

Property as sovereignty *in micro*: the state/property nexus and the Cyprus Problem

THEODOROS RAKOPOULOS *University of Oslo*

This article shows that landed property can be an exercise of state sovereignty *in micro*. I argue that property tightly relates to statehood and that the concept of ‘community’ offers us a lens with which to investigate that relation. Property’s ‘communal’ character in Cyprus often transcends individual rights to ownership. A house belongs not to an individual, but to persons in their capacity as members of either the Greek-Cypriot or Turkish-Cypriot constitutional communities of the Republic. Focusing on the moral and political claims that ensue from this premise, I show how refugee Cypriots encounter and rearticulate the state in a variety of institutions as they lay claims to property (*periousia*) – their own or others’. Consequently, I argue that thinking through ‘community’ contributes to understandings of the linkage between property and statecraft (what I call the state/property nexus). In turn, this allows us to better comprehend statehood in post-conflict domains.

One late afternoon in April 2005, Nicolas,¹ then 35, married with children, came back from work to his mortgaged house in a quaint part of Limassol, in southern Cyprus. As he opened the door and entered, he became slightly concerned when he noticed male voices that were unfamiliar to him. In the garden, he was astonished to find two young men wearing black suits and Ray-Ban glasses. For a moment, Nicolas thought they looked like secret service agents, as one might have expected from film stereotypes. As the men introduced themselves, he was told that indeed they worked in intelligence for the Republic of Cyprus (RoC). His mother-in-law, who had come to help with the children and had opened the door to the agents earlier, smiled in awe; she looked proud that her household had such elite visitors. But Nicolas was upset. The agents had come to visit him about what he considered a private choice: whether or not to sell the property he had inherited from his mother in the North of Cyprus, where he was born and uprooted at age 5, during the 1974 Turkish invasion of the island. He told the agents that what he did with the house was ‘his own business’.

They responded that, on the contrary, considering selling it was ‘definitely not *his* own business’, but rather an issue concerning the ‘Greek-Cypriot community’ as well as ‘the Republic’.

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Why would the intelligence service of the state care about the private choice of an individual concerned with ‘his own’ property? Nicolas was faced with the need to account for ‘the Greek-Cypriot community’, one of the two constitutional communities of the partitioned RoC, when making choices over the future of his private property. In some states, property is implicitly associated with one’s membership in an ethnopolitical community. This condition can render private property a stake for statecraft, and articulate its bearers (here, Nicolas) to state institutions. Highlighting property’s centrality in the context of the ‘Cyprus Problem’, I wish to draw attention to its role in understanding statecraft and statehood anthropologically. To do so, I investigate ‘community’, a main idiom through which the dialectical constitution of state sovereignty and property can be pursued, which is central in plural, post-conflict polities like Cyprus.

My argument has two key components. First, via the existing ethnographic record from northern Cyprus (controlled by the unrecognized ‘Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus’, or ‘TRNC’), I expand on the bond between proprietor/citizen and political community/state, sealed through private property. Anthropologists of the northern part of Cyprus have already underscored the importance of this bond, which I call the state/property nexus. Second, I further substantiate this analysis through two vignettes from the southern side of Cyprus, controlled by the RoC, my own ethnographic focus. I highlight the emic distinction concerning Cypriot property between *periousia* and *idioktisia*, where the former, denoting inalienability and collective memory, is key to understanding property in this context. I show how the state is given shape across moral claims to private property which, in turn, are articulated as claims of sovereignty to communal territory. This is especially the case in Cyprus since, despite the 1974 partition, the Republic is officially a bicomunal polity that only nominally holds sovereignty throughout the island.

The suspended Republic inspires or even enforces upon its citizens a gridding effect (Jansen 2015) that might not correspond to their material circumstances or desires. Land remains ‘communal’ at all times (belonging at once to a person via title deeds but also as a member of the state’s constitutional communities, either Greek-Cypriot or Turkish-Cypriot), pushing people to constantly rearticulate their positions vis-à-vis the Cypriot states. This gridding effect allows for an investigation of the constitutive role that private property plays for modern statehood in general, as the ‘community’ tier both seals and problematizes the property/state relation. Analysing the idiom of community can advance anthropological knowledge on the dialectics between private property and state and help us appreciate the nexus between state and property more fully. As I show, ‘community’, with its implicit territorial claims, provides a link between property and state that seals their conceptual and normative nexus. The article therefore contributes to the political anthropology of state and property by opening up how the community idiom solidifies the formation of the state/property dialectics and their territorial normativity.

Lessons on property from a bicomunal Republic

Settlement in propertied land is a technology that renders populations legible to the state (J.C. Scott 1998; 2009), what Stef Jansen called the gridding effect of statecraft (2015: 42). Advancing Scott’s take, Jansen argues for a ‘more multilayered, dynamic and plural understanding of grids’ (2015: 70) as in Bosnia, like in Cyprus, there exists a puzzling reality of multiple states. Indeed, the existence of multiple Cypriot states *in situ*

affects how a person might identify with their respective main/first point-of-reference state (Constantinou & Papadakis 2011). Cypriots experience existing sovereignties as a struggle. Coming to terms with the island's multiplicity of sovereignty (and their associated property regimes) has corrosive effects on their social memory (see Bryant 2012). Tiered, coexisting states of exception, which are tied to different readings of its constitutional communities (Constantinou 2008), often befuddle the Republic's citizens.

The modern state's invention of citizenship rested on the legal right of private property (Brubaker 1989: 35), seen as a connecting bridge between a unitary citizenry and state. The citizenry and state notions are always contentious, but they become more complex in post-conflict states, which operate on a presumed unity of sovereignty but division of citizenry. This 'community' tier applies to the scale of both individuals and the state so all private matters regarding property are regulated as matters of state. This condensing of macro and micro scales concerning the role of land in establishing 'community' among competing sovereignties has been noted before in political anthropology (Hayden 2004: 123; Nuijten 2003: 46). Here, however, a post-conflict situation and ideas of future sovereignty call for a revisiting of community as a stake in shaping understandings of 'private' property and the 'state' at once.

In partition contexts, a person's individually owned land often becomes part of the territory of another sovereign. This property/state relation establishes a reproduction of the issues of communal sovereignty (and conflict) at a micro scale. The Republic adheres to a pre-1974 partition bicomunal agreement, and continues to act as a trimmed-back version of its pre-partition status. Consequently, befuddled citizens like Nicolas face the obligation to negotiate the loss of their property in a complex multi-state system on the grounds of a 'community'. While this does call for a more plural understanding of grids (Jansen 2015), it also reveals a missing link in the dialectic of the state formation: the mutual constitution of citizen and state operates through the means of property, which in this process becomes 'communal'.

Much political anthropology, especially of conflict and transition, has focused on how citizenship corresponds to property (e.g. Elyachar 2005; James 2007; Rakopoulos 2021; Slyomovics 1998). These research contexts unravel the ways in which post-conflict land agreements produce individual subjects who look to the state to guarantee their property rights (see Verdery 1998: 298) or suffer land encroachment precisely *because of* property rights (Li 2014). Community, in such contexts, informs both the private notion of property and the collective concerns of the state. Placing the Cypriot institutional treatment of the idiom of 'community' under scrutiny, I contribute a needed attention to a link forging 'individual' and 'state' together, as community brings state and citizen on the same scale.

The RoC, unlike the 'TRNC', is constitutionally a bicomunal state² co-owned by Greek-Cypriots (henceforth G/Cs) and Turkish-Cypriots (T/Cs) (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 7-8). It was established in 1960, via a postcolonial plan by Britain, alongside its NATO allies Greece and Turkey, to bestow independence on a population that only begrudgingly accepted it. Anthropologists have documented the ensuing intercommunal violence of 1963-4 and the de facto partition, in part due to the Republic's G/C bias (Bryant & Hatay 2011); the Greek-backed coup d'état against Makarios and the subsequent Turkish invasion in 1974 (Loizos 1981); as well as the establishment of the 'TRNC' in the North in 1983 (Bryant & Hatay 2020). Since the 1974 war, and the full partition it provoked on both sides of the Green Line (the effective

border between the two states [Papadakis 2005]), individually owned land and houses of displaced people have acquired a life of their own (Navaro-Yashin 2009). Refugees of the Republic's two communities, who fled to the other part of the island, thus form part of the negotiations that animate the Cyprus Problem.

As in Nicolas's story, the politically charged 'communal' feature of individual property is often messy. The postcolonial and post-conflict specificities of Cyprus, whereby houses are often registered as communal, mean that individual negotiations on people's own land are stalled as land scales up to the state level. The *dramatis personae* in my ethnography are mainly Greek-Cypriot citizens, as well as state institutions of the RoC (the police, the authority managing Turkish-Cypriot properties, a political party) that mediate these citizens' relations and claims with and towards the state.³ Indeed, the communal aspect of property connects personal stories to statehood and brings state institutions to act on the ground, like the secret service in Nicolas's backyard.

This case gestures to the importance of revisiting how property is handled conceptually within political anthropology. The latter parts of this article reassess the prevailing conceptual distance between interpreting property as an individual and a collective stake, in light of 'community' as a missing link. Highlighting how this link connects persons, land, and state institutions, I show how private property can be an exercise of sovereignty *in micro*.

Rereading Cypriot ethnography

Julie Scott's under-discussed chapter in a classic volume on property explores how landed property acquires moral and political attributes on the northern side of Cyprus (J. Scott 1998). Indeed, 'the Cypriot house has been a centremost political and legal institution. Politics and law in Cyprus have been centrally negotiated around people's personal homes and belongings' (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 179). After 1974, displaced T/Cs in the North were encouraged to interpret land grabbing as compensation for what they had lost in the South. The northern part's T/C nationalist administration, even before the 'TRNC' was established in 1983, had a 'unilateral' policy of transferring ownership from the South that would permit property 'to be reintegrated into the social fabric of life in the North', taking place in ways that reduced the original *ownership* into *property* value only (J. Scott 1998: 142-3, emphasis added). The tensions between original property and commoditized ownership is a point I shall return to below in the G/C context. The 'right' (*hak*) ascribed to property, in both the legal and moral sense, mirrors that of G/C refugees and their own experience. However, unlike the RoC, the 'TRNC' policy was to dissociate displaced T/Cs from their original dwellings and 'anchor refugees in their new home in the north' (J. Scott 1998: 158).

Here, property's gridding effect is evident. This property model connects people to land and new sovereign terrain in tandem: lost properties had fallen into the new state's hands and had become the ground of politics (Bryant & Hatay 2020: 135). In this way, statements about property are also statements about territory (Bryant 2010: 97). For T/Cs – as Rebecca Bryant points out – (re-)establishing themselves in propertied homes in the North was a closure to the Cyprus Problem.⁴ At the same time, from the G/C perspective, the T/Cs expected 'the return of their friends, the land's real masters, its owners or proprietors' (Bryant 2010: 152). Most T/Cs eventually saw the plunder of G/C properties as the completion of a history and the right of revenge (Bryant 2014: 683).

Nevertheless, many saw the property transmission of said homes as a moral problem. The development of property markets in the North, especially after the Green Line's opening in 2003, turned originally G/C-owned land into commodified private property, often counterfeit or illicit (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 218). Indeed, 'histories of land sales were not only tales of commerce but stories of trickery and deceit, of persons who took what belongs to one "by right"' (Bryant 2010: 91). With the ongoing lack of a solution to the Cyprus Problem, many Cypriots find this profiteering morally questionable.

Yael Navaro-Yashin's work shows that the notion of loot (*ganimet*) is key here. This concept denotes how spoils of war turn into a politically charged metaphor through which T/Cs criticize themselves and the 'TRNC' as 'a state built upon *ganimet*' (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 157; see also Bryant 2010: 139). Expropriating the 'property of others' has provoked self-critical moral commentary towards the state (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 3; 2012: 158). This sense of usurpation extends to G/C collective history (e.g. churches abandoned or vandalized), stoking competition between the 'TRNC' and the RoC (Welz 2017: 14, 24).

We are therefore presented with a broader framework of the connection between state and property, where citizenship and statehood move to and fro across the Green Line on the basis of moral claims to propertied land that become territorial claims, expressions of the micro component of sovereignty. How citizens and the state ascribe moral aspects of a collective past to private property is a central feature of the existing ethnography of northern Cyprus. This centrality of property concerns how conversations around property scale up to the making of the T/C state, T/C political subjectivity, and T/C-G/C relations and polities within Cyprus. This scaling of private property issues to statehood matters, and the attendant relation of citizens to their state embedded in conceptions of property, is what I call the state/property nexus.

Naming the condition that ethnographers of northern Cyprus have already explored allows us to further understand this nexus in a comparative anthropological fashion. Indeed, despite the attention of 'TRNC'-focused ethnographies on state and property, no research has focused specifically on the centrality of property in the RoC. This is surprising, because in the southern part of the island, refugee subjectivity is 'a structural aspect of [the] citizenship regime' (see Demetriou 2018: 13), central to upholding the state, and – as I argue here – also reliant on property. Moreover, a further understanding of the state/property nexus through an emphasis on community can bring us into dialogue with political anthropologists of the state and property elsewhere – a point that I return to towards the end of the article.

In the Republic, we again witness the dialectical constitution of property and state(s) as communal categories. Languages of stateness that call on the state's judgement (Hansen & Stepputat 2001: 8) permeate the actions of my G/C interlocutors. The common idiom of these languages is property, despite the multiple states they refer to: the 'lost North' seen as *katehomena*,⁵ or the South as lived experience informed by the G/C 'affective basis of generalized refugeehood' (Demetriou 2018: 70). While private property scales to the political community, and thus to the statecraft of the Republic and the 'TRNC', the outcome is puzzling, as people are pulled in different directions by the grids of conflicting states.

In effect, the state/property nexus brings forward both overlapping and juxtaposing realities. I shall explore this complexity by further nuancing two emic concepts that roughly correspond to the distinction between ownership and property. This requires

an historical and linguistic contextualization of the tension between the terms *periousia* and *idioktisia*.

Periousia and idioktisia

When the British captured Cyprus in 1878, they encountered an ‘ocean of micro-properties’ (Katsiaounis 1996). The small landholding, the *kotsani*, had already been established as part of the Ottoman’s *Tanzimat* modernizing reforms. Smallholding had inspired individual male autonomy, as per the phrase *tzi ego moustatzin tzi esy moustatzin* (‘I have a moustache, you have a moustache’) (Loizos 1975a).

As the British intervened, the system was changed into a capitalist debtor economy, which led to the loss of smallholding, due to colonial domination and subjugation to local loansharking. This form of modernization oversaw a conceptual change in the *kotsani* associated with the 1920s credit crisis and a deepening of capitalist development on the island (Panayiotou 2006: 272). Peasant indebtedness became salient and indeed the G/C term for selling off landed assets is, tellingly, *apoxenosi* (‘alienation’). Between the 1920s and 1940s, rural Cypriots were pushed off their land and agricultural capacities, out of their villages and into cities under odd formations of patrimonial waged work (Loizos 1985a: 131–3). This change gave rise to the formation of social classes (Argyrou 1996: 30–8). Property transmission through marriage also adapted, from brideswealth into dowry in the 1950s, thus diminishing the power of women (Loizos 1975b: 507–12).

While *idioktisia* signifies marketable property and sets the basis for the colloquial G/C tendency to trade,⁶ the inalienable *periousia* denotes an attachment to land ‘rights’ as an extension of selfhood – notably the case with refugee properties in the north. It was through the aforementioned economic transformations that property became increasingly framed by these two antonymic, but overlapping, concepts.

When G/Cs speak of ‘*oi periousies mas*’, they are speaking not only of their own personal or family property but rather of all G/C property left in the North, the occupied areas, *ta katehomena*. Moreover, the *katehomena*, while an adjectival form, is used as a noun in a way that allows it to stand in precisely for that empty space between village – the space where *periousia* converges with selfhood – and territory. *Katehomena* can mean ‘occupied villages’, ‘occupied area’, or ‘occupied territory’ (*katehomena edhafi*). Therefore, the fusion of communal selfhood, and indeed communal identity, with *periousia*, emically discussed as ‘*oi periousies mas*’ (our properties), should also be seen as lost territory, with the perceived stamp of communal identity.

The G/C notions of *periousia* and *idioktisia* stand in conceptual tension. While similar to the tensions between ownership and property that Julie Scott underscores among T/Cs, the English words ownership/property do not fully reflect the *periousia/idioktisia* distinction. *Periousia* denotes generational accumulation, inalienability, and (collective) memory. A good anthropological example is offered by Peter Loizos’s documentary *Sophia and her people: eventful lives* (1985b). The story of Sophia describes the desire to assert family sovereignty among displaced G/Cs, embedded in the construction of a village furnace identical to the one left behind in their North Cyprus village. My analysis of property as sovereignty *in micro* draws from these features of *periousia*.

While *idioktisia* is transient, alienable, and pertains to the market, *periousia* is not to be marketized – despite its potential to be measured by the market lexicon. Instead, *periousia* forms familial life-planning and is ingrained with intergenerational

affordances and obligations that come with passing and receiving across ages. It indicates accumulator status: assets that may well have been achieved through the market but which are not negotiable within it. As a saying goes: ‘*en poulamen gin pou eklironomisamen*’, we don’t sell land we have inherited. As in Rhodes, the Greek island sharing more similarities to Cyprus than any other, property is associated with ‘family fate’ (Herzfeld 1982: 649).

Property as *periousia* thus reflects and summarizes the efforts of many (potentially, the G/C community). It is a kin-driven history of the labour of people who came before us, and prefigures the state’s obligation to protect it in the future. This reasoning explains why, for G/Cs, the institutional protection of *periousies* (plural) in North Cyprus is a matter of ‘human rights’.⁷ The Cyprus Problem is never discussed in terms of *idioktisies*, either in the language of the state or in that of grassroots voices. As with ‘anchoring’ people to new land in North Cyprus, similarly, G/C refugees from the North felt anchored to their original landed property in terms of *periousia*, which entailed also a promise of return.

Interlocutors in their fifties and above, when talking about Famagusta, their place of origin, told me that they are stationed ‘for the moment’ in Limassol, on the southern side of Cyprus. Maria, a Famagusta refugee aged 55, ironically commented that ‘this “moment” has become our whole lives “till now”’. Dealing with clients who consider pursuing a road similar to Titina Loizidou (bringing a case against Turkey in front of the European Court of Human Rights), she reported a mantra among G/C refugees: ‘If you do not have *periousia*, you shall always remain displaced’.

At the same time, as the Republic – at least nominally – pursues the unification of the island under a new federated state, it has legal responsibilities towards the properties (*periousies*) of its other constitutional community, the T/Cs, also RoC citizens. Officially awaiting a solution to the Cyprus Problem, the state acts as the custodian of T/C *periousies* in the South. This work is done by the Ministry of Interior, through the ‘Turkish Cypriot Properties Management Authority’ (henceforth TCPMA).⁸ Indeed,

The fact that the Republic of Cyprus keeps Turkish Cypriot real estate in trust ... serves to underline what Greek Cypriots consider their morally superior position in the Cyprus conflict ... [I]n the 1990s, legal changes made it easier for Greek Cypriots to rent Turkish Cypriot houses from the government authority administering these properties. Tenants who sign a lease for Turkish Cypriot property have to guarantee the upkeep of the property and consent to return it to its owner in the case of a solution (Welz 2017: 24-5).

In what follows, I use two stories to show how refugees encounter the state and rearticulate its meanings over property claims and conflicts. These are property issues concerning *periousia* – as well as its lapses into *idioktisia*, whether by inheritance or marketability.

The first story explains the scramble for T/C property among G/Cs in need of accommodation resources. The story illuminates the repercussions of the administration of T/C *periousies* by their custodian (the Republic) guided by the G/C sense of ‘owning the Greek-Cypriot state’ (Navaro-Yashin 2012: xvi). The second story revisits Nicolas’s scaling up to the state’s higher echelons, as his actions could allegedly lead to the recognition of the ‘TRNC’ as a valid property negotiation partner. Again, the story highlights the inalienable communal character of *periousia* that obstructs Nicolas’s attempt to treat his land as individualized property.

'The President gave me this house'

Polemithkia, a working-class suburb of Limassol, was historically mostly T/C land. What is today *Kato* (lower) Polemithkia is an urban development (a *synoikismos*⁹) built in 1983 by the Republic to house G/C refugees. While *synoikismoi* in the southern part of Cyprus host G/C refugees from topographically scattered places in the North (Loizos 1981), the apartment building I lived in was mainly populated with people from the Famagusta/Varosha area, including the plain of Mesaoria, now under 'TRNC' administration.

After years of roaming in the island's southern parts, including being temporarily housed in the evacuated T/C village of Kantou, 30 kilometres outside Limassol, Androulla and Panicos, my main fieldwork protectors, have been living in Polemithkia since 1983. Their wedding took place in a Mesaoria mixed village in 1963, in the early days of the Republic's independence. Panicos has just turned 80 and Androulla is 73; they have long been affiliated with DHSY,¹⁰ the right-wing party, despite entertaining no nationalist sympathies. Panicos speaks Turkish fairly well, and Androulla often points out that 'the only reason I don't go to the *katehomena* anymore is that my *Turkues* [T/C] girlfriends have recently died'. They have good relations with their T/C neighbours, Mustafa and Kadir, who, in exercising the right of return to their place of origin, ended up living in the opposite block of flats.

Also in the block of flats opposite lives Pamos, the son of Androulla and Panicos. Like Mustafa, Pamos has reached his early fifties and does odd jobs to supplement the benefits from the Republic. He had an accident at work as a mason, where the informal conditions of labour offered little social protection. After his accident, he found himself unemployed and, up until the time of my research, was underemployed for more than four years. Accumulated debts and the ongoing needs of small children meant he had to sell his house and, after his divorce, move to cheaper accommodation.

Pamos had a paternal uncle, an unmarried octogenarian named Hambis, another Mesaoria refugee. Since the 1980s, Hambis had lived in a house in Mouttagiaka, a village outside Limassol that had been majority T/C from the late nineteenth century until 1974. After wandering about southern Cyprus impoverished on the back of the 1974 displacement, he managed to establish himself there in the early 1980s. While I was doing fieldwork in early 2019, the childless Hambis died, aged 82.

The Mouttagiaka house was managed by the aforementioned institution holding T/C properties in trust, the TCPMA. Nevertheless, Panicos and Androulla thought that, with the passing of Hambis, a window of informal opportunity opened to house their son Pamos and his young family. After suggestions from his parents and extended kin, who all thought Pamos deserved to be housed at the Mouttagiaka T/C property, he took his children and wife, underemployed 50-year-old Zoi, and moved into the house. Pamos was 6 during the 1974 war, while his wife was 4, and so they had refugee status. Furthermore, while to the Republic this was and will always be 'a T/C property', to Pamos this had been 'the Hambis house' for almost four decades. It 'belonged' to an unmarried, childless man, and had often hosted, with its large garden, Hambis's immediate family. Pamos had grown up in that garden. He and everyone in his family thought he had an informal right of inheritance and was thus entitled to move into the Mouttagiaka property. Indeed, two days after Hambis died, Pamos, Zoi, and their two toddlers moved in, to pre-empt the TCPMA from allocating a new tenant to the property.

As the state guardian institution, the TCPMA has to make sure that no G/C household claims a T/C property for their own, and that T/C properties are maintained as they await a federal state solution to the Cyprus Problem. In light of that institutional pause, no ownership rights are allowed on T/C properties other than usufruct. The TCPMA is therefore a major agent in the Cyprus Problem and in intercommunal negotiations for the sovereignty of a 'future Cyprus'. This institutional protection of private property is done on the grounds of seeing such houses as possessions 'of the T/C community'.

The state does not intervene only as a representative of a community but does so to protect its claim on the island's future territorial shape and integrity. This 'future Cyprus' is explicitly envisioned as a bicomunal, bizonal federation, but also retains hope for the restoration of territory under Republican protection. In turn, it guarantees the return of refugees to their homes in the North.

While conventional ownership rights keep property in the kin group through inheritance, no (communal) T/C properties are meant to be part of the (individual) inheritance of the person temporarily inhabiting them. Based on an individualized understanding of property, however, Pamos and his family moved into the Mouttagiaka house. For them, the house 'had always been the Hambis house' and thus Pamos was a rightful inheritor, owing to it having been the home of a member of their extended family for over thirty-five years.

Pamos's family therefore squatted the house on the basis of a 'moral right' towards the Republic, as he told me. The state, and specifically the TCPMA, discovered the event by surprise, after a visit to the place a week after Hambis's death. They warned Pamos's family that they had to evacuate the premises. The family were eventually given a brief grace period of a week; when that expired, they were warned again. When another deadline passed with Pamos declaring himself the 'moral and legal owner' now, the TCPMA paid him and his family a fateful visit.

Three TCPMA agents accompanied by eight police officers went to the Mouttagiaka house one early afternoon in February. The TCPMA Committee Director for the Limassol municipality was present and personally oversaw a violent eviction of the occupants from the property. The Director, a middle-aged woman named Marina, explained to Pamos that he had no legal right to the house whatsoever. Pamos, disagreeing, insisted that he had 'morally claimed the place as a refugee', as well as 'the next of kin of a deceased refugee'. Standing in front of the property's door, Marina explained, in what Pamos's family considered an obtrusive and patronizing way, that the distribution of T/C houses is the sole prerogative of the TCPMA and that 'there is a long list of poor families who have been waiting years for such free accommodation'. Pamos and his family were shocked by the state's aggression, given the overwhelming presence of police officers and the Authority's strictness during the visit. He refused to let them in.

The result was havoc. Policemen stormed the house, waking up the children, who were having an afternoon nap. Pamos attempted to resist but he was met with immediate police action. Yelling about the social injustice of a 'rotten Republic', he was arrested and escorted to the police station, while Zoi was screaming and the children were crying in terror. Pamos's brother Giorgos, present at the episode, was desperate because of both his sibling's behaviour and the state's violence.

The prospective occupant of the property was also present with his family at the eviction. A right-wing working-class G/C as well, he exchanged rough words with his

peer Pamos during the police intervention. He yelled to Androulla and her son's family that he 'claimed the house from [RoC President] Nicos Anastasiades himself'. As the two families argued that he (the prospective occupant) must have had connections to be guaranteed the house over a family with infant children, he triumphantly said 'the President gave me this house'. Androulla, who had a life-long commitment to Anastasiades' party, was devastated.

Despite voting for the DHSY, the party controlling both the majority in the Republic's Assembly of Representatives and the Presidency since its establishment as the Greek Cypriot Right in 1976, Androulla decided that never again would she do so. Keeping to her promise, in the 2019 European Parliament elections, she abstained. She told all her friends about it, proclaiming that 'this state [the Republic of Cyprus] is not mine anymore. I don't belong in it'.

Androulla thought, like Pamos, that her son and his young family had a 'moral and legal right' to occupy the Mouttagiaka house when his uncle passed. When that did not happen, she took the political choice to actively dissociate herself from the DHSY (and, by association, the Republic, which she saw as a G/C-owned state). Both of these choices, connected to a mode of thinking popular among G/Cs, illuminate what I call the state/property nexus.

The nexus has many facets. As demonstrated, it mobilizes familial sentiment and solidifies the development of state actors alongside Cypriot citizens, in often conflictual situations. Therefore, it follows that the territorial and broadly political claims associated with property transcend individual decisions, especially as the state, premised on an idiom of 'community', takes property away from individual and familial planning.

The drama that unfolded at the Mouttagiaka house also shows the prominence of the Cyprus Problem as a future that haunts the present of contemporary Cypriots. The Republic's statehood relies on its recognized legitimacy and its self-proclaimed moral high ground embedded in certain state institutions, including the TCPMA 'guardianship', which protects T/C property in expectation of T/Cs' eventual return in a future united Cyprus. A similar future-driven state ideology in the North also relates to property, but with different results: property practices have long reflected the push towards partition, or at least guaranteeing two separate states under a federal umbrella. The identification of property with lost territory and its significance for future sovereignties is indeed central to both the RoC's and the 'TRNC's vision of future Cyprus, and cannot be overlooked. This situation will be further illuminated in another, related story.

'A Pandora's box'

The second ethnographic story takes us back to my friend Nicolas, a 50-year-old man who works as an accountant in a major firm in Limassol. Nicolas's dad comes from the South, but his mother is from Karavas (Turkish: Alsancak) in the North. Nicolas followed her southwards as a refugee child when he was 5 years old. His refugeehood informs his commitment to the solution of the Cyprus Problem, the so-called reunification movement, in which he is an activist.

In 2003, when the Green Line barricades were opened for the first time, he visited his family's property in Kerynia (Girne). At his family's home, he noticed that the lock on the outer door was intact, the way its original owners left it in 1974. Its current occupants, a T/C family, had been using the side door to enter the estate since they

were assigned the property in 1975. The lady of the house, when asked, told him in Cypriot Greek: come, child, it's yours (*kopiase, paidi mou, dika sou eni*).

After the visit, Nicolas started considering claiming compensation for that property. He found a T/C lawyer in the North who told him 'he had no property rights'. As his case became known in Girne, a local legal firm contacted him with a different opinion. Nicolas drove to their office from Limassol. The lawyer argued that he could sell the property directly to foreign buyers and be compensated by them. She put him in touch with potential purchasers: first an Englishman and then a German, who offered good money. The German asked that the property transfer be registered at the RoC's Land Registry in order to validate the deal. Nicolas went ahead and submitted a contract of sale at the Kerynia district's Registry in Nicosia.

No answer came, so a year later Nicolas drove to Nicosia to personally check on his application. He was told that the case of his childhood home 'was a matter of political decision and was thus part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' portfolio'. Nicolas visited the Minister and discussed the possibility of claiming expenses for his property. The politician advised him against it, as this would 'open a Pandora's box'. He noted that if his sale was to be adjudicated, many more G/Cs would want to *alienate* their properties – which was at the time unprecedented.¹¹ Validating such a transaction would, by association, accept the legitimacy of the North's polity, whose laws would underpin any transaction taking place within its territory.

While at a loss with the Republic, Nicolas was approached by the North Cyprus state in the same year, 2005. A woman who was soon after to become the President of the 'TRNC's Immovable Properties Committee (IPC)¹² phoned and told him that the compensation for his property could be granted immediately. She only asked him to tell her three things: how much he wanted for his property; in which currency; and in what country's bank account. She clearly wanted to 'capitalize on recognition', as Nicolas told me.

Specifically, concluding a transaction in landed property would *in micro* equate the recognition of the 'TRNC' as a legal sovereign authority at large. The IPC had been established only that same year to tackle the fact that the title deeds the 'TRNC' issued for G/C properties were illicit (see Navaro-Yashin 2012: 117-18). For Nicolas, accepting the transaction (stipulating the sale of property deeds) would have meant setting a precedent for the whole G/C community, and possibly for future 'TRNC'-RoC negotiations in the Cyprus Problem. On that basis, the social capital to be gained by the 'TRNC' and the moral high ground to be lost for the G/C community would have been immeasurable.

Nicolas was then faced with the option of a lucrative individual economic transaction that could translate to a political slippery slope with collective consequences for the G/C community. He was perplexed. Partly to test his exchange partners in the North, he thought of asking for £20 million. He discussed the case with his brother, who was then politically involved in the DHSY's youth wing. But his brother's involvement further complicated the case. Nicolas liaised with DHSY officials; elections were looming, and they strongly advised him against going ahead with the sale.

Two days after his series of calls to local politicians, the event described at the beginning of this article took place. Nicolas returned to his Limassol home from work to find the two black-suited, Ray-Ban-wearing agents of the KYP, the RoC's secret service, being treated to coffee by his mother-in-law in his garden. They explained that Tassos Papadopoulos, the then President of the Republic,¹³ was 'personally interested and

invested in the case'. Nicolas, enraged, told them that if Tassos was *so invested* in the case, he could *invest* in Nicolas's property himself and compensate him individually. Embittered, the agents left Nicolas's house.

Nicolas eventually applied for compensation in 2012 to the IPC; he is still waiting for an answer. Soon, he will refer the case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). After Titina Loizidou's case, the ECHR has made Turkey compensate dozens of G/C citizens for in excess of £290 million.

Nicolas's story indicates how refugee property owners often find themselves muddled up with present and future territorial claims of the two states of Cyprus, and especially the Republic's. Like the previous story of Pampos, Nicolas's adventure shows how 'community' scales state and citizen up and down in property matters. Citizen and state meet at the level of property, where their issues become entangled. Individual property issues become state matters due to their 'community' underpinning – just as state claims to territory dialogue with individual claims to land (like *oi periousies mas*). Both Nicolas's and Pampos's stories are therefore stories of the state/property nexus and its discontents. Both stories highlight the dialectical co-formation of statehood and private property, which in Cyprus takes the ethnic-cum-legal modality of the constitutional community ('G/C' property and 'T/C' property).

The state/property nexus

Anthropologists often explore the tensions among collective and/or individual conditions of property (Martin 2013). These debates share the criticism of the muddy dichotomy between individual and collective land, favouring a relational approach. In doing so, they account for emic beliefs in property's non-individualist character. What Chris Hann notes in the introduction to *Property relations* most anthropologists would be in agreement with:

[P]roperty is not an activity or a thing at all, but the rights that people hold over things which guarantee them a future 'income stream'. They 'own' only incorporeal rights, not the thing itself. Property relations are consequently better seen as social relations between people (1998: 4, original emphasis).

The relational nature of property unites findings across time and place in anthropology: whether via Gluckman's 'property defines not so much rights of persons over things, as obligations owed between persons in respect of things' (2012 [1965]: 46) or Davis's 'You cannot sue an acre: a boundary dispute is not a dispute with land but with people' (1973: 157). Such points debunk the liberal myth of property 'belonging' to 'an individual' (see also Rakopoulos 2020). Anthropological accounts, in contrast, highlight the coexistence of communal and proprietary rights (Epstein 1969: 119–20).

However, this consensus might need revisiting in contexts like Cyprus where, especially post-partition, the state and its communal emphasis are embedded in private property. Indeed, the Republic's bicomunal making renders the 'communal' aspect of property more explicit than the contexts anthropologists usually criticize: liberal theories of property that take 'the individual' in the abstract as the holder of property rights. This is not a condition of different types of property corresponding to contrasting legal regimes such as public and private, as in socialism (Verdery 2003: 50). Rather, the state promotes and assigns a communal character to land and the communal aspect is enmeshed in private property. Indeed, if we *see like the state* of the RoC (cf. J.C. Scott 1998), *all* land is community-owned and thus a stake for the state, even land belonging to one person.

Cyprus baptizes all land as belonging to one of two communities but leaves neither community outside the sovereignty of the state. This situation invites us to further think beyond individual/collective models of analysing property. The struggles and contradictions that arise of how state agents and institutions operate on the ground level of propertied citizens suggest how the state/property nexus is not a merging of dualistic categories of state and citizen. As Timothy Mitchell rightly argues (1999: 77), the elusiveness of the boundary between state and society precisely offers us a clue to the nature of the state phenomenon, a condition made more salient when ‘community’ is at stake.

Anthropologists routinely conceive of state authorities as relational projects, too. Recently, this approach has also been applied to sovereignty, with state power seen as one project of sovereignty (Wilson 2016: 8). Here, it is crucial to stress the relational threads that tie property, state, and ‘community’ if we are to grasp the process through which they constitute each other. I have shown this through the stories described, where ‘the state’ operates on the ground through the actions of functionaries embodying the Republic and in interaction with property-claiming citizens. I have therefore unpacked ‘the state’ in a twofold way: first, focusing on the actions of its functionaries, whether secret service agents (in Nicolas’s story) or custodians of communal property (in Pamos’s story); second, discursively, as citizen-proprietors invoke state institutions due to perceived injustice.

People’s relation to their land, and through it to state institutions and their claims to sovereignty, is experiential and mediated through property. Citizens articulate the state through various means: for example, levelling its activity with their experience (‘the President gave me this house’), or struggling to exercise individual legal rights to their own property (Nicolas) and denying the inalienability of communal rights by laying proprietary claims through familial long-term usage (Pamos). While citizens claim individual property rights towards homes, ‘the state’ reminds them (through house visits or house evictions) of property’s communal character. The state/property nexus is, largely, the empirical feel of the state in the immediate encounters between its functionaries and the citizenry.

The link between state and property is often captured in visions of a house and its broader ambience, especially in conflict settings. Peter Loizos (1981) notes that people cannot be separated from place, underscoring the bound unit of ‘persons-and-things’. The Cypriot ethnographic record I have drawn from confirms this, as we look to the meanings projected on the home. Indeed, Richard Zetter’s definition of the home echoes what I note above on *periousia*: ‘a living organism of relationships and traditions stretching back into the past ... a symbolic representation of an inherited order and status. The house distils the history and life of the family which is lost by enforced exile’ (1999: 12).

Zetter shows how this mythical status is constructed in order to advance an agenda of future sovereignty. These constructions by both Cypriot states (the Republic and the ‘TRNC’) operate through citizens’ living memories but can also work against their individual will. We can think of Nicolas’s futile struggle for compensation and Pamos’s perceived prerogative over the Mouttagiaka/Hambis house on the basis of his refugeehood and kinship history.

Indeed, the connections we witness are outcomes of the dynamic nature of the state/property nexus and depend on the version of the Cypriot state context at play. The communal narrative is sometimes strategically mechanized (as time has for the

Republic frozen in 1974), while on occasion it encompasses current developments (as per the ‘TRNC’ case). In Cyprus, property and state(s) as communal/ethnic categories are dialectically constituted as part of this nexus.

I do not, however, argue that the state/property nexus is unique to Cyprus. After all, the onset of political modernity relies on connecting citizens with property rights (Shachar & Hirschl 2007) – a condition that ties full circle with Androulla’s indignation and promise to never vote for the DHSY again, as the state disrupted her access to property that her family claims. The clash between state and citizens over individual-turned-communal property claims invites comparison with the historically dynamic treatment of property in states undergoing structural changes or conflict.

As the paradigm of propertied citizenship expresses an ontology itself, a way of being in the modern world (Roy 2003: 464), it follows that propertied land becomes a central stake in transitory and post-conflict environments. Generally, in conflict settings, communal land acquires a fixed meaning, what Michael Mason and Muna Dajani (2018) call ‘a political ontology of land’: that is, a sense of belonging as rootedness in a territory.

Such rootedness interacts with the shifts of history and the place of political community in these shifts. Anthropological work on land restitution has shown how apparently failed postsocialist outcomes were ‘the result of reluctance to implement policy fully and of an insistence on reproducing a status quo set of norms regarding property rights’ (Allina-Pisano 2004: 561). In post-conflict South Africa, where restitution of land rights aimed at amending wrongs of the past, both individuals and community were represented in property rights (James 2007: 12).

While not codified as such, identifying a nexus between state and property has been discussed at length by numerous anthropologists, particularly in post-conflict areas. Israel/Palestine can be compared to the Cypriot context, as in both Hebron and Nicosia ‘two state entities exercis[e] sovereignty in “their” ethnocratic parts of the city’ (Amit & Yiftachel 2016: 146). As I note in the introduction, people are pulled by differing, if overlapping, statal grids in opposite directions (Jansen 2015: 72): the ‘TRNC’-Republic sovereignty conflict on Nicolas’s own property is telling. What is more, the T/C property within the Republic’s immediate sovereign area recalls the Israeli policy of ‘Absentee Property Law’, as the rights to homes and land of Arab citizens of Israel who had ‘left their villages even for a brief time in the midst of war were deemed abandoned’ (Slyomovics 1998: 106).

These comparisons have limits, of course, as – unlike Israel – the Republic’s construction as a bicomunal state impedes its G/C population from claiming ownership of T/C homes. Oren Yiftachel’s model, premised on an ethnocratic allocation of land, focuses on settler societies (Kedar & Yiftachel 2006: 131, 142). Instead, the role ‘community’ plays in the constitutive order of the Republic of Cyprus ironically subverts an ethnocratic grab of T/C property. As the Republic forbids the squatting of T/C property by G/C citizens, we witness a Greek-Cypriot family struggling at the gates of the Mouttagiaka house. The Republic, inseparable as it is from a vision of a future state where sovereignty is shared between two communities, earmarks T/C property as ‘protected’. On the grounds of communal sovereignty as well as its own future sovereignty, ‘the state’ evicts Cypriots from the house they (illegally) squatted, showing a lack of tolerance towards informal practices, so common to state legitimacy elsewhere (Elyachar 2005: 66-7).

In Cyprus, community as an idiom of sovereignty is the missing link in the dialectical formation of state and propertied citizenry. This phenomenon has broader connotations for ethnographic journeys across state, sovereignty, and property, adding needed nuance to an understanding of their delicate and interwoven ground.

‘Community’: scaling property to state formation

In lieu of a solution to the Cyprus Problem, the reliance on property and its moral meanings shapes a key aspect of the Republic’s existence. The Republic projects itself into the future and its territorial claims operate through the micro-sovereignty of its communities’ members’ property. Especially for Greek-Cypriots, future state integration is suspended on the grounds of property demands, trapped between the maximalistic claim that ‘all refugees return to their homes’ (Demetriou 2018: 69) and, recently, the minimalistic claim of IPC compensations. Within this context, individual action over private property immediately scales up to state formation. As with individual Cypriots’ passports crossing the Green Line, the (future) Republic issuing those passports is at stake, not its citizens (Demetriou 2007; cf. Rakopoulos 2022; Rakopoulos & Fischer 2020).

Property (*periousia*) is thus not a matter of individual choice. The weight of history, with its collective and communal connotations that shape understandings of property, can mitigate the individualization that comes with owning land. Basic property rights bow before communal and (thus) statist processes of normativity; in turn, encompassing how the Republic envisions future territorial sovereignty. In that respect, *oi periousies mas* (our properties) in the North is lost territory for the G/C community, which forms part of the state’s future plans and present administration. Refugees’ experience uprooting partly as the loss of their *periousia* – a lost sovereignty experienced at a micro scale. The Republic sees its own sovereignty reflected *in micro* in each individual case of G/C private property in the North. The state/property nexus in the post-conflict domain forms on the coexistence of personal matters (refugees’ private property) and matters of state (where property is seen as communal). Such equalization of micro and state takes shape in the interaction of state institutions (the TCPMA, the IPC, the DHSY, and even the secret service) with everyday citizens through the idiom of ‘community’.

Property thus lies at the core of claims over statecraft, as it is more than a discursive formation that legitimizes state action (Hansen & Stepputat 2001). Rather, it arises as a constitutive order of statal life. For the citizens narrated here, property is the gridding desire of their citizen existence in a post-conflictual terrain of dual sovereignties. An array of moral claims is attached to this condition, informing the ways ‘communal’ citizens of the RoC (G/C and T/C) relate to their respective states as well as to the state at the other side of the Green Line.

The lessons learned here about state formation have to do with condensing the scale between citizen and state, as they merge through idioms of communal property. The community link, rather than a level in itself ‘between’ state and individual claims, is an elevator that scales state and citizen to the same level: that of property, where state and citizen’s issues become entwined. This dialectical relationship between state formation and citizens’ private rights allows us to unravel the dynamics of perpetual state formation on the ground. This observation can be used to guide studies of postcolonial and indeed post-conflict state formation and its relation to ‘private’ property elsewhere. The central role of ‘communal’ property within the state/property nexus allows us

to move beyond distinctions between individual rights and collective processes of conceptualizing land (Martin 2013; Verdery 2003). Scrutinizing 'community' allows us to better understand how it articulates both statecraft and the ways citizens negotiate their place in a world where rival statecrafts (cf. Wilson 2016) reshape what are only ostensibly 'individual' rights. In this way, Cyprus offers a case study for the collapse of categories of the person, property, and political community, as the state/property nexus forms the premise for the life of the body politic.

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NOTES

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

² The three smaller communities (Armenians, Maronites, and Latins) are formally recognized as 'religious groups'.

³ The main characters in the stories I narrate here are middle-aged men. This is due both to my own positionality as a male fieldworker in Cyprus and to the nature of property matters in the island, which are more often associated with a man in the household. This gendered aspect of property's relation to citizenship reminds us of the very history of citizenship as the realm of propertied men (see also Rakopoulos 2022).

⁴ Titina Loizidou's legal victory unsettled this, causing anxiety among T/Cs (Bryant 2014: 688). Loizidou won an historic case against Turkey at the European Court of Human Rights regarding her property in North Cyprus. Turkey ended up paying 1.5 million euros to her, not as compensation for the worth of her Kyrenia property, crucially, for the loss of its usage: that is, Loizidou never lost the title deed to her house. Interestingly, however, although Loizidou's situation is hailed as 'an ideal form of refugeehood' for Greek-Cypriots, she was never displaced herself as she lived in Nicosia during the invasion (Demetriou 2018: 97).

⁵ *Katehomena* are the 'occupied territories'. Greek Cypriots call the 'North' a 'pseudo-state' (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 100). Indeed, G/C media as well as the majority of G/Cs and Greeks use the 'pseudo' prefix very frequently to characterize the T/C state, or quotation marks for words such as 'the Minister' when these concern T/Cs (Ioannou 2020: 90).

⁶ In Lawrence Durrell's colonial apology *Bitter lemons of Cyprus*, which narrates the author's time in late 1950s Cyprus, there is a chapter on 'how to buy a house'. The author strikes an excellent deal, and opines that property matters call for 'roguery, the skill of the Levant' (Durrell 2011 [1957]: 57).

⁷ See, for instance, this characteristic article by a politician of EDEK, a centre-left G/C political party particularly sensitive on the Cyprus Issue: <https://philenews.com/f-me-apopsi/paremvaseis-ston-f/article/776470> (accessed 3 May 2022). The article reiterates the mantra that the property of the displaced is an inalienable matter of human rights and only the proprietor (the G/C community) has the right to decide over it. In this announcement of the (also polemic on the Cyprus Problem) party of the Greens, the property issue (*periousiako*) is also seen as inalienable: <https://cyprusgreens.org/imerida-stelexon-gia-to-kypriako-omilia-voulefti-giorgou-perdiki-proedrou-kinimatos-oikologon-synergasia-politon/> (accessed 3 May 2022).

⁸ *Ypiresia Diaxeirisis Toyrkokypriakon Periousion*. Crucially, the term that translates into properties is *periousies*.

⁹ *Synoikismos* is a generic term used for suburban or periurban areas built post-1974 to house refugees.

¹⁰ DHSY stands for DhmoKratikos Synagermos, 'Democratic Rally'.

¹¹ The situation has slightly changed since: by 2014, 0.5 per cent of the G/C property in the North had been sold. Because of the charged language used against such transactions by institutions (the Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus has repeatedly used the word 'traitors'), the selling process has been delayed. The Republic openly discourages transactions and institutionally hinders them. We do not have official data of recent transactions. However, my enquiries with pre-eminent G/C lawyers working on the subject reveal that still only a tiny fragment of the population pursues compensation by giving away title deeds. The IPC itself talks of 1,213 claims settled outside court in its fifteen years of existence (data from 2020), which still is a small fragment of all properties in the North.

¹² The IPC of North Cyprus is an official internal legal remedy according to the European Court of Human Rights. Since 2005, only after the process through it is exhausted can someone refer themselves to the Court.

¹³ Papadopoulos was a conservative nationalist, albeit officially a centrist.

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De la propriété comme une souveraineté *in micro* : le nexus État/propriété et la « question de Chypre »

Résumé

Le présent article montre que la propriété foncière peut être un exercice de souveraineté de l'État *in micro*. L'auteur affirme qu'elle est étroitement liée à la notion d'État et que le concept de « communauté » offre un prisme à travers lequel examiner cette relation. À Chypre, le caractère « communal » des propriétés

transcende souvent les droits de propriété individuels. Une maison appartient non pas à un individu, mais à des personnes en leur capacité de membres des collectivités constitutionnelles de la République, soit chypriotes grecques, soit chypriotes turques. En se concentrant sur les revendications morales et politiques qui résultent de cette prémisse, l'auteur montre comment les Chypriotes réfugiés rencontrent et reformulent l'État dans diverses institutions en faisant valoir leurs droits sur des propriétés (*periousia*), que ce soit les leurs ou celles d'autrui. En conséquence, il affirme qu'une réflexion par le biais de la « communauté » aide à comprendre les liens entre propriété et pouvoir de l'État (ce qu'il appelle le « nexus État/propriété ») et que cela permet aussi de mieux appréhender la notion d'État dans le contexte post-conflictuel.

Theodoros Rakopoulos is Associate Professor in the Social Anthropology Department, University of Oslo. He is author of *From clans to co-ops: confiscated mafia land in Sicily* (Berghahn Books, 2017) and editor of *The global life of austerity* (Berghahn Books, 2018). His forthcoming book provisionally titled *Passport island: selling citizenship in Cyprus and beyond* (Manchester University Press, 2023) is an ethnography of the global market for passports and the commodification of citizenship.

Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo, Postbox 1091 Blindern, Moltke Moes vei 31, 0317 Oslo, Norway. theodoros.rakopoulos@sai.uio.no; trakopoulos@gmail.com; Theodoros.rakopoulos@sai.uio.no