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**VARIETIES OF ETHNIC POLITICS  
AND ETHNICITY DISCOURSE**

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## VARIETIES OF ETHNIC POLITICS AND ETHNICITY DISCOURSE

Jan Nederveen Pieterse

In original Greek usage *ethnos* refers to nation and *ethnikos* to heathen, or 'others'. Taken in this sense the contemporary wave of ethnic politics is a politics of assertion on the part of 'others' protesting their subordination or exclusion by the nation. On the other hand, 'ethnicity' is now also stretched to refer to the cultural politics of dominant groups. Thus it refers both to emancipation and domination. This is not new. Nationalism has had a similar double connotation, with the Janus faces of a liberatory meaning as in national liberation, and domination, as in chauvinism, jingoism. One distinction runs between offensive or imperialist nationalism and defensive or anti-imperialist nationalism. Many of the nationalisms that emerged out of decolonization have since turned into forms of domination of internal 'others'. It is meaningful that the contemporary wave of ethnic politics comes at a time when the era of the nation is past its peak. In a broad way we can interpret contemporary ethnic politics as a continuation of the dialectics of empire and emancipation in a finer print of history, moving on from the *national* to the *group* level, and as such part of an overall global dialectics of domination and emancipation.

That ethnic identification often follows state or nation formation, rather than the other way round, is a common observation.

'Ethnicities' ... are largely the product, rather than the foundation, of nation-states. ... The ever more powerful structures of central state control - be they colonial or autochthonous, imperial or national - are what generate and motivate the new *need* for ethnic autonomy, and even, in many cases, the actual sense of ethnic identity on which the latter is predicated. (Guideri and Pellizi 1988: 7-8)

Instances where state formation preceded nation formation are numerous, particularly in the postcolonial world. In addition, many societies are multinational in composition. In such cases, state-led efforts at national integration and development from above may provoke ethnic mobilization. This encompasses ethnic politics in the West, such as emancipation movements of African Americans and native Americans, and regional autonomy movements in Europe.

Ethnicity can no longer be dismissed on the premises of modernization theory or marxism for these paradigms themselves are in question. Neither can ethnicity be taken at face value: because of its hydraheaded character, because to do so would yield an archipelago of particularisms, and because there is 'life after ethnicity'. If ethnicity in one sense represents a repudiation of false universalism which paraded as the universal subject but was in reality stratified and exclusionary, what then emerges on the horizon *beyond* ethnicity? What would be the points of reference for a *new* universalism that starts out from cultural pluralism?

The varieties of nationalism are part of common understanding: now we must come to terms with the varieties of ethnicity. Ethnic identity formation must be addressed in relation to existing cultural hierarchies, the state, and modernization. This is the programme of this reflection, which is a deconstruction of ethnicity as a 'lumping' concept while scanning the sky for 'life after ethnicity'.

### **Global context**

First, before going in, let's take a walk around the neighbourhood. While there is a tendency to approach ethnicity from within, an approach from without may be more fruitful, considering that ethnic politics are profoundly affected by macro processes. Thus, some of the general dynamics underlying the contemporary wave of ethnic politics include the following.

*Postnationalism*, or a shift of allegiance from the nation to units or networks smaller or larger than the nation, generally on account of diminishing returns from nationalism. Also dependency theory, which was state-centered and politically premised on Third World nationalism, is past its peak. What may also be at issue are specific concerns such as regional uneven development and, accordingly, attempts to renegotiate access to state resources. If ethnic politics takes the form of micronationalism, then it's not a matter of postnationalism but post state-nationalism.

*Retreat of the state*, due to the general crisis of development and to globalization under the sign of neoliberalism and deregulation. This may be interpreted as a general de-centering of the state, or the centre cannot hold.

*Global recession*. Specifically, ethnic politics may be correlated with a move away

from export oriented production at a time of world market downturn, declining commodity prices, or disadvantageous terms of exchange, toward domestic oriented production or subsistence economy.

*Post Cold War politics.* The great political ideologies have been gradually waning for some time, resulting in global and local political and discursive realignments. Thus in Angola, Unita no longer follows the Cold War schema of anti-communism but mobilizes in the name of 'authenticity' and in effect, along ethnic, regional, rural-urban lines (Birmingham 1993). In South Africa, Inkatha underwent a similar career shift. In social science, a notable reorientation is the cultural turn.

*Democratization.* Ethnic politics may represent a deepening of democracy as a mobilization of hitherto passive, alienated constituencies in reaction to regional uneven development or internal colonialism. For instance, when indigenous peoples, who had been passive in earlier rounds of nation building, assert their rights. Ethnicization may also be a consequence of a shift to multiparty democracy; conversely, it may be used and manipulated as a means to sabotage multiparty democracy, as in Kenya recently.

These overall dynamics work out differently in emphasis, degree of intensity and combinations in different contexts, and indeed ethnic politics is but one in a range of responses.

### **Ethnic identity formation**

The extremes on the continuum of views in the current debate on ethnicity are primordialism and instrumentalism. Primordialism is the essentialist view of ethnicity in which ethnic groups are taken as givens. In the familiar 'tribal model' 'tribes' are viewed as an archaic reality underlying modernity, resurfacing when modernization fails or cracks. This kind of perspective has been popular in the media and also predominant in social science, as in plural society theory. It is the basis of a fundamentally pessimistic view of multiethnic societies.

Lately this view has made place for the notion of the constructed or invented nature of ethnicity, or ethnicity as an imagined community, as politics (Sollors 1989). But, what then is the logic governing the process of construction or invention and what are the political consequences of this view? The most extreme view is to treat ethnicity as another form of resource mobilization. Ethnic groups then are a form of interest groups. An advantage of this view is that it takes distance from the essentializing claims of identity politics; the limitation of the rational choice approach is that it underrates or ignores the *cultural* character of ethnicity and the importance of symbolic resources, which are all flattened to economic choices.

A limitation of much current literature on ethnicity is that it critiques the primordialist view without taking the next step of theorizing the politics of subject formation. Paul Brass's

*Ethnicity and Nationalism* does present a theory of ethnic identity formation and mobilization, in terms of elite competition. In a nutshell,

The cultural forms, values, and practices of ethnic groups become political resources for elites in competition for political power and economic advantage. (1991: 15) Ethnic communities are created and transformed by particular elites in modernizing and in postindustrial societies undergoing dramatic social change. (1991: 25)

The settings in which ethnic identity formation takes place range from modernizing to postmodern societies. What they have in common is that the existing situation involves an ethnic hierarchy in place in the form of a 'cultural division of labour', involving alignments between political elites and political forces such as mass parties and religious authorities. Next, social and economic changes or new encroachments by the center 'may precipitate new center-locality conflicts in which issues of language and religion come into play again and provide bases for ethnic and political mobilization' (1991: 275).

What is attractive is that Brass goes beyond the critique of primordialism to formulate a theory of ethnicization. On the other hand, the emphasis on elites, the elite model of ethnicization, implies a neglect of subaltern agency and a tendency to take elites as givens, rather than examining the process of in-group contestation through which elites come into being and to the foreground. The implication is that subalterns are manipulated and duped by elites, which is a variation on the theme of 'false consciousness', presents too passive a view of subalterns and simplifies the process of subject formation. Combining the processes of identity formation and elite formation in the context of ethnicization and mobilization would produce a richer perspective.

That the role of elites may be more complex emerges from an analysis of ethnic mobilization in 'The development of political opposition in Taiwan, 1986-1989' by Fu-chang Wang (1992). Taking a social movement approach, Wang distinguishes two forms of ethnicity: ethnic competition and ethnic enclosure. The Taiwanese who are assimilated into Taiwan's mainstream political culture dominated by the mainland Chinese engage in ethnic competition and in the process experience discrimination on ethnic grounds. This makes ethnicity *salient* to them, so that in effect they experience a double process of assimilation *and* ethnic identity formation. According to Wang, this has been relevant for the start up of ethnic mobilization, the phase of grievance formation. Next, political opposition in ethnic terms spread to the Taiwanese enclosed within the ethnic experience - mostly rural, with less education and less mobility - to whom therefore ethnicity has not been not salient ('the fish don't talk about the water'), but is *made salient* under the influence of the political protest actions initiated by the assimilated Taiwanese. This process has been relevant to the diffusion stage of ethnic mobilization.<sup>1</sup> Hence there are two moments of ethnic identity formation:



first in the context of ethnic competition during the process of assimilation, next in the course of ethnic mobilization itself. The assimilated members, the initiators of the movement, according to Wang, would tend to be moderates, because to them ethnicity remains optional, while the nonassimilated members, once they have been recruited from the ethnic enclosure, tend to radicalize the movement.

Accordingly, different elites may be involved in ethnic mobilization: a bicultural elite and, in addition, an ethnic enclosure leadership that emerges in the process of ethnic mobilization. Hence the notion of 'elite' tout court is too narrow and static, for what about subaltern social movement leadership?

We can further differentiate between successful and unsuccessful assimilation and argue that unsuccessful assimilation fosters ethnic identification, and hence can lead to ethnic mobilization, in an attempt to renegotiate access to resources and public space on a collective basis. Ethnic identification and mobilization, then, are strategies to achieve collectively what one could not achieve individually. In that respect they parallel class solidarities; they differ in that they are confined to a particularist agenda, while class politics carries a universalist component of social justice. Throughout, the label 'ethnicity' covers a wide and fluid variety of notions and experiences.

### Varieties of ethnic experience

When shooting Westerns, use real Indians if possible; but if Indians are not available, use Hungarians.

Old Hollywood manual on lighting (Weinberger 1992: 31)

The static nature of ethnicity discourse is generally disabling: ethnic identity comprises many different modes along a wide spectrum ranging from objective markers to subjective identifications.

The language commonly used in ordinary as well as social science accounts is of the *persistence* and *resilience*, *survival* and *revival* of ethnicity. This is deceptive because of its essentialist logic, the assumption of continuity and sameness, suggesting dichotomies of tradition and modernity, old and new, in the process concealing the modernity and newness of ethnic responses. This discourse implies that ethnic sentiments and identifications are somehow primordial. It overlooks and underplays how ethnicity changes, so that what is happening is not the reassertion of an old identity but the creation of a new one.

Thus Anthony Smith (1992) seeks to explain 'Why ethnic groups survive'. He finds that 'myths of election' are most strategic in the reproduction of ethnicity: it is 'chosen peoples' that survive. This is a legitimate focus and characteristic of Smith's general interest in the nexus between ethnicity and nationalism. But there are problems with this outlook:

there is a tendency to reify ethnicity; it is ethnicity that becomes the independent variable rather than the changing structure of political opportunity. The conditions under which 'myths of election' become salient are not specified. While highlighting the continuity of ethnicity it overlooks the varied and changing nature of ethnic identity. It may be more significant then to look at the *reconstruction* than the *reproduction* of ethnicity.

Ethnic markers have variable functions. Paul Brass makes a distinction between *ethnic category* or group - defined by objective cultural markers such as language, dialect, dress, custom, religion or race - and *ethnic community* or *ethnicity*, in which cultural markers consciously serve for internal cohesion and differentiation from other groups. 'Ethnicity is to ethnic category what class consciousness is to class.' (1991: 19) The third notion is *ethnonationalism*, which is the politicization of ethnic community.<sup>2</sup> The significant steps in the process of ethnicization then are ethnic identity formation, or the step from ethnic category to ethnic community, and ethnonationalism, or the ethnic community politicized.

This taxonomy is useful but also problematic: if ethnicity only refers to ethnic identity or subjective ethnic consciousness, is it appropriate to call groups merely differentiated by objective cultural markers *ethnic categories*? Should these not be simply termed *cultural groups* which can *become* ethnic following the process of ethnicization? Furthermore, *ethnic community* is a static concept: there are more experiences of 'ethnicity' than through community. Besides, community is a homogenizing and contested concept generally (Young 1990).

Brass distinguishes three sites of conflict: *within* ethnic groups, *between* groups, and in relation to the state. He rightly points out that most treatments of ethnicity focus on the second form of conflict and neglect the others, particularly conflict *within* groups, as a consequence of their reified, objectified and therefore homogenizing view of ethnic groups. What is to be demonstrated - ethnic identity formation or the degree of 'ethnicization' - is taken as given. The negotiation of ethnicity in relation to other forms of difference - such as class, gender, age, place, ideology - is taken for granted. But, by equating ethnicity with *ethnic community*, Brass himself privileges a homogenizing approach to ethnicity.

Ethnic identity itself involves considerable variation. One variation is the shifting nature of identities under the same label. Thus Sinhalese identity in Sri Lanka used to be a matter of language first, religion second; but after independence and in the wake of agitation by the Buddhist sangha, a new identity developed in which religion was central and language secondary: 'Where previously to be Sinhalese implied being Buddhist, now to be Buddhist implies being Sinhalese' (Brass 1991: 31). The new inflection changes the way group boundaries are drawn.

Ethnicity is often associated with place or origin and claims to common descent. But the actual variety of cultural markers is much wider. Besides, the salience of cultural markers

shifts over time. According to Brass, 'the choice of the leading symbol of differentiation depends upon the interests of the elite group that takes up the ethnic cause' (1991: 30). If it is a religious elite, religion will be the first and language the second symbol of differentiation. Next they will try to promote multisymbol congruence through education and publishing religious pamphlets in the vernacular.

Some forms of ethnic identity may in fact represent, not the hardening but a weakening of ethnic boundaries. In a study of ethnic identity in the United States, Alba finds that among white Americans objective ethnic markers and differences - of education, residence, occupation, marriage - have been steadily and irreversibly eroding, while there has been a simultaneous increase in ethnic phenomena such as media broadcasts in ethnic mother tongues and ethnic studies courses at colleges and universities, and a growing societal sensitivity to matters of ethnicity (1990: 16).

But it is not the same 'old' ethnicity. Ethnicity has become increasingly voluntary. It is no longer a working and lower class style. On the contrary, among the third generation of immigrants, 'the more highly educated ... may be more likely to identify ethnically than those with less education' (1990: 29). This has also been referred to as *symbolic ethnicity* (Gans 1979). 'Symbolic ethnicity is concerned with the symbols of ethnic cultures rather than with the cultures themselves' (Alba 1990: 306). It may find expression in ethnic activities of an occasional character which are acceptable in a multiethnic setting.

This points to 'the underlying transformation of ethnicity in the lives of white Americans' (1990: 292). First, what has remained or returned is ethnic *identity*, or the subjective importance of ethnic origins and affiliation. Second, for most white Americans ethnic identification has become volitional, situationally specific and shallow. Ethnic identification is most salient among Italians, Jews and Poles, and least among those originating from northern and western Europe. Third, the privatization of ethnic identity - 'a reduction of its expression to largely personal and family terms' (1990: 300). Fourth, among third generation immigrants ethnicity has become a form of cultural capital, so that ethnic identity rises along with educational level. Hence the multiethnic chic. Fifth, this would point to the formation of a new ethnic group of 'European Americans'. In the process, the very content of 'ethnic culture' changes. Thus,

the ancestors of people who wear the 'Kiss me, I'm Italian' T-shirt never thought of themselves as such - but as Sicilian, or Calabrian, or Neapolitan - and would be mystified by their 'Italian-American' children. (Delbanco 1992: 84)

Likewise the Italian food served to visitors at home may be fashionable north Italian cuisine quite unfamiliar to their ancestors. Ethnicity, then, is an unstable and contested category. Alberto Melucci finds that ethnic nationalism contains

a plurality of meanings that cannot be reduced to a single core. It contains ethnic identity, which is a weapon of revenge against centuries of discrimination and new forms of exploitation; it serves as an instrument for applying pressure in the political market; and it is a response to needs for personal and collective identity in highly complex societies. (1989: 90)

We can add to this the political economy of ethnicity, as part of the political economy of identity. Ethnic entrepreneurialism is as old as the world's trading minorities and mercantile diasporas. In the two main varieties of trading minorities and ethnic enclaves, ethnic entrepreneurialism has become an accumulation strategy in 'world cities' and globalized environments (Waldinger et al 1990; Light and Bonacich 1988). Ethnic association sustains mutual aid, savings clubs, forms of community self-help, and market niches.

Moreover, in the era of the multiethnic chic, ethnicity *itself* can be commodified, identity turned into a mercantile ploy. Thus, a trader of mixed native American descent active in the 'Indian business' in the US, muses that 'It would be real interesting if it turned out that all Indians are "fake"', and observes,

The media began looking at the Indian fad about seven years ago. Dealers and collectors in New York went directly from the African fad to the Indian fad. And the funny thing is that African 'trade beads' are now passed off as Indian 'trade beads'. (Steiner 1976: 209)

From the entrepreneurial point view, ethnicity can be a chameleon strategy:

The minds of the Indians operate so that they can be Indian when they want to, or white when it's profitable, or Chicano when it's necessary. They can do whatever does them the most good. (Steiner 1976: 211)

On the other extreme of ethnic identity discourse are the claims made by ethnic and ethnonationalist movements that speak a language of the politics of blood. This may be updated in a language of DNA. In the words of the native American poet John Trudell: 'genetic light, from the other side'. Ethnic identification may be taken to the point of ethnic fundamentalism. Class and national mobilization refer to universalist ethics of egalitarianism and democracy as part of their horizon, but ethnic mobilization *per se* has a particularist agenda only. It may take the form of cultural polarization, stressing the unbridgeable gap of cultural habitus, as in the discourse of négritude and Afrocentrism (Asante 1988). Accordingly there may be a fundamental affinity between racism and racism-in-reverse. As long as anti-racism follows the logic of binary opposition, the current is the same, only the polarity changes. For instance, there is a definite family relationship between Nazi racism and négritude, as Léopold Senghor conceded:

Unconsciously, by osmosis and reaction at the same time, we spoke like Hitler and the Colonialists, we advocated the virtues of the blood. (in Hymans 1971:

71)

In Asian American discussions of ethnicity, Lisa Lowe observes on the one hand 'the desire for an identity represented by a fixed profile of ethnic traits, and at another, challenges to the very notions of identity and singularity which celebrate ethnicity as a fluctuating composition of differences, intersections, and incommensurabilities' (1991: 27). Ethnicity, then, is an unstable category: as a constructed or imagined community, like the nation, its logic and truth is that of imagination, and imagination is a social practice. Ethnicity is a plural and contested category, shifting in-between the comforts and limitations of enclosure ethnicity and the contradictory pressures of competition ethnicity.

Ethnic imageries are situational and highly contextual. Different modes of ethnicization take place in the context of colonialism, postcolonial development, industrial society, and globalization. Factors of particular significance are ethnicities-in-relation and the role of the state, both interacting with the dynamics of modernization.

### **Ethnicities-in-relation**

This concerns an obvious point - that ethnicization is part of a chain reaction; and a subtle point - that in many situations, new subjects are termed 'ethnic' whereas established subjects or the dominant group remain outside the field of vision. This is again the difference between *ethnos*, nation and *ethnikos*, others. This is a point made by Ella Shohat which, though it belongs to the context of American cinema, is also of wider interest:

The ... assumption that some films are 'ethnic' whereas others are not is ultimately based on the view that certain groups are ethnic whereas others are not. The marginalization of 'ethnicity' reflects the imaginary of the dominant group which envisions itself as the 'universal' or the 'essential' American nation, and thus somehow 'beyond' or 'above' ethnicity. The very word *ethnic*, then, reflects a peripheralizing strategy premised on an implicit contrast between 'norm' and 'other', much as the term *minority* often carries with it an implication of minor, lesser, or subaltern. (1991: 215)

Inscribed then in the terminology of ethnicity is a coded relationship to power. Decoding this relationship must be the first step in the analysis.

With respect to the process of ethnogenesis an important starting point is that ethnicity is frequently imposed and that what often precedes it is a process of *othering* on the part of a dominant group. What is at issue is the 'ethnic' character of the centre, the dominant group and cultural alignment, the canon. Accordingly, ethnic identity may derive not from 'roots' but from politics of domination and exclusion, imposed through labeling and legislation from above and subsequently internalized. Hence it makes sense to first consider ethnic strategies of domination.

In the West, the 'study of whiteness' should *precede* the analysis of ethnic movements because these are reactions in a field already ethnically defined - though from the point of view of the dominant group this ethnic character is usually perceived as national culture. Stuart Hall observes that 'ethnicity in the form of a culturally constructed sense of Englishness and a particularly closed, exclusive and regressive form of English national identity, is one of the core characteristics of British racism today' (quoted in Parry 1991).

This is also the question of 'whiteness as an absent centre' (Pajaczkowska and Young 1992) - absent due to the denial of imperialism. A sizable part of western imperialism and colonialism can be interpreted in terms of ethnic or racial strategy - the White Man's Burden. Besides, there are specific episodes of racial or ethnic mobilization from above, such as political antisemitism and the ideology of Anglo-Saxonism.<sup>3</sup> Generally it is important to first problematize the dominant cultural ethos: to examine whiteness as a constructed identity (Kovel 1970). In *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991) Roediger takes up the social construction of race and the 'struggle for whiteness' by the Irish and other immigrants in the United States. In colonial settler societies, in the Americas, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Israel or Taiwan, the relationship between *ethnos* and *ethnikos* is more obvious.

Conversely, this means that *ethnikos*, ethnicity is first defined by *ethnos*, the nation. Thus, 'it was the European who created the Indian' (Knight 1990: 75). The category 'American Indian' and the politics of native American nationalism owe their existence to the expanding frontier and the policy of Indian Removal.

There is, in parentheses, no clear division between race and ethnicity. The common distinction is that 'race' primarily refers to somatic differences while ethnicity refers to a combination of cultural (language, religion), place (region, territory), descent (claim of common descent) differences, along with some degree of somatic difference. But since 'race' also sprawls over into culture, the difference is a matter of degree rather than principle: the degree to which differences in somatic attributes play a part in the social construction of difference.

Ethnicity implies a relationship. The construction of ethnicity takes place through a mutual labeling process: 'This labeling, the mutual process of identity construction, happens at ethnic boundaries, and both affects and is affected by the economic and political positions of groups.' (di Leonardo 1984: 23)

For a long time most western countries have been 'stable' in terms of ethnic relations. Ethnicity occupied a marginal, often decorative status on the periphery of a stable institutional and cultural mainstream. In the United States,

The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning

that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. (Hooks 1992: 21)

This is the familiar situation of a stable core of WASP hegemony with a sprinkling of 'ethnic neighbourhoods' available for 'slumming' for spicy variety. Thus, 'Little Italy' can be consumed as a tourist commodity, complete with local colour and ethnic atmosphere (di Leonardo 1984: 18). For some time, also in the United States, this core-periphery relationship is no longer stable due to a host of factors including demographic, economic and cultural changes. That WASP hegemony is on the wane and can no longer be taken for granted (Brookhiser 1991) explains the ferocity of the battles over 'political correctness' and the multicultural curriculum. Ethnicization here refers to the renegotiation of hegemony.

### **Ethnocracies**

In many societies the state is an instrument of domination by privileged ethnic groups who engage in a form of 'cultural despotism'. The modern state, according to Hechter (1975), is an upholder of a cultural division of labour that distributes valued jobs and economic development unevenly.

'Monocultural control of the state apparatus' (Mayall and Simpson 1992: 15), or ethnocracy, comes in many varieties.<sup>4</sup> The ethnicization of the state is a familiar process in many countries North and South. We can differentiate among ethnocracies by majority or minority, stable or unstable ethnocracies, and democratic ethnocracies such as 'Herrenvolk democracy' and even 'ethnic democracy'.

The United States has been analyzed as a Herrenvolk democracy (Van den Berghe 1978). This momentum is apparent in the difference between the American Declaration of Independence, which is universalist and inclusive within a patriarchal framework ('All men'), and the Constitution, which is particularist and exclusive ('We the people') (Ringer 1983). South African Apartheid and its construction of racial and ethnic identities from occupational and political niches to homelands is a Herrenvolk democracy by minority. Israel has been described as an 'ethnic democracy', combining ethnic dominance by Ashkenazi Jews with political and civil rights for Sephardim and Israeli Arabs (Smootha and Hanf 1992).

A brief, incomplete panorama runs as follows. Minority ethnocracies in the Middle East include Syria (Alawites) and Jordan (Hashemite monarchy supported by Bedouins), while Turkey (Turkish Muslims over Kurds) and Egypt (Muslims over Copts) are stable majority ethnocracies. Iraq (Sunni Arabs over Shi'ites and Kurds) is an unstable quasi-majority ethnocracy. Stable majority ethnocracies in Asia include Indonesia (Javanese Muslims), Malaysia (Malays) and Singapore, while unstable majority ethnocracies include Sri Lanka (Sinhalese), the Philippines and Burma. Taiwan is an unstable minority ethnocracy of mainland Chinese. Stable ethnocracies in Africa are Burundi (Tutsi domination) and

unstable ones include Rwanda (Hutus challenged by Tutsis), Ethiopia, Sudan, Chad, Uganda, Cameroon, Senegal, Mauretania.

Several states practice some form of ethnic coalition government either by ethnic juggling or more institutionalized arrangements (Kenya, Zambia, Nigeria, Ghana). The most institutionalized arrangement is consociationalism or government by a cartel of elites. The Netherlands during the era of pillarization (1917-1960s), Belgium (recently federalized) and Austria used to be classic instances of consociationalism, but presently the main remaining instance is Lebanon (1943-75 and 1989- ) (Smootha and Hanf 1992).

That ethnocratic minorities tend to be insecure goes without saying, but a different problem is that of the *insecure majority*. When in Sri Lanka from independence in 1948 Sinhalese hegemony was established politically (ruling party in parliament) and symbolically (the lion on the flag), it was a reaction to the relative lead Tamils had gained under British colonialism through education and in administration. The perception of Indian support in Tamil Nadu for the Tamils also played a part in making the Sinhalese feel insecure. What ensued was the further ethnicization of the state in the recruitment to the bureaucracy and armed forces, the victory of the SLFP, the Sinhala Only Act, ethnic riots instigated from above, and the role of ethno-merchants. Prior to independence the Tamil cultural identity movement, like the Sinhala cultural revival, was primarily anti-imperialist, but under the circumstances it gradually evolved into an ethnonationalist and ultimately separatist movement.

In India, militancy and religious ethnonationalism in the Punjab and Kashmir have been preceded by a process of ethnicization within the Indian party system. Leading parties including the Congress I played the communal card and leant over towards mobilizing majority Hindu identity as a prop for electoral support in unstable constituencies in north India. (Rupesinghe and Kothari 1989)

It has been argued that, in general, ethnic mobilization in postcolonial societies can turn into secessionism under the following conditions: if the ethnic groups have been treated differently within the same territory under colonial rule; if the postcolonial government imposes monocultural rule; and if there is support within the regional environment for the secessionists (Mayall and Simpson 1992: 9).

What happened in Yugoslavia since the demise of Tito and along with the erosion of communism as the hegemonic ideology, has been the gradual regionalization and ethnicization of politics generally and the ethnicization of the federal state by Serbian interests. What fueled Serbian expansionism was that, although a majority, they felt insecure: the second Yugoslav state, like the first, was based on Serbian hegemony, but there were also accusations of the subjugation of Serbs. (Feffer 1992)

Economic factors such as uneven regional development and competition over



government resources, especially government jobs, of course often play a significant part. One school views ethnic competition for state power and state resources as the key to ethnic group formation.

The state is itself the greatest prize and resource, over which groups engage in a continuing struggle in societies that have not developed stable relationships among the main institutions and centrally organized social forces.  
(Brass 1991: 275)

But as a generalization the deprivation thesis is too simple. Also because the economic argument frequently cuts the other way: often the economically advanced and prosperous areas seek secession, as in the case of the Punjab (wheat bowl of India), Kashmir (tourism), Biafra (oil), south Sudan (oil), Shaba (mining), Eritrea (infrastructure). What may be at issue then is the degree of political control: 'it is being shut out from political power which is decisive, rather than the presence, or absence, of economic resources in and of themselves' (Mayall and Simpson 1992: 19).

### **Ethnicity and modernization**

One might argue that the theory of ethnicization in terms of elite competition is more concerned with the *how* than the *why* of ethnic politics. Different in emphasis is Michael Hechter's model of internal colonialism. In brief, his argument is that 'The spatially uneven wave of modernization over state territory creates relatively advanced and less advanced groups' (1975: 9). The superordinate group seeks to stabilize its advantages by institutionalizing the existing stratification system, in the form of a cultural division of labour, which contributes to ethnic identification and ethnic solidarities among groups.

In this argument, modernization and its uneven spread is part of the underlying cause of cultural difference. This alone puts the modernization discussion on a different footing. The next question is, what then is the effect of ongoing modernization? Whereas the postwar modernization literature posited a zero-sum relationship between 'tradition' and 'modernity', now it is often recognized that 'modernization intensifies communal conflict':

The expansion of markets and improved communications increases contact and generates competition among communal groups. As people aspire to the same social and economic rewards, competition intensifies and communal solidarities become an important - often the most important - vehicle for mutual support and promotion, especially in urban areas. The expanding role of the state invites and even requires groups to mobilize for collective action to struggle for their share of the benefits available from government and for political access, cultural rights, and economic opportunities. ... The competition generated by economic development thus politicizes ethnic

pluralism and makes it even more salient than in earlier periods. According to this perspective, modernization does not erode communal solidarities, it modernizes them and converts them into more-effective instruments of group defense, promotion, and combat. (Esman and Rabinovich 1988: 15).

This assessment has been borne out in different ways in many areas, such as Indonesia (Wertheim 1978) and the Middle East (Esman and Rabinovich 1988). Accordingly, ethnicization and ethnic conflict are *part* of the process of modernization. This means a complete departure from the assimilation point of view. Hence economic development and modernization may evoke ethnicization. Modernity and ethnicity coexist very well. Development does not eliminate ethnicity but makes for its refiguration. Different modes of modernization and development produce different forms of ethnic association and mobilization.

Malaysia and the government policy favouring the 'Bumiputra' is a case in point. Preferential treatment of the Bumiputra or 'sons of the soil' as against the Chinese minority, has been part of a state-led accumulation strategy of building an ethnonational bourgeoisie, going together with a Pacific Rim oriented 'Look East' policy (Lee 1990; Ibrahim 1989).

In Yugoslavia, both uneven modernization (more advanced in Croatia and Slovenia) and, on the other hand, also the lack of modernization is held responsible for instigating ethnic conflicts through the process of 'scapegoating' (Flere 1992: 263).

Rajni Kothari relates ethnicity in India to the 'dialectic of development': 'ethnicity becomes a ground for reassessing the cultural, economic and political impacts of developmentalism' (1988: 214). 'Instead of disappearing, ethnic identities harden as a combination/ convergence of three trends' (1988: 214): viz., developmentalism as culture, as economics, and 'in the role of electoral politics in dividing up the development cake' (1988: 217).<sup>5</sup>

In Kothari's perspective, ethnicity has the single meaning of *ethnikos*. In his discussion of postcolonial developments in sub-Saharan Africa, Shaw differentiates between different forms of ethnicity. In Africa, according to Shaw, ethnicity has changed form 'from ethnic aggrandisement in the 1960s to ethnic fragmentation in the 1980s' (1986: 590).<sup>6</sup> Focusing on the political economy of ethnicity, Shaw compares two situations: sustained growth, as in Nigeria in the 1970s, and economic contraction, as in Most Seriously Affected countries such as Ghana or Uganda. Sustained growth produces a mixed-sum situation in which patron-client relations work and ethnic identity is accordingly reinforced: 'Factional ethnic politics are seen to work', there is a "'trickle down" of ethnic association' (598-9). Negative growth produces a zero-sum situation in which patron-client networks break down, and therefore one would expect class consciousness to develop. The contracting economies, however, tend to witness ruralization: 'a retreat from urban decline to rural survival in ethnic

homelands' (591). Accordingly, Shaw distinguishes between an 'old' and 'new' ethnicity:

In only the few expanding economies will the 'old' ethnicity of patronage remain a dominant factor, whereas in the many contracting countries, the 'new' ethnicity of survival may become prevalent. (602)

Thus in both situations, of growth and contraction, ethnicity is reinforced, ethnicization takes place, but they are different kinds of ethnicity: varying from urban patronage politics to rural retreat. Accordingly, the relationship between development and ethnicity is highly complex. Ethnicity is not a stable category but contingent, and development and modernization are likewise contingent and contested concepts. We can differentiate between successful and failed, even and uneven development, centre and local dynamics, growth and contraction. Uneven modernization can be both a cause and effect of ethnicization. A cause because it fosters group stratification; an effect because superordinate groups seek to institutionalize their advantage and discriminate against 'others', thus deepening ethnic cleavages. Shifting centre-local relations destabilize the cultural division of labour and in the process may both reinforce and refigure ethnic associations. Meanwhile ethnicity itself changes character across this range of situations.

Reviewing the different types of ethnic politics discussed, we can roughly distinguish the following clusters of varieties of ethnic politics.

**Regional autonomy movements/ ethnic conflicts (South).** Africa: Angola, Chad, Cameroon, Ethiopia (Omoros, Tigray), Nigeria, Senegal (Casamance), Zaire (Katanga/Shaba).

Dynamics: Weakening state due economic crisis, deregulation. Monocultural state control. Rural/ urban disparities and regional uneven development. Differential treatment of regions under colonialism. Post cold war realignments. Modes: Territorial, economic, political, cultural interests.

**Ethnonationalism (South).** Asia: India (Kashmir, Punjab, Assam). Sri Lanka (Tamil Eelam). Indonesia (East Timor, West Irian, Aceh, Moluccas). Philippines (Moros). China (Tibet). Africa: Sudan (South).

Dynamics: Monocultural state control. Differential treatment under colonialism. Support for secession in the regional environment. Modes: Regional micronationalism. Territorial, economic, political, cultural interests.

**Indigenous peoples movements.** Asia: India - Adivasi, Nayar. Sri Lanka - Veddas. Malaysia - Iban, Orang asli in East Malaysia. Myanmar, Laos, Thailand - hill tribes. Japan - Ainu. Americas: Native Americans. Africa: South Africa - San. Central Africa - Twa. Mahgreb - Berbers. Australia: Aborigines. New Zealand: Maoris.

Dynamics: Penetration by world market and multinational capitalism. Ecological concerns over land, water, timber, mining. Monocultural state control, marginalization,

exploitation and exclusion. Modes: Territorial, economic, political, cultural interests.

**Regional autonomy movements in Europe.** UK - Scotland. Spain - Basques, Catalonia, Andalusia. France - Corsica, Bretagne. Netherlands - Frisians. East Europe: Croatia, Slovenia. Slovakia, regions in former Soviet Union.

Dynamics: Monocultural state control. Micronationalism/ postnationalism. European market unification. In East Europe: Weakening of the state. Post cold war realignments. Modes: Regional micronationalism. Territorial, economic, political, cultural interests.

**White ethnic identity in the USA.** Dynamics: Follows civil rights movement. WASP hegemony. Ongoing immigration of Hispanics, Asians. Modes: Symbolic ethnicity, cultural interests.

The dynamics of ethnic politics in these clusters are diverse, but the *modalities* are the same: they all concern territorial, political, economic and cultural interests; with the exception of the white ethnic renaissance in the United States, which is mainly (though not exclusively) concerned with subjective, cultural interests. But, there is one factor common to all these varieties of ethnicization: they all protest some form of monocultural control.

### Living with ethnicity

Ethnicity is only unacceptable when it is used for reasons unacceptable to dominant social interests. (Shaw 1986: 597)

How then, if ethnicity in fact often serves as a common currency of power, do we arrive at the standard representation of manifestations of ethnicity as a social or political problem, associated with 'irrationality', bloodshed, riots, terror? In the words of Timothy Shaw,

Ethnicity is only characterized as a 'problem' by the bourgeoisie when it ceases to be functional ... In short, ethnicity only becomes a problem when (i) ethnic groups turn the tables on each other in terms of access to the state; or (ii) ethnic politics degenerates from a form of political support into a basis for political secession. (1986: 597)

It is from the point of view of *ethnos* that *ethnikos* presents a problem. But nations create ethnicity and maintain it as much as they need low wage economies on their fringe. At the same time it is this concept of ethnicity viewed *from above* that appears suspect. In the words of Christopher Miller, 'To think anthropologically is to validate *ethnicity* as a category, and this has become a problematic idea' (1990: 31).

At this point there are several options: one is to revert to the primordialist argument and seek to achieve political compromise through, for instance, consociationalism. This means yielding to a pessimistic scenario: first taking the status quo for granted and then

considering options for damage control. An alternative is to view the situation as transitional and to consider the counter indications to the scenarios of ethnic polarization.

The *domination discourse* of ethnicity can be contrasted to *oppositional discourses* of ethnicity. The oppositional discourse of *enclosure ethnicity* tends towards ethnonationalism and under certain conditions to separatism: its logic is inward looking and towards delinking. This replicates the logic of *ethnos* but seeks to reproduce it on one's own terms. It follows a binary logic of opposition, in which dominant ethnocentrism is both confronted by and mirrored in opposition ethnocentrism. What these perspectives share is that nation and ethnicity are taken as destiny. The paradox of ethnonationalism, however, is that it is a postnationalist discourse that has given up on nationalism and that is being fed transnationally.

The discourses of *competition ethnicity* or bicultural ethnicity are more complex and varied. One perspective is, ultimately, to turn the tables and declare *ethnos* a form of *ethnikos*: for from the point of view of bicultural 'others' the nation itself is just another form of ethnicity which happens to be dominant. As nation and ethnicity are equated, then, as a consequence *both* are bracketed, relativized. This is a matter of awareness of the way ethnicities-in-relation function, of the effects of the cultural division of labour, and of the dynamics of ethnicization in the stream of political and socioeconomic change, *without* essentializing and freezing ethnicities.

Thus Stuart Hall (1992) speaks of decolonizing ethnicity and in the process recognizing difference, engaging in a new politics of representation premised on the end of the essential black subject. Likewise in the United States, black intellectuals can take a position of double engagement and accept, in the words of Cornel West, the importance of 'positive identity, self-affirmation, and holding at bay self-doubt and self-contempt and self-hatred' as 'an indispensable element for people of African descent' - as in the lineage of black nationalism that runs from Marcus Garvey to contemporary Afrocentrism; but, on the other hand, reject the 'black nationalist rhetoric that is still operating in a binary oppositional discourse', as in the black/white discourse of Louis Farrakhan (West 1992: 704). In the difference between the positions of West and Farrakhan we recognize the tension between competition ethnicity and enclosure ethnicity.

Is the world of ethnic identity politics merely an archipelago of ethnic particularisms? According to Chantal Mouffe, 'the progressive character of a struggle does not depend on its place of origin ... but rather on its link with other struggles' (quoted in Mercer 1992: 429).

The discourses described above translate into different politics - of marginalization, separation, and coalition politics, respectively. Monocultural definitions of the nation translate into restrictive notions of citizenship and political and civil rights. The discourse of

oppositional ethnocentrism translates into defiant ethnochauvinism. Decolonizing ethnicity translates into the roundtable/ Rainbow politics of multiethnic, multi-issue coalitions.

In practical terms, the *degree* of ethnic difference matters. The degree to which a society is not a level playing field but structured through policies of cultural privileging - privileging a cultural division of labour - is the degree to which the normalization of difference requires as a first step removing institutionalized privileges through policies of affirmative or positive action to empower disadvantaged groups. This can involve a stance of 'strategic essentialism' in the sense of Spivak: 'a strategic use of a positive essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest' (1987: 205). In fact, this may apply not only to disadvantaged ethnic groups, but to scheduled castes in India, blacks in the US, Arabs, Falashas and Sephardic Jews in Israel, and for that matter, to women in virtually all societies. The specificity of these groups resides not in their inherent characteristics but in their *positioning* in the existing politics of difference.

Ethnicity is protean. There are as many ethnicities as there are boundaries and frontiers that societies generate, and positions to take along them. Ethnic politics are highly contextual and local because they are affected by so many variables - socioeconomic change, changing centre-local relations, political transformation, historical mortgages.

If ethnicity is constructed and reconstructed by articulatory practices growing out of contemporary conditions and power relations among social groups and the interpretive meanings people give to them, rather than out of some timeless or primordial dimension of human existence, then creative leadership by political and cultural elites and public intellectuals, as well as the everyday interventions of ordinary people into the flow of racial and ethnic discourse, do matter, perhaps more than we are now prepared to imagine. (M.P. Smith 1992: 526)

The competing particularisms of *ethnos* and *ethnikos* or nation and others may not be an edifying spectacle. But it should not be overlooked that these particularisms are not symmetrical, for one is dominant and the other subaltern. Even so, also subaltern identity may operate as a form of domination in its domain, in relation to the differences crosscutting ethnicity.

Living with shifting boundaries means living with ethnicity. The notion of ethnicity itself is indelibly stamped with the legacy of 'race' thinking which it continues in cultural mufti. On the other side of ethnicity is hybridity, heterogeneity, difference. But life after ethnicity comes available only by living with ethnicity. For one cannot want the outcome without wanting the process.

## Notes

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1. This argument concerns relations between recent and earlier arrivals from the mainland, and leaves the native Taiwanese out of the picture (see Yen Liang 1989).

2. Brass defines *ethnic category* as 'any group of people dissimilar from other peoples in terms of objective cultural criteria and containing within its membership, either in principle or in practice, the elements for a complete division of labor and for reproduction' (1991: 19). An *ethnic community* is an ethnic category that 'has adopted one or more of its marks of cultural distinctness and used them as symbols both to create internal cohesion and to differentiate itself from other ethnic groups' (1991: 19, 263). In this context a *nation* is a particular type of ethnic community: 'an ethnic community politicized, with recognized group rights within the political system' (1991: 20). 'Insofar as an ethnic group succeeds by its own efforts in achieving and maintaining group rights through political action and mobilization, it has gone beyond ethnicity to establish itself as a nationality.' (1991: 23)

3. In the late nineteenth century Anglo-Saxonism served as one of the ideologies of English hegemony in Britain and on the world stage. As an ideology it served to link the political projects of leading strata in Britain and the United States, and in this context played a strategic part in the process of 'imperial succession', passing on international hegemony from the British Empire to the United States, in the period between the 1890s and the early part of the twentieth century (Nederveen Pieterse 1990: Ch 12).

4. The term ethnocracy was first coined by Veiter (1977), quoted in Stavenhagen (1986: 83).

5. According to Rajni Kothari, 'Developmentalism, as culture, creates a universal spread of commercial values and conspicuous consumption based on western life styles and in particular on the hegemony of the 'Market'. ... unlike other models of universality in past civilizations, this particular model is so arrogant and ethnocentric that it has no in-built mechanism of self-correction in it. Ethnicity and recovery of ethnic spaces become the only correctives.' (1988: 214)

6. Shaw tends to take an instrumentalist point of view: most of the literature 'on African ethnicity still treats it as an orthodox political concept rather than as a contemporary economic response' (1986: 591).





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