

An Interview with Kalypso Nicolaïdis

Kira Huju talks to Kalypso Nicolaïdis about academia, identity and what is next for the European Union



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Kalypso Nicolaïdis is on a life-long quest to undermine the ‘tyranny of dichotomies’ that governs so much of our thinking on the European Union. For the Professor of International Relations and Director of the Centre for International Studies, this quest involves mastering three different types of translation: translation across different languages and cultures; the transdisciplinary translation across academic boundaries; and finally, the political translation that bridges academia and the public sphere. Nuanced translation carries the argument beyond the straight-jacket of traditional labels: nationalism versus cosmopolitanism, pragmatism versus idealism, Europhobia versus Europhilia. Nicolaïdis’ framework speaks to what might have gone wrong with the Brexit referendum, too.

Translating across nations

Translation across different cultures and languages involves recognising the diversity of how people explain Europe to themselves and others. In many ways, Nicolaïdis herself embodies this. A Franco-Greek citizen, she was raised in Paris by a Franco-German mother (who insisted on her ‘European’ identity) and a Greek father from Asia Minor. Now married to a Brit with tri-national children, the self-identifying ‘rooted cosmopolitan’ exemplifies European hybridity. Translation is a suitable metaphor for untangling this hybridity, because it, too, is an indeterminate undertaking that hopes to make things intelligible to others without flattening out nuances and idiosyncrasies. For Nicolaïdis, the prescription of ‘more Europe’ has never entailed the artificial construction of a single European people or ‘demos’, but instead a consensual construction of European *demoi-cracy* – a Union of peoples, understood both as states and as citizens, who govern together, but not as one.

Democracy thus escapes the false dichotomy between identifying either solely with a nation or solely as a European, and resuscitates the possibility of overlapping, comfortably complex identities. It also helps us resist the Eurocentric temptation of constructing the EU through opposition to various non-Europe others. The nationalist *cul-de-sac* of ascribing specific identities based on nationality, Nicolaïdis insists, is not meaningfully countered by demanding supranational allegiance. “The European institutions employ thousands of professional translators and even run a book translation service,” Nicolaïdis laughs, “but have given little thought to how the ideals of translation might apply to the identitarian diversity of Europe”. The Union, and those analysing it, must learn to speak across, not over, various languages and collectives. And this cannot happen if we fail to deeply engage with each other in a spirit of what she calls ‘transformative mutual recognition’.

Translating across academic disciplines

Translation across academic disciplines poses its own challenges and opportunities. Academic diversity need not render one’s work untranslatable to colleagues with different methodological or epistemological commitments. Different perspectives – such as constitutional law, empirical studies of policy-making, normative political theory, uses of history or anthropological considerations on settlers and nomads – can be brought together to develop a more variegated understanding of the ‘nature of the beast’, as Thomas Risse-Kappen would say. In the spirit of practicing what one preaches, Nicolaïdis is a native of different disciplinary fields. Trained as a French civil servant, she completed a master’s in international economics at Sciences Po and another in political economy

and government at Harvard, before settling at the Kennedy School of Government to write her PhD on the Single Market. Drawing game and negotiation theory into her academic ambit, she spent nearly two decades teaching at Harvard before resurfacing at Oxford as an IR scholar. Nicolaïdis suggests that the diversity of EU scholarship’s theoretical vocabularies ought to remind us why each field’s ‘standards of truth’ should always remain ajar to insights from outside.

Translating between the academy, the public and the political world

Finally, and arguably most acutely, we have much work to do in translating academic thinking into intelligible contributions in the allegedly separate ‘real world’. One way to do this is through stories. “Politics without stories is like a world without colours”, Nicolaïdis says. In the recent EU referendum, the Remain campaign focused on the economy, but had no story to tell of the same power as Leave’s ‘take back control’. The academic reflex cannot be to dismiss stories, but must involve an attempt at providing accessible counter narratives. For example, a sensible story about *democracy* might have persuaded even patriotic Brits, who talk of European unity as a top-down negation of national identity, that membership in the EU can readily accommodate national differences. Similarly, Nicolaïdis’ vision of *sustainable integration* does not insist on the inevitable goal of an ever closer Union, but points to an open-ended agonistic politics in which goals are always contested against shared long term ambitions and in which there is an ever-present exit option. This fosters a sense of agency and possibility rather than fatalism. As the only academic in

a 12-member EU Reflection Group on the future of Europe, chaired by Felipe González, Nicolaïdis has recently had her original instincts reaffirmed—Europe needs academic storytellers who can envision an EU 2.0 without expounding one hegemonic EU narrative penned in Brussels. Within the limits of liberal democracy, academics should reflect upon a plurality of acceptable ways of belonging, without shutting out unorthodox interpretations. Our translations must always be grounded in competence, but never in contempt.

Across both national and disciplinary boundaries, as well as between academia and public life, much has been lost in translation in the last few decades of EU debates. To recover the art of translation, Nicolaïdis encourages EU scholars to practice self-reflection, mutual learning and academic humility. Academics should try to communicate what is at stake in Europe today to more diverse audiences. Paradoxically for scholars committed to theory building, this can require relying on intuition to find the ever elusive balance between one’s academic or political language, and that of others.

Kira Huju
MPhil Candidate in International Relations