Ethnicity: Concept and Meaning

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' "Them and Us": the Assertion of
Ethnic and National Identity in the New Europe'

Abstract

Why has nationalism appeared to be in the ascendent again in post-Cold War Europe? This paper considers the phenomena of ethnic and national identity and conflict in the context of their current revival in the New Europe.

Identity, Community, and Nation

The notion of 'identity' has received considerable attention in recent years, not least in political science and international relations literature. It may refer to the individual and his or her sense of 'belonging' and points of reference to the world in which he/she finds himself or herself. It tends to be linked to familiarity and a sense of shared orientations in a community of the similar. There are echoes here of Ferdinand Tönnies' notion of *Gemeinschaft*.

The need for identification with a community in order to achieve individual identity or self-respect is in part a function of socialisation experiences. The group constituting the 'community' may vary historically and geographically from family, extended family, through 'kith and kin' to clan and tribe and on to a larger community. In this sense it relates mainly to a community based on a shared history and culture. In a historic culture- community the modes and goals of identification are given by the group and its past experiences as they coalesce into a collective 'tradition' which distinguishes a particular 'ethnic' identity.

Indeed, the core of ethnicity itself resides in myths, memories, values and symbols, rather than in any idea of race. This is an important point. It is not unusual for social work or social service agencies to refer to 'black and ethnic communities' as if they are one and the same. This is demonstrated by the following extract from a letter from Hampshire County Council Social Services Department under the heading 'Ethnic Monitoring – Service Users'.

> 'As you will know, Hampshire Social Services Department has adopted a race policy. The policy identifies the need to *record and monitor the ethnic background of people using our services*. This recording will enable us to monitor the service requests and usage by people from the black and ethnic communities in order to assist this department in the planning and development of appropriate services ... Identification of ethnic origin will be by the service user themselves and will not be required of third party referrer ... I am sure that you will wish to support us in this important step in improving our service to people from the black and ethnic communities ...'[1]

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[1] Letter from Hampshire Social Services Department, January 1993, on 'Ethnic Monitoring – Service Users'.

It can be argued that the above usage of the term 'ethnic' is incorrect. 'Ethnic' should not just mean 'non-white' or minority group, nor should it be used to refer to colourful, peasant-style clothing!

Similarly, the word 'nation' has had a variety of uses before its modern version. In the past it has been used in the same sense as such related terms as race, political class exercising power, people, community, tribe, state, clan, and society. Lack of space prohibits full illustration of this except to mention that, for example, in the Middle Ages the University of Aberdeen contained the four 'nations' of Mar, Buchan, Murray, and Angus whilst the University of Paris was composed of the 'nations' of France, Picardie, Normandie, and Germany.

Anthony Smith of the London School of Economics and Political Science who has written widely on the ethnic origins of nations suggests that

> 'the "modern nation" in practice incorporates several features of pre-modern ethnic community and owes much to the general model of ethnicity which has survived in many areas until the dawn of the "modern era".'[2]

Smith suggests that

> 'It is fashionable for modern Western observers, securely ensconced in their own national identities forged in toil and blood several centuries ago, to pour scorn on the rhetorical excesses and misguided scholarship of nationalist intellectuals in nineteenth century Europe or twentieth century Africa and Asia. Those whose identities are rarely questioned and who have never known exile or subjugation of land and culture, have little need to trace their "roots" in order to establish a unique and recognisable identity. Yet theirs is only an implicit and unarticulated form of what elsewhere must be shouted from the rooftops: "We belong, we have a unique identity, we know it by our ancestry and history". It matters nothing that these are so many "myths" and "memories" full of deceptions and distortions. The "self-evident" nature of English or French national identity is made up of such myths and memories; with them, the English and French are "nations", without them, just so many populations bounded in political space.'[3]

Ethnic nationalism in Europe has a long tradition. Recent events in the New Europe have caused many to reassess their attitudes, not least in the academic community. Today it is a commonplace among social scientists that ethnic cleavages can affect politics and political stability.

Indeed, the rehabilitation of the study of nationalism has progressed to such an extent that Tom Nairn recently observed

> 'The whole subject of nationalism used to be regarded as more or less taboo in academic circles ... It is no counter-culture or side eddy, interfering with the majestic mainstream of Progress. Nationalism is the mainstream, and it's time we recognised the fact.'[4]

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[2] Anthony Smith, *Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Blackwell, 1989, p.18.

[3] *Ibid*, p.2.

[4] Tom Nairn, 'The Worth of Nations', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, August 11, 1995.

We also need to recognise that the traditional discrete boundaries between academic disciplines in studies of ethnicity and nationalism are becoming increasingly redundant.

Are Nations 'Natural'?

It is sometimes claimed (especially by nationalists) that national characteristics are 'natural' divisions of mankind, marked by definite cultural characteristics which are readily apparent to any ordinary observer. As such they do not need to be 'cultivated' as they should be self-sustaining and self-generating and 'naturally' progress from being an ethnic community to a nationality or nation and then to being established as a nation-state. This view is unrealistic and unacceptable. Ethnic communities do not just 'achieve' nation-state status in isolation. Nations are often composed of several related ethnic groups. The route is usually long and bloody, for example,recent events in the former Yugoslavia.

The same is true for the issue of national identity. In many parts of central and eastern europe the peasants were socialised into a nationality. Language, religion, or another dominant cultural dimension may indicate a wider sense of community identity beyond the immediate locality. It is for such reasons that in the past governments have sought to suppress rival languages or religious groups and in particular to promote the use of the favoured 'official' versions in education and administration to reinforce a dominant language, religion, history, tradition, etc. This includes the message that the dominant culture is superior and somehow more 'natural'.

The creation of nations is a recurrent activity which has to be renewed periodically, including rediscoveries and reinterpretations of the myths, folk-memories, legends, values and symbols of the 'national' past. Most academics who have dismissed such historical mythology as irrelevant to our modern lives do not fully appreciate its power and influence. Nations are rarely 'natural'; though the ethnic ingredients that make them up have a real validity. As Ernest Gellner observed

> 'Nationalism is not simply the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it often invents nations where they do not exist.'[5]

The creation of a national identity usually builds on some pre-existing body of culture and ethnicity. The resultant 'national' outcome may not always be the 'natural' one. For example, in terms of language and original ethnicity Portugal has more in common with Castille than Catalonia which has much in common with Provence and the Languedoc in southern France. Equally, the Lothians could have been part of northern England, with Edinburgh having been named after a King Edwin of Northumbria. Even today the town of Berwick-upon-Tweed is in England, whilst its county is in Scotland and its soccer team plays in the Scottish Football League.

Ethnicity, Nations and Nationalism in Europe

The possession of at least some ethnic bases is a pre-requisite for the development and sustenance of a strong nationalism. Foremost amongst these ethnic bases are

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[5]Ernest Gellner, *Thoughts and Change*, Weidenfield & Nicholson, 1964, p.168.

history and a related historicism, language and culture, and a growing degree of secularisation. The essence of a sense of ethnicity lies in a shared myth of common origins and historical traditions, often in conjunction with an association with particular territories.

Language is often singled out, following the German writers Herder and Fichte, as the essential criterion of nationhood and basis for nationalism. Only through a vernacular language and its literature can one grasp the 'personality' or 'soul' ('Volksgeist') of a nation; and only through the communication of messages in an agreed code can a sense of nationality develop.

Some European examples regard their distinctive religious practices and communities as more vital, however, to their sense of identity than any accompanying language distinctions, for example, Croats (Catholics), Serbs (Orthodox), and Muslims in Bosnia where all speak 'Serbo-Croat'.

Others emphasise their common distinctive institutions and traditions whilst still sharing languages and religions with their 'foreign' neighbours, for example, the Swiss.

In contradistinction to the Yugoslav case, we may note that on occasion another essential cultural condition for the rise of a particularistic historicism and an ethnic revival is an increase in secularisation among the nationalist leadership. This is because nationalism is a secular doctrine of political autonomy for the nationality, going beyond a sense of ethnic identity. A key element in this increased secularisation is the role of the intelligentsia in the nationalist movement. Nationalism has offered this intelligentsia a means of attempting to translate into institutional reality their vision of utopia; community based upon affiliations which reach back into a past but idyllic time of virtue and innocence, uncontaminated by modern market forces, urban vices, and petty bureaucracy. It also offers them a chance to find a place for their education and their talents in a project where their knowledge is needed for social guidance and national construction. Thus, in the aim for, and the achievement of, statehood for the nation, both individual and national fulfilment can be achieved.

Nationalists seek to give that nation or distinct political community a state of its own, or dominance within a state containing more than one such nation or ethnic cultural community. Once a nation has achieved the status and reality of constituting or controlling a state it is held to possess sovereignty. I would define sovereignty as the exercise of the supreme legal coercive power over a given territory. There are three main elements of state power. These are respectively Identitive, Utilitive, and Coercive.

Identitive elements are the most positive and draw heavily on cultural roots. They meet emotional needs. They include the use of symbols, flags, anthems, badges etc. Utilitive elements meet physical needs. They include economic, protective, diplomatic aspects, etc. Coercive elements are the least positive, but in many senses sum up the real test of statehood. They include the police, army, law courts, taxation, conscription, the general use of legal force to compel obedience, etc.

The identitive elements derive most strongly from the ethnic and national backgrounds of the state. The coercive elements tend to be under-rated in relation to their importance in underpinning the state. Indeed, the use of force in politics is often under-rated in western political systems where constitutional theory empha-

sises the importance of consent between government and governed. It is difficult to think of a state, however, which has not been founded through or by the use of violence.

The first (Western) European nations were constructed around strong, cohesive ethnic cores, and their states were able to incorporate, even absorb or acculturate, neighbouring ethnic groups. Many later states in Eastern Europe were designed expressly to fit such ethnic cores, for example, Poland, Roumania, Greece; despite the fact that they often had significant ethnic minorities within their territorial boundaries.

Much of the missionary zeal of modern nationalism in new states takes its content and inspiration from the inclusive type of ethnic community that feels itself threatened by hostile alien forces – hence the frequency of violence. Hence also the high incidence of nationalists who originate in mixed or border areas of ethnic groups. Nations need homelands – historic territories containing ancestral monuments and sacred sites. Homelands help to build nations around past endeavours and environments are a precondition of their 'rebirth' and renewal.

Nations, according to nationalists, need 'heroes' and 'golden ages' – memories and myths. As Akbar Ahmed points out, 'Most academics who have dismissed such historical mythology as irrelevant to our modern lives do not fully appreciate its power and influence.'[6]

The 'transmodernity' debate and the ethnicity revival

It is argued by some contemporary commentators that the rediscovery of ethnic identity is part of a broader epochal shift into 'transmodernity'. Unlike 'post-modernity', with its logical outcomes of nihilism and opportunism, 'transmodernity' heralds a post-liberal age which is characterised by concrete cultural identities that are rooted in long standing traditions and customs. It is reasoned that only the latter can constitute personal identities over and above what modern international mass communication culture industries market as the appropriate 'role models' for alienated and manipulable consumers for an anonymous society of interchangeable abstract individuals. Within such a framework 'ethnicity' may be redefined as that identity bestowing cultural particularity which is able to both resist and reverse the tide of post-modern anonymity and rootlessness.

This shift towards transmodernity, it is reasoned, constitutes an irreversible process of the same magnitude as industrialisation. Indeed, it mirrors the Industrial Revolution to the extent that the main characteristic of transmodernity on the socio-economic level is the centrality of services based on information. The opposite may be said of the triumph of a post-modern ideology that sees the economy as the foundation of the human condition, and differences or cultural specifities as minor and bizarre deviations from a global social 'normality'. As Dario Durando graphically describes it,

> 'the result is a world (often characterised as a "global Euro-Disney") reduced to an immense market unified by the flow of goods, services and capital. It is culturally standardised because it is permeated by a global informational network that is a product of the hegemonic

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[6] Akbar S.Ahmed, 'Ethnic Cleansing: a metaphor for our time?', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 18/1, 1995, p.21.

Anglo-Saxon culture industry, and it transmits with enormous symbolic impact the values of a consumer society. Politically, it is structured hierarchically with the USA at the head, always ready to brandish Theodore Roosevelt's famous big stick.'[7]

In fact, however, it is cultural differences and specifities that constitute the most powerful obstacle to the diffusion of this universalistic and economistic ideology, and to the transformation of the world in its image. Cultural specifity, it is argued, is ethnic in character and should be approached in the context of an organised opposition to universal standardisation. Here the anthropological and biological components of ethnicity are secondary in their importance for social interactions to the sense of ethnic belonging generated by a specific system of cultural production, cemented usually by a common language and/or religion, among the members of the ethnic group.

What is important about the ethnic dimension within the context of the contemporary global society is its ability to provide a source of identity. This mechanism of identification is based primarily on cultural and linguistic belonging and only secondly on the quasi-biological notions of a 'blood community'. Put another way, ethnic belonging can be seen as the ultimate form of generalised interpersonal solidarity and the epitome of the communitarian and organic 'Gemeinschaft' described by Tönnies.

Primary belonging and a sense of birthplace, as illustrated in Michael Ignatieff's 'home is where your ancestors are buried',[8] are brought into play against the threat of the engulfing mass culture. Ethnic identity offers individuals and groups considerable certainty in an uncertain world. When the territorial dimension is added to ethnicity they can together constitute one of the deepest dimensions of human experience – the sense of identity, place, and belonging. As Lord Macaulay expressed it through the words of Horatius,

'... and how can man die better
Than facing fearful odds,
for the ashes of his fathers,
and the temples of his Gods?'[9]

Thus, ethnic solidarity provides bonds that are strengthened by the roots of language, culture, folk-lore and history. The ethnic-territorial appeal is basic and challenges complex society over fundamental issues such as the direction and speed of change as well as over the nature of a sense of identity.

Accordingly, the modernist view that ethnicity is nothing but a residual phenomenon in the transition from tradition to modernity, and therefore bound to give way inevitably to the advance of global culture and the mass world market is wrong and should be abandoned. Rather, different social structures and cultures based on ethnic roots will continue to play an important role in social and political mobilisation and motivation.

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[7] Dario Durando, 'The Rediscovery of Ethnic Identity', *Telos*, 97, Fall 1993.

[8] Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging*, BBC Television Series, 1994.

[9] Lord Macaulay, *Lays of Ancient Rome*, 1842, 'Horatius', 1.

'Ethnic Cleansing'

Given the above analysis it may be more accurate to refer to 'ethnocide' rather than 'genocide' in the conflict and suffering witnessed since 1992 in the former Yugoslavia, particularly in Bosnia. So-called 'ethnic cleansing'; or 'ethnic purification', whilst repulsive to civilised minds and morality is nothing new. We can read of such actions in the Old Testament *Book of Numbers*, for example, as follows:

> 'And the Lord spake unto Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, "Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye pass over Jordan into the land of Canaan, then ye shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, and destroy all their figured stones, and destroy all their molten images, and demolish all their high places: and ye shall take possession of the land, and dwell therein: for unto you have I given the land to possess it".'[10]

Earlier this century, in 1922 and 1923, a negotiated large scale population exchange took place between Greece and Turkey. This followed the collapse of the Greek dream of the 'Great Idea' which had ended in crushing military defeat in Asia Minor and the evacuation of soldiers and civilians from Smyrna. The human cost of ethnic engineering on such a scale was very high. Some 1,200,000 refugees entered Greece (a 20% increase in the population) and some 250,000 Muslims were forced to leave for Turkey.

The activities of the German Nazis and their allies and clients during the Second World War are well recorded and relatively well known. What is less familiar to many, however, is the experience of the Germans expelled after that war from Bohemia, Silesia, Eastern Pomerania and other parts of what is now Polish territory. Over two million Sudeten Germans were removed under the Potsdam Agreement in what Prague Radio described as 'the greatest diplomatic and political victory ever achieved by our nation in its long historical fight for existence against the German nation'. The Polish Government declared the establishment of the Oder-Neisse line as the new frontier with Germany as 'one of the greatest achievements in the history of the Polish nation, the guarantee of its real independence and prosperity.' Some eight million Germans had lived in these territories before the war. Poles from Ukraine and from territory taken from Eastern Poland by the Soviet Union were transferred to take their places. Only relatively small minorities remained in all cases.

Contemporary 'ethnic cleansing' has been described as 'the sustained suppression by all means possible of an ethnically or religiously different group with the ultimate aim to expel or eliminate it altogether.'[11]

Recent examples have followed the capture of Srebrenica, Zepa, and the Krajina region, amongst others and have been perpetrated and suffered in turn by all the major ethnic groups in the Serb-Bosnian-Croat conflict. Yet there is a view that such ethnic conflict constitutes a vital element of both nationality and nationhood.

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[10] Holy Bible, Old Testament, *Book of Numbers*, Chapter 33, verses 50-53.

[11] Akbar S.Ahmed, *op cit*, p.7.

Slavenka Drakulic, a feminist journalist and novelist based in Zagreb, explains, in an eloquent article in *Time*, how one can be, willingly or otherwise, 'Overcome by Nationhood'.

'... Along with millions of other Croats, I was pinned to the wall of nationhood – not only by outside pressure from Serbia and the federal army but by inside national homogenisation in Croatia. That is what the war is doing to us, reducing us to one dimension: the Nation ... What happened is that something that people cherished as part of their cultural identity – an alternative to the all-embracing communism, a means to survive – became their political identity and turned into an ill-fitting shirt. You may feel the sleeves are too short, the collar too tight. You may not like the colour, and the cloth might itch. But there is no escape; there is nothing else to wear. One need not succumb to this ideology of the nation – one is sucked into it ... Once the war is over ... all the human victims will be in vain if the newly born independent countries do not restore to us a sense that we are before all else individuals as well as citizens.'[12]

Drakulic's point is that we can all be prisoners of our nationality – whether we like it or not.

Rape or sexual intimidation is frequently and extensively employed as part of ethnic cleansing to terrorise and humiliate the ethnic enemy and explains much of the deep bitterness between combatants. It symbolises the dominance and violation of one group over another, as well as one individual over another, in a most brutal way. Any resultant pregnancies with their births or abortions bring traumas and dilemmas of their own which have both personal and ethnic consequences. No one ethnic group has a monopoly of virtue or vice in respect of episodes of such violence. While we need to study the more obvious examples of death, torture, terror and harrassment employed (as with the more notorious concentration camps) we should also identify other more subtle, but still tragic and painful, forms of ethnic exclusion and denial.

This intense assertion of identity, when translated into violence (as in the case of 'ethnic cleansing'), can be explained also in part as a consequence of a perceived fragmentation of previously existing social and political circumstances. It can be seen as a reaction to the project of modernity in the post-modern era. Although, as has been illustrated, ethnic cleansing is not a new phenomenon, developments in the mass media allow it to play a crucial role in influencing people in their perception of culture and identity on an unprecedented scale. Hatred of 'Them' (the 'other', the 'enemy') defined simply in ethnic terms, is heightened through the use of television and other forms of mass media and communication. Honour, glory, past mythology and ethnic nationalism are extolled, all creating a pre-disposition for extreme arguments and actions in favour of 'Us' (the 'special' culture-community). Without 'Them', of course, there would not be 'Us'. This is the irony of the whole ethnic determinist approach.

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[12] Slavenka Drakulic, 'Overcome by Nationhood', *Time Magazine*, January 20, 1992, p.52.

Conclusion

It has been claimed by traditional writers on nationalism such as Hans Kohn and Eli Kedourie that there have been two distinctive routes to the establishment of nation-states in Europe – one followed mainly in Western Europe and the other followed mainly in Central and Eastern Europe. This approach has been given a new exposition in more recent years by Anthony Smith.[13]

According to this view the 'Western' European path leads from State to Nation. It is that experienced by 'territorial' nations occupying fairly well defined areas and it manifests early 'bureaucratic-rational' state forms. The process of nation formation via this path includes three revolutions:

(1) transition from feudalism to capitalism;

(2) centralisation of state administration;

(3) cultural and educational revolution – with a consequent spread of standardisation.

These contributed over varying periods to the centralised and culturally relatively homogenous states of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe. The classic examples here are Great Britain and France where state unity came early and assisted in the process of nation-building.

The 'Eastern' European path, on the other hand, leads from Nation to State. It is that experienced by 'ethnic' nations where cultural awareness is strong whilst existing state forms with which to identify are not. In this case the three revolutions mentioned above came later. This path transformed ethnic ties and sentiments into a national identity, and then into a state, through mobilisation, territorialisation and politicisation. This route emphasised genealogy, customs, 'folkish' elements, etc more, and much less the 'civic' rational-legal emphasis than in the western case. The eastern and central route also placed a stronger emphasis on ethnic homogeneity and 'purification'.

The historical role of the state in Europe in homogenising populations and stimulating their cultures and sentiments has been considerable. It could not have achieved its results, however, without building upon ethnic roots and feelings of national identity for mobilising popular aspirations and feelings of shared interests and community. Without ethnic bases there could not be the starting points for nations or nationalisms. Failure to appreciate this can only prevent us from understanding the antagonisms that so often plague relations between states, within states, and between states and individual citizens so often in the New Europe and elsewhere in the world.

There is a third route to statehood in addition to the two outlined earlier. This is the 'Pluralist' approach which places an emphasis on 'Civic' nationalism rather than on 'territorial' or 'ethnic' nationalism. Membership depends on attaining 'citizenship' and is 'rational-legal' based rather than on being born within the territory of the state or within the ethnic core of a nation. Examples of civic nationalisms are those of the USA, Canada and Australia. In each case there is a dominant ethnic group which has provided the dominant language and legal system, but it is an immigrant group alongside other immigrant groups and a new 'civic' nationalism is developed.

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[13] Anthony Smith, *op cit.*

Both Tom Nairn and Michael Ignatieff, the latter in his six-part television series *Blood and Belonging*,[14] expound the view that such civic nationalism is the only effective antidote to the antagonisms of ethnic nationalism. Civic nationalism is not, however, a model native to Europe. The emotional sources of European nationalisms, based on their ethnic roots, should not be under-estimated, as we have seen in recent years.

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[14] Michael Ignatieff, *op cit.*