action research. And I concluded, rightly or wrongly, that the appropriate thing for a researcher to do is to take what Chairman Mao would have called the main contradiction, and work conceptually on that. The main contradiction faced by HAD (as I see it - they might not all agree) was this thing of: why are we a women's group? Just trying to answer that raised a whole lot more questions. Does being a women's group mean we're feminist? If so what does that mean exactly? And what uniquely does a women's or a feminist group have to say about ending an ethnic partition? When we say 'racism, apartheid and war are women's issues', what do we mean actually? How can we substantiate that statement (without being essentialist)? I think to answer these questions we have to go back to theory.

A bit about doing research... As a non-Cypriot I've had the privilege of being able to spend equal time north and south of the Line. I have both an original and a duplicate British passport, and use one for visits to the north and the other for the south, so that I don't have to worry about the 'wrong' stamp appearing 'too often' on one or the other. While in Cyprus on a sequence of visits over the last two years I interviewed, individually or in groups, 144 women. Twenty-three were HAD members, the rest from a range of political positions. Almost all the material was tape recorded and all transcribed. I've used the Nudist Nvivo programme to code it thematically. The book I'm just now completing covers women's narrations about the ethnic conflict of the 1960s and 70s; their perceptions of gender power relations in Cyprus today; and an analysis of HAD's particular problems in doing transversal politics – border crossing work - when you can't cross the border physically. I conclude the book with a discussion of possible futures for gender and ethnic relations after a political solution in Cyprus. Anything that is worthwhile in the book I'm indebted to the generosity and inclusiveness of Cypriot women. It will I am sure have a lot of errors in it and these are of course my own responsibility.

### **Identifying usable concepts and propositions**

For the remainder my time now I want to talk about the conceptual framework I'm using, because it's with that that I could really do with your help. I seemed to need to begin from the concept of difference - and its ambiguity. And from the difference between difference as an effect and differentiation as a process. I think it's necessary to go back to basics like this in order to see the connection between ethnicity and gender. Because this is the link between them: difference and differentiation.

First I reviewed to myself the positive things about difference - that for each of us individually self-differentiation is an achievement, part of maturing. And collectively, cultural difference is a source of richness, pleasure and desire - the encounter between cultural differences moves us forward, generates change and creativeness. We can fall in love with difference. And I reviewed the negative things about difference - that it's often constructed as un-surmountable otherness. We can hate and kill for difference.

A related concept of course is identity. And I draw on all those well known thoughts about how our sense of self is built and continually shifts over time through the articulation – the selection and linking together - of a lot of different discourses, a lot of competing names calling us, appellations hailing us, from the world out there, partly inescapable, partly pliable to our own will and preferences. Plus the uncomfortable fact that every self must be constituted to some extent through excluding some other or others. A self defines a not-self. Stuart Hall calls this a 'radically disturbing recognition'.

But the question for me - for us, for Cyprus, for Europe - is about the mode of differentiation. That's something I began to think about in the work I was doing five years ago, in the book *The Space Between Us*, where I worked with similar women's alliances in Bosnia, Northern Ireland and Israel-Palestine. A line of differentiation may be relatively rigid or flexible, relatively permeable or impermeable. It may be sharply dichotomous, a matter of us-and-them, or involve pluralities so that one sees oneself as belonging to just one among a lot of comparable communities. The other it separates from the self can be a little different or profoundly different, interestingly different or threateningly different, merely alien or utterly inimical.

I've given my book the title *The Line*. Which of course refers first and foremost to the Partition Line, the Green Line. But it also refers to the line-drawing that goes on in our heads as we mark and separate people as 'different' from us. The question is: do we draw a line that dichotomizes, turns self and other into reductive caricatures in black and white, privileges one side of the line while it subordinates, marginalizes, reduces or anathematizes what lies the other side? Do we envisage only two stereotypes or do we notice variations and divergences from them? In our fascinated hatred of 'the Turks' in Cyprus, the new settlers, do we forget to differentiate the Kurds, the Roma, the Asian immigrant workers, and the many other kinds of foreigner who for different reasons live on the island? In our desire to maintain the proper line between the proper man and his proper wife, do we deny valid existence to the single mother, the sex worker, the lesbian? Or alternatively, and hopefully, do alarm bells ring in our heads and make us suspicious when we feel ourselves drawing a sharp neat clean dividing line of some kind?

To some extent, I think, groups, forces and movements within societies, are capable of choosing the discourses and the material practices through which they frame up and represent themselves and their others. The constitution of collective identity, a belonging, is a political process, even a political project, in that it has to do with choice and power. Our political movements are definable by their relationship to lines. Nationalisms, fascisms, socialisms, anarchisms, feminisms – each of these is a multiple phenomenon with internal differences in line-drawing practices. Take nationalism. There are fiercely reductive, blood-line nationalisms; others that talk a language of citizenship, rights and internationalism. Take feminism. There's a feminism that's fiercely essentialist, woman-idealizing and man-hating (although this brand is much less prevalent than a lot of critics like to think) and there's a feminism that's about transforming a gender order that we see does terrible things to men, while doing worse things to women.

You'll see from this that my main proposition in the Cyprus work (and it isn't new, I'm being utterly derivative here) is that the significance of the mode of differentiation applies equally to ethno-national identities and gender identities. And what is more the two processes often occur in and through the same moves.

To come back down to *Hands Across the Divide*... In Cyprus, the women of *Hands Across the Divide* talk about 'the Cyprus problem', by which they / we mean relations between Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots and Turks; and they / we talk about the position of women in society, by which we mean the prevailing relations and inequalities between men and women. We're therefore concerned, I'd say (even if we're not really in the habit of using this kind of language in the organizational life we share) with two particular dimensions of cultural differentiation - ethnicity and gender. We're concerned with effects (Partition on the one hand, male dominance on the other) and therefore our struggle is inevitably with the process that produces them: the mode in which Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots and Turks mutually construct their sense of self; and the mode in which at the very same time men and women constitute Cypriot masculinities and femininities.

But this is precisely the point: we can't really speak of Cypriot masculinities and femininities because such things don't exist, yet. What exist are Greek Cypriot masculinity and femininity, Turkish Cypriot masculinity and femininity and so on. Gender is always constituted in a culturally specific form, and an ethnicity is deeply characterized by its gender relations - as Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis have often enough reminded us. Every male and female identity is specific to a culture, and in turn every ethnicity, in any given period and place, has its norms for manhood and womanhood. As ethnic

identities differ in expression (let's say more and less nationalistic and reductive), these variants involve different expressions of gender. Essentialist and reductive nationalisms tend to generate and be sustained by essentialist and reductive, that is highly patriarchal, versions of gender. So our oppression as women is enacted in ethnically specific ways.

Gender and ethnic relations, political and economic relations, being intertwined, are sensitive to mutual change. Economic change for instance, consumerism, has been notably reshaping gender differences. Social structures aren't immutable. For one thing, they're often challenged by the people they disadvantage, and if those with power are to hold on to it, such subversions have to be counteracted and the structures cleverly adapted for new times.

There are similarities in the range of modes of differentiation that are seen in the ethnic order and the gender order. An ethnic identity can be barely emphasized or fiercely militant. Gender differentiation likewise can be laid back, scarcely observable, men and women permitted a range of ways of being. Or gender rules can be ferociously enforced and policed (as in certain fundamentalist cultures). But of course there are differences too. Ethnicity and gender differ in their relation to a physical referent. Gender has to deal with the fact of reproductive dimorphism – male/female. Ethnicity doesn't necessarily involve physical distinctiveness. One very significant difference is that while people of different ethnic cultures may move apart, to a greater or lesser extent, to dwell in mono-communal groups, men and women have been held by heterosexual reproductive relationships into cohabitation. Gender separatism, as in monasteries and convents, is relatively rare. While an ethnic line, such as a partition line, may almost totally separate two cultural groups, the gender line that differentiates men from women achieves its effects in a whole lot of day to day interpersonal interactions. The gender line runs through every institution, every street, every building, every bedroom, even the bed itself. But we shouldn't assume from the 'unthinkability' of gender partition that the line as it's drawn between women and men in contemporary societies is relatively unproblematic. Its effects are often less tolerable precisely because men and women are chained together in intimacy, in a domain labelled 'private'. When gender tensions result in clinical depression or violence, as they often do, the damage is hidden from view and it often goes unremedied. Women quite often die of it.

So you'll see what I've been trying to do is to listen to what women in Cyprus tell me about their history and their present realities and their future aspirations with ears that are primed to hear a story of ethnicity and gender coming through the self-same words. I've been finding it, I promise you, far harder to do in practice than grasping the theory in principle. I don't know why it's so hard - perhaps it's partly something to do with the way my consciousness is conditioned, reared in a dominant colonializing English culture. But the difficulty may also lie in the limitations of the terminology that's available to us. For instance I've found it's useful to take the terms gender order, gender regime, patriarchal bargain and patriarchal dividend that have been coined by gender theorists Jill Matthews, Bob Connell, Deniz Kandiyoti and others, and transfer them so we can talk about an ethnic order, ethnic regimes, ethnic bargains and ethnic dividends.

Anyway, finally, I find myself saying what other women have always insisted: we have to be very selective and precise about the kind of feminism we need to challenge militant and war-prone nationalisms. The feminism we need has to be anti-racist, and at the same time the anti-racism we need has to be anti-sexist. Why? because the inferiorization, exclusion and alterity we encounter in our gendered and our ethnic selves derive ultimately from the same source, an arrogant 'othering' process in which those with the power to do so cast their alter-egos into the pit.

So we come at last to the important questions, the ones I think we most need to answer in order to foresee the direction of change in an always surprising Cyprus... If the ethnic order (or ethnic orders if we think of both north and south Cyprus) and the gender order are mutually constituting, if they're shaping and sustaining of each other, as our theory says they are, can we undermine one by undermining the other? If we step out of line as women, challenging the gender order, with its injustices and its rigidities, do we inevitably damage just a little the capacity for survival of the ethnic order with its rival racisms and nationalism, their associated militarisms and practice of partition?

If Cypriots achieve a new constitution that has ethnic equality built into it, so that Turkish Cypriots aren't a persecuted minority and Turkish 'settlers' get and give a fair deal, and so do Asian immigrant workers, and the Roma aren't chased from pillar to post - will that equality principle be generalizable, so that women simultaneously acquire full and true equality and respect? If we refuse to see 'Greek Cypriots', or 'Tu rks' or (in Britain, 'Muslims' or 'Arabs') as though they were rigid and real categories, and as 'them', the 'enemy'; and if instead we work towards a genuine mixity (difference without mutual annihilation, living contiguous lives without sinking into homogeneity, identity that is definable but fluid and continually flowering in mutant and hybrid forms) .... will that signal a new way of thinking, bringing an acceptance of variance and multiplicity in sex and gender too? Will sexual ambiguity be more tolerable? Will lesbians at last be visible in Cyprus and not feel they have to flee to the diaspora to get a life?

It's on this kind of assumption I think we have to base feminist activism - that's to say, pitching it against patriarchy and against nationalism and militarism in one and the same move. I derive the belief from both our experiences as anti-war activists in London and as activists for a peace agreement in Cyprus. Can you help me to get it clearer? And above all can you tell me whether, in your experience, the thinking, the theory, translates into reality, into outcomes?

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