More than meets the eye

Analytical frameworks beyond race and ethnicity

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INTRODUCTION

> "In Malaysia we have three major races which have practically nothing in common. Their physiognomy, language, culture and religion differ. […] Nothing makes anyone forget the fact of race. So those who say 'forget race' are either naive or knaves."
> (MAHATHIR 1970: 175)

Reading a quote like the one above, from former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, is likely to evoke an uneasy feeling with scholars in the area studies disciplines. The history of this nowadays very broad and trans-disciplinary field has been closely tied to the colonial endeavor, often in an unholy alliance with the ancestors of today's anthropology. Today still – and not only in Malaysia – these categories are abound not only in political discourse, where violent conflicts are often traced back to contestations between ethnicized groups with seemingly homogenous interests, but also in scholarly analyses, where they remain as analytical frameworks, and often in the context of conflict.[1]

But can race and ethnicity be sound and valid analytical categories in the first place, especially in a contemporary academic context? Are they sufficiently coherent that they can be applied in every possible context, or do they rather

1 As an indication, the Library of Congress alone holds more than 1000 publications that deal with conflict in conjunction with race or ethnicity in their title.

only make sense when looking at the 'other'? And are there ways and means to describe the phenomena that we encounter in fundamentally different ways, rather than just replacing one shaky term with another?

In this article I want to address these questions from a trans-disciplinary area studies perspective.[2] Modern area studies, which go beyond merely studying a nation-state environment, are helpful in overcoming eurocentric approaches, which are often still very much engrained in the 'classical' disciplines. Taking inspiration from disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and discourse analysis, and adjusting and testing them outside a predominantly white, 'Western' environment may produce better results not only when looking at the area of the 'other', but also one's own area, 'at home'.

One of the outcomes of this direction is an alternative approach, in terms of concept as well as terminology, to the phenomena we often describe along the lines of race and ethnicity: the layered concept of *ethnicization as a processual framework of analysis*. In order to provide a new perspective, such an approach must go beyond classical counter-arguments with regard to race and ethnicity, with the bottom line that everything related to these is constructed. It must take into account the power that notions of race and ethnicity have in real life, but at the same time avoid reinforcing notions of homogeneity, and instead underline the processual aspect of group and identity formation. This may not be an easy task, and might challenge accustomed and convenient categories often used when analyzing group dynamics and relations. But in the end it is a worthwhile endeavor that opens up more differentiated views of the underlying issues at stake, which are all too easily overlooked when focusing on the rather static categories of race and ethnicity.

AMBIGUITIES OF RACE AND ETHNICITY

> "The concept of a single, exclusive, and unchanging ethnic or cultural or other identity is a dangerous piece of brainwashing."
> (HOBSBAWM 1996: 1067, emphasis in original)

When talking about aspects of identity, one can often make an interesting observation: Hardly anyone would regard one's own identity or personality as

2 This chapter is a condensed version of the theoretical framework of manifestations and implementations of ethnicization which I have developed in greater detail, and with specific regard to the Malaysian scenario, elsewhere (Holst 2012).

static, or even interchangeable with someone else's. Yet there often seems to be no problem in assuming the existence of large-scale, homogenous ethnicized groups and assigning individuals membership of one of these, or other, identity groups. This obvious contradiction is often not realized – which may have to do with the different meanings and ways in which terms like 'race' and 'ethnicity' have developed. A cursory overview of the genesis of these terms is therefore a good point of departure for this analysis.

Although modes of differentiation and discrimination have existed in most societies across the world for centuries and more – where those living in the periphery have often been termed 'barbarians' or similar by those in the center – race as a concept became manifest at a time when Europeans encountered people whose physical appearance was outright different.

Banton states that these "contacts were important to the development by Europeans of racial categories" (1977: 13), and Barot and Bird add that "issues of corporeality were central to developing racial discourses and were seen as signs of something else, that is, signs of superiority and inferiority" (2001: 607). Race and perceived racial differences were readily incorporated into justifications of colonialism which were at best based upon the twisted notion of "bringing development to the inferior" (2001: 607).

With the advent of the Enlightenment and its stress on rationalism, racist ideologies needed adequate fundamentals. Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) provided a scientific foundation for a biological perspective on human development. It is this natural science approach to race that has dominated the discourse until today. Van den Berghe (1995), for example, argues that "social organisms" could only evolve because of nepotistic behavior, as altruistic investments into non-related organisms would be biologically "wasted". As a consequence, social concern is based on common biological descent and biologically rooted nepotism, even when the markers that determine on a larger scale who shares a common descent with someone else are primarily cultural.

However, most scholars in the social sciences and humanities have abandoned the concept of race as a category of distinction because biological and genetic markers have been proven to be far too broad and unspecific to explain meaningful differences between large groups of populations in general terms (Tonkin et al. 1989; Rustin 1991; Banton 1998). To some degree this has also happened in the medical sciences (Goodman 2000), with the most striking point being the lack of a clear definition and differentiation of race as a scientific category (Schwartz 2001; Cooper 2003; Bamshad et al. 2004).

The term and concept of 'race' have thus undergone changes in their meaning and use. Whereas in a German context, it would be inappropriate to use

rasse as an academically sound category, the term has been transformed in Anglo-American academia. One example is its use as a category to justify affirmative action policies, e.g. in the USA. One argument in favor of maintaining the concept of race is that it is a result of a social and political process, and that it is necessary in order to highlight the position of those who have been oppressed by racial policies in the past. Regarding affirmative action policies in the USA, Mosley argues that "we need not expect the elimination of racial categories to eliminate the problems introduced by racism. At best our problems would no longer be 'racial problems'" (1997: 102). While it is true that a mere change of terminology does not change the underlying problems – as the next paragraphs will show – it is important to note that race here is not an analytical category in the sense of describing a certain group, but an attribute describing the outcome of a process of discrimination. What remains problematic is that relying on the term 'race' contributes – at least discursively – to the persistence of the idea that distinctive racial groups exist, for example, through the frequent ticking of the 'race box' in various forms. Such forms of self-categorization as 'black', 'white', etc. further reinforce racial group identities, thus running at least partly counter to the intentions of affirmative-action policymakers.

In contrast to 'race', the term 'ethnicity' seems to be a rather "new" (1975: 1) concept, as Glazer and Moynihan state in one of the first compilations discussing the term. The question remains as to whether it provides a more open approach towards categorization that takes into account more than just biological or genetical factors. The difficulty again lies in the definition, as the general meaning of ethnicity still remains fuzzy today, ranging from the essence of an ethnic group, to the feeling of belonging to such a group, to the marker of difference from other ethnic groups (Tonkin et al. 1989). Most recent theoretical literature follows an "umbrella classification" (cp. Chandra 2006: 397 for a more comprehensive list), in which a shared culture, a common ancestry/kinship (real or imagined) and some form of group membership are central aspects of defining an ethnic group.

Barth (1969) raises a fundamental critique against defining an ethnic group in this 'traditional' manner, especially because "while purporting to give an ideal type model of a recurring empirical form, it implies a preconceived view of what are the significant factors in the genesis, structure, and function of such groups" (Barth 1969: 11). The result is "a world of separate peoples, each with their culture and each organized in a society which can legitimately be isolated for description as an island to itself" (ibid: 11).

However, not everybody seems to see themselves as part of such an island: Hutchinson and Smith highlight that the usages of the term 'ethnicity' "refer to other peoples who, like animals, belong to some group unlike one's own" (1996: 4). The implication that it is the 'others' who are characterized by ethnicity is a notable difference to the concept of race. As Tonkin et al. put it: "Within the discourse of race, everybody had one, everybody belonged to one. In actual use, however, not everybody belongs to an 'ethnic group', or has an 'ethnicity'. In their common employment, the terms have a strong and familiar bias towards 'difference' and 'otherness'" (1989: 15). Elwert points out that in many cases it was scholars from within the colonial system that attached an ethnic group definition to a certain set of people. Geographical identifiers were frequently used to define a group with perceived similar cultural traits, but more often than not these definitions were far from being specific or clear (Elwert 1989: 443-446). In a similar way, the term 'ethnic group' has also become synonymous with (mostly non-white) minorities in certain contexts: Guibernau and Rex (1997: 4) note that it is used in Britain for non-white immigrants, in Australia for the Aborigines, in Scandinavia for the Sami, and in Southeastern Europe for the Roma. The example of the Sami points to the fact that an element of 'backwardness' is implied here as well: They are a 'white' minority that is associated with the ethnic minority attribute, whereas it is not common to refer to the Welsh or Scots in Britain as an ethnic group, for example.

Is an ethnic group now any different from a racial group? Eriksen points out that the "boundaries between race and ethnicity tend to be blurred, since ethnic groups have a common myth of origin, which relates ethnicity to descent, which again makes it a kindred concept to race" (2002: 6). Smelser et al. summarize the problem that lies in the ambiguity of the identifying characteristics of race and ethnicity: They point out that both terms comprise complex social phenomena that are hardly possible to describe or measure accurately, especially when it comes to identifying the principal characteristic, of which there are many to choose from: attributed physical markers, common descent, legal definitions, or the attribution of others or one's own self-identification (2001: 4).

ETHNIC VS. SOCIO-CULTURAL IDENTITIES

If ethnic identity is constructed yet at the same time is used to explain social realities, the scholarly task is to provide a model that does not depend on essentialization, yet which can still explain those social realities often seen to be based on race and ethnicity.

Ethnicity is often conflated with identity. However, ethnicity is more static, in cases where biological traits are included, or more fluid, if it is based upon an (imagined) community (Anderson 1983). In contrast, theories of identity acknowledge its possibility of change and adaption. The result of this conflation – the notion of an ethnic identity – is therefore not going to provide substantial explanations of group relations (cp. Chandra 2006).

Regarding the linkages between ethnic identity and culture, Eriksen shows the incongruences between the two:

> "Cultural differences cut across ethnic boundaries; and [...] ethnic identity is based on socially sanctioned notions of cultural differences, not 'real' ones. While ethnic identity should be taken to refer to a notion of shared ancestry (a kind of fictive kinship), culture refers to shared representations, norms and practices. One can have deep ethnic differences without correspondingly important cultural differences [...]; and one can have cultural variation without ethnic boundaries" (Eriksen 2001:43, emphasis in original).

However, this would render it difficult to make any kind of statement about any group, because one would never have an accurate definition of what is being examined in the first place. For this reason Tonkin and colleagues present two contrasting notions of the term 'identity':

> "[O]ne more-or-less essentialist notion, with identity as something (an attribute, entity, thing, whatever) which an individual or a group has in and of itself […]; and another much like that of ethnicity as already discussed – a notion only existing in a context of oppositions and relativities" (Tonkin et al. 1989: 17).

For the current analysis, I propose to take the basic notion of this duality of identity that Tonkin and colleagues have described here and specify it with the adjective 'socio-cultural'. Rather than an excessively broad and static notion of ethnic identity, it is the conglomerate of social and cultural identity components and interactions that will provide significant insights into group and community relations, because it is in this sphere where the most significant interaction between groups takes place. Lasting group affiliations will therefore have to have ties on a social as well as a cultural level in order not to fizzle out after a while.

If we extend this two-dimensional model to a three-dimensional one by adding some 'depth' to it, the model also helps to explain why certain socio-cultural identities are more prevalent than others: On a very small scale, between two individuals for example, the socio-cultural identities that might provide a

basis for the individuals to 'connect' to each other could be quite sophisticated. For example, an individual in Malaysia who is a left-leaning social activist, plays piano, likes punk music, speaks Malay, and is of Muslim faith may be lucky enough to find another person with similar socio-cultural identities (for example, if they both live in a large enough city). However, to find more than a few people like this might be a difficult task. Furthermore, at work or on other occasions where group membership is not fully voluntary, a number of these socio-cultural identities will not be entertained.

Still, this person is required to 'connect' to others if he or she does not want to become an outsider. Thus, the larger the reference group becomes, the more abstract become the socio-cultural identities that provide for ties that bind. This left-leaning social activist might therefore focus on being an activist in a larger reference group, because he or she might think that being left-leaning is one aspect of being an activist. Alternatively this person could focus on the socio-cultural identity of being a religious person, and see his or her political affiliation as part of this socio-cultural identity. In an even larger reference group, for example when it comes to political party affiliation, this person might just refer to him- or herself as 'left-leaning', if this is what this person sees as the most encompassing socio-cultural identity in that context.

Now, what are the socio-cultural identities that become most prevalent in societies, and which can be used to form national or ethnic identities? As I have argued elsewhere (Holst 2012) it seems that socio-cultural identities based on language and on (moral) value systems such as religion can easily become salient points of reference in a society. When we now regard ethnic group membership rather as a socio-cultural identity that is defined, for example, by the criteria of speaking a certain language and practicing – or at least being influenced by – a specific religion, two things become evident: First, for most people in a given society, language as well as (moral) value systems such as religion are among the few elements that define them from childhood onwards. Second, these aspects constitute probably the largest reference groups that people can somehow relate to – at least on an abstract (or in Anderson's terms, "imagined" (1983)) level – because the former enables people to communicate about the values derived (or seen to be derived) from the latter. Thus, coming back to our multi-faceted left-leaning social activist, he or she would somehow still be able to relate to a socio-cultural identity defined as 'Malay' – although most likely inadequately and uncomfortably.

This model shares some similarities with Barth's (Barth 1969) analysis of the construction of ethnic groups and their boundaries regarding the permeability of borders between groups, for example, or the possible changes of identity.

Eriksen's (2001) criticisms of ethnic identities are acknowledged here, as is Nagata's proposition that "certain cultural items and behaviors, far from being uniquely or inalienably attached to particular ethnic groups, are in fact amenable to manipulation according to the current choice of reference group" (Nagata 1974: 333). However, in my opinion, apart from principally maintaining the shaky concept of *ethnie*, these approaches do not adequately acknowledge the influence of social-cultural identities that help to view the individual as being defined in more than just one (i.e. ethnic) way. In this regard, the model I propose has two advantages:

On one hand it provides a basis for explaining what other models have termed 'ethnic identity', as I have shown in the previous paragraph: A person labeled as 'Malay', 'Chinese', or 'German' might to a certain extent live, think, and act outside the mainstream of what is generally or normatively associated with that group or community. However, the power of these group identifiers will nevertheless force him or her to act (or be seen as acting) accordingly, at least in certain situations.

His or her socio-cultural identity is formed through interaction with others, and at least to a certain degree it will have to harmonize with the corresponding surroundings. Some systems might pressurize individuals to emphasize a particular socio-cultural identity while marginalizing another, thereby increasing the pressures associated with homogenization, possibly resulting in conflict. Again, these socio-cultural identities need not be similar to what is otherwise understood as ethnic identity. It can be a focus on descent or kinship, but it can also incorporate gender, religion, social class, or other factors. Herein, this model connects to what Elwert (1989) has described as 'We-group processes' in which he points out different motivations for group affiliations, and argues that nationalism and ethnicity are not the only manifestations of these social processes.

On the other hand, this model opens up the space for acknowledging the fluidity and transformability of identities in general. Thus, an individual has the option of choosing certain affiliations or identities that are more meaningful to him or her and reduce others to a necessary minimum. Some of these identities will be stronger than others and thus more unlikely to change, but hardly any are cast in stone.

This helps to explain the power that ethnic group identifiers may have on people, such as being labeled 'Malay' or 'Chinese' or 'German' for example, because these identifiers have a real impact on people's lives, and it would be wrong to ignore them. These ascriptions are also instrumental in creating and stabilizing discursively dominant ethnicized groups. However, it is important for the analytical perspective to keep in mind that members of these (rather large)

socio-cultural groups also possess a number of additional socio-cultural identities which may be more meaningful and decisive for their lives, and thus it would be wrong to assume a homogeneity of what is commonly referred to as 'Malays' and so on.

For the course of this work, this approach has two consequences: One is the understanding of group identities such as Malay etc. not as one homogeneous set of attributes but rather as one aspect of identity out of many others: The analytical focus shifts from conflicts apparently inherent in these groups' relations to facets of identity that actually provide a common basis for mutual cooperation. The other consequence is derived from this understanding: If these groups are characterized by individuals associating with a certain set of socio-cultural identities, they cannot be 'ethnic' *per se* in the sense that they carry a primordial notion of ethnicity within themselves. Group labels that build upon ethnic markers are thus external constructs, becoming salient through processes of manifestation and implementation of ethnicization, which shall be explored further below in this article. These group labels are nevertheless powerful and have an impact on people's everyday lives, and thus cannot simply be ignored. At the same time, the processual aspect of identity ascription should remain evident, at least in scholarly terminology. As a consequence, I refer to these groups as ethnicized rather than ethnic. This acknowledges the fact that group identity formation does take place, but underlines the processual aspect rather than reinforcing notions of staticity. With this precursory disquisition, a conceptual terminology has been established with the aim of reducing ambiguity, in order to deal with the various contexts where ethnicization takes place.

RATIONAL CHOICE OR SITUATED AGENCY?

Despite ethnicity remaining a rather ambiguous concept, it is nevertheless still a common explanation and foundation for identity-group formations. On the one hand this section takes a closer look at the arguments supporting ethnicity as a resource in advancing one's own causes, where a vertical category, based on group-inherent traits such as ethnicity, seems to override horizontal ones, based on socio-economic conditions, such as class. On the other hand it also describes an alternative model that takes into account not only individual benefits but also the many (and often complex) situations in which individuals cannot make strategic decisions solely on the basis of personal gain.

Rational choice theory is one of the more prominent explanations for the prevalence of group and identity formation based on ethnicity (Banton 1995;

Banton 2004). In short, the theory states that individual actors make a choice of action guided by constraints and opportunities that form the basis of rational responses. Collective identity can become a resource that can be controlled and used strategically by single actors (Eder et al. 2002: 78). The concept, quite closely connected to game theory in economics, has drawn significant criticism (Macy and Flache 1995; Boudon 1998; Christiano 2004; White 2004).

Some of the critical points raised by Eder et al. (Eder and Schmidtke 1998; Eder et al. 2002) will be looked at in more detail here, as they take these as points of departure to develop their own model of *situated agency*. They acknowledge the capacity of individuals to act rationally in line with their interests and preferences, which are deemed important on a subjective level. However, they dispute the stability of collective identities that would be a prerequisite for making a substantial choice for three reasons (Eder et al. 2002: 78).

Firstly, identity construction is a continuous struggle that prevents ethnic identities from becoming stable. Collective identities are in a constant process of symbolic dispute over their meaning, thus calculating the cost and benefit of ethnic action can only take place in an ongoing process of negotiation and interaction. Recognition of the collective identity, rather than scarce resources and privileges, becomes a good in itself and thus a key objective of ethnic action.

Furthermore, individuals are limited in making choices because their knowledge and competence with regard to weighing the costs and benefits of sharing a collective identity is limited. Especially regarding ethnically framed identities, the individual is often drawn into them against his or her rational interest. Identity formation is not characterized by an 'open market situation' where individuals can choose between a number of offers equally, but is rather an "incalculable object matter which undermines any attempt of rational action" (Eder et al. 2002: 78). Especially in terms of ethnic mobilization and conflict, individual approaches to collective action are limited, because "[w]ithout a collective identity as the basis for defining oneself as a rational actor the rationalist framework becomes spurious" (ibid: 78).

Finally, the values that should help in gauging the effect of an action cannot be assumed as certain. Individual actors are in continual interaction while negotiating and figuring out what they share with each other and what creates differences. It is the situation in which they interact that has a strong influence on their negotiating of social order in terms of identity and difference: "Their 'rational choice' is made neither before nor after the interaction with others. Preferences and interests are formed in the process of interacting with others" (ibid: 79).

Eder et al. proceed to offer a model that is able to explain rational choice as one factor among others, using the approach of situated action. In this model, they do not assume the existence of strategic actors using collective identities to maximize their individual benefit; collective identities are rather created by pluralities of individuals in concrete social actions. The motivations that drive these individuals can be manifold: "from such greed to a sense of shame or shyness, to a sensitivity to the feelings of others and fear and avoidance of conflict with those present" (ibid: 81). These motivations, combined with other constraints and rational intentions (the existence of which of course Eder et al. do not deny), guide individuals' actions and choices. However, processes of identity construction, maintenance and conflict do not come about solely as the results of individual and deliberate choices. The key aspect for Eder et al. is that these processes are "processes of communicating signs [...] [which] consist in myriad acts of interaction between individual actors as they make conscious and unconscious claims to belonging which are – or are not – recognized by others" (ibid: 81, emphasis in original).

The 'currency' in these processes is made up of "symbolic codes of distinction and classification which are communicated in social situations" (ibid.). It is in these situations that codes and processes are linked, as "[c]odes are embodied in processes of communication" (ibid: 84). Within these processes of communication, Eder et al. locate three structural positions, each of which can make use of codes depending on the circumstances: *Ego*, the actor; *Alter*, who – as *Ego* knows – is the reacting and responding party; and Other – who in principle could participate, but is not addressed directly – such as bystanders, other groups or society as a whole. The possible configurations in which the three relate to each other constitute various social situations.

This Other is the main difference in this model compared to theories dealing with rational choice. Those theories "depend on extremely restricted assumptions about social action in situations" (ibid: 91), in which *Ego* and *Alter* are actors that can negotiate with minimal external pressure over what can be gained and what might be lost. Such models therefore lack "a constitutive element of social situations: the third party in an interaction situation, the Other who is to be taken into account by actors in a situation and who shapes the logic of agency" (ibid: 91). It is this third observer who "opens the analytical perspective to collectively shared ideas, cultural definitions, and communication processes which structure the environment in which single actors make their claims", and it is *Ego's* and *Alter's* actions which are dependent upon the attention and recognition of an observing Other (ibid: 90).

Eder et al. focus on those situations that generate a cleavage between *Ego* and either *Alter* or the Other, especially in identicization processes, because the aforementioned neglect of the Other in rational choice approaches and game theory becomes most evident here: In situations of ethnic conflict, "boundary construction is not only directed against an *Alter*, but also involves the invocation of a third Other as proof, 'recognition' of the construction" (ibid: 91).

Thus, their conclusion is that rational choice exists, but not in the sense of independent choice, motivated by a clear evaluation of personal gains and losses; it is rather a choice that is embedded in situations and public perspective: In real life, when defining his collective identity no actor acts without taking into account the public, which serves as a reference context for staging and negotiating an identity. Impression management not only refers to *Alter* but also to the third party, Other. Claiming an ethnic identity is first of all a form of impression management, and then a struggle for recognition within a society. There is rational action, but it is embedded in situations which transcend the meanings that rational actors attribute to their action (ibid: 92).

It should be stressed again that this approach does not eliminate individual choice. The individual is not acting in an environment that is entirely determined by the Other, thus making it exploitable by an elite. As Eder et al. state: "Leaders often get an intuitive sense of the value of collective identity constructions and can have a steering effect on identity construction, but the process is structured by macro-factors and micro-situations in which actors communicate their identities" (ibid: 84).[3]

ETHNICIZATION: A PROCESSUAL AND LAYERED APPROACH

With this perspective in mind, the focus expands from the individual benefits that a person might have, to the inclusion of the processes in which these "macro-factors and micro-situations" (Eder et al. 2002: 17) advance the creation of collective identities. Eder et al. refer to this process as ethnicization, "the chain of events through which objective conditions of economic or political grievances become the basis of political claims justified by reference to a

3 For a more concrete example of their concept of *Ego*, *Alter* and Other cp. Eder et al. (2002) in which their theoretical model is intertwined with a well-written fictional "storyline of ethnicization" where the development between "Landlandians" and "Alternians" greatly helps to elucidate their argument.

collective identity" (ibid: 17). This chain of events is, however, often examined mainly from a top-down perspective, where a powerful elite is the center of academic (as well as activists') attention. This might lead to the impression that the elites are able to actively control the processes of ethnicization while ordinary people are unaware of their manipulation. I argue that some aspects of ethnicization have become so engrained in society's everyday life that they are difficult to identify as such, even for elite actors. Other aspects may have been initiated by actors in the center of power, but may not develop along the lines of a typical instrumentalist perspective. They might even backfire and harm the interests of the initiator or be taken up and reinforced by actors outside the typical realms of power, and thus develop their own, uncontrolled dynamics.

To account for these dynamics, I have developed a layered model of manifestations and implementations of ethnicization to distinguish between those aspects where dominant reference points of ethnicization have become developed largely independently from external influence, and those processes where actors intentionally engage in and react to ethnicized politics or policies. Nevertheless, there is not always a clear-cut line between the two, and in many cases there is a strong interdependence where one provides the foundation for or reinforces the other and implementations can themselves result in further manifestations over time. However, differences and even contradictions may occur if, for example, long-term developments of ethnicization and their manifestations run counter to implementations of short-term ethnicized political agendas.

Manifestations of ethnicization shall be defined as occurrences of ethnicization that have shaped a certain societal sub-system to such an extent that ethnicity has become a dominant reference point, and associated policies no longer need to be pushed through in order to achieve their implementation. Often policies of ethnicization develop independently from a larger political framework once they become common practice. They therefore also become difficult to change or adjust, even if that were the aim of those actors who put them into practice in the first place. These manifestations have become deeply entrenched in various areas of society in which ethnicity has become a core pillar of a societal sub-system. In the political and economic field, for example, ethnicized manifestations may be characterized by a certain routineness. They have shaped and influenced these areas in such a way that referencing to ethnicity has become a matter of course, or even unavoidable. Some segments of society may contest these aspects, but still they remain the (or among the) main points of reference – even for those who challenge this – because they have gained such a dominant position in politics, policies, and related discourses. Typical examples of manifestations of ethnicization would be an ethnicized party system where

ethnicized groups supersede class-based interests, or an ethnicized economic system where ethnicized group membership determines – either *de facto* or *de jure* – access to resources in the (political) economy. The origins of these manifestations may lie in a colonial system, but other sources of reinforcement must also be involved to explain their persistence.

This is why the manifestations of ethnicization provide a fertile ground for ongoing ethnicized policies, but the circumstances in which these policies are initiated and put into practice – their implementation – are equally important to examine. Analyzing ethnicized policy-making that focuses on top-down structures or similar cause-and-effect chains risks being limited to examining only aspects of instrumentalization. As the term implies, a certain issue or conflict becomes the instrument of another group in order to gain political leverage. In the context of ethnicization, instrumentalization would describe the process of exploitation of ethnicized fault-lines in order to create antagonisms between ethnicized groups with the aim of strengthening one group's position at the expense of others. However, this perspective has its weaknesses: Sticking to the root of the word, an instrument is a tool that is usually used by a person who has a clear idea of the achievable results if the instrument is used properly. Thus, the perspective of instrumentalization is often one that creates a focus on a central or dominant power that not only has a clear-cut goal, but also more or less knows a way that leads to it. As a consequence, this runs the risk of conjuring the image of a 'core of all evil' that is pulling the strings, and which just needs to be removed in order to get rid of the system and affected policies. However, manifestations of ethnicization may have become so prevalent that it is impossible to remove notions of ethnicization by simply identifying and removing a central power that controls the various instruments of ethnicization. It is instead a multitude of actors that incorporate ethnicized policies into their agendas, although their aims and goals may not be primarily based on ethnicized notions. They rather realize that ethnicity is a major reference point on the way to achieving or remaining in their position of power – and power, again, not in terms of any kind of central power, but rather in more widespread terms, across the societal sub-systems. These actors therefore implement policies based upon ethnicization, knowing that there are solid manifestations to build upon. However, with a multitude of actors and various levels of ideological fervor, the impact and direction of these policies in the process of achieving their goals is often unclear. Despite all target-orientation, implementations of ethnicization can only be influenced to a certain degree, and might develop a life on their own, eventually even becoming challenges for those political actors who implemented them in the first place. Sometimes this may lead either to excesses in ethnicized

policymaking, or to contradicting approaches that result in flip-flop policies that need to be topped with layer after layer of policy reactions to conceal their inherent inconsistencies. These two aspects – beneficial and obstructive – that implementations of ethnicization can have for political actors must be addressed, in order to underline the claim that ethnicization in the political system is not merely a top-down approach that can be safely managed and controlled. Examples of implementations of ethnicization would be ethnicized policies governing language or religion, where these are advanced or restricted in their practices in multi-lingual or multi-religious societies. An especially extreme example of ethnicized flip-flop policies would be Malaysia's ethnicized labor migration policies, where at times several hundreds of thousands of undocumented workers were deported from the country, only to be brought back weeks later after the construction sector came to a virtual standstill (Holst 2007).

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The question remains whether a critical take on ethnicity and a shift in the conceptualization of the underlying factors can result in a meaningful new approach to the issues at stake, or whether it remains an academic exercise for the sake of securing one's position. And in fact many scholars go into lengthy deconstructions of the use and accuracy of concepts such as race and ethnicity, but nevertheless fall back on using these same terms to explain the societal systems they are dealing with. However, when categories are being used that lump together large parts of a population, it is almost inevitable that complex cultural and social dimensions are lost to the observer. Especially since race and ethnicity have such a vast scope and are discursively so prevalent, it is often very tempting to just follow the well-trodden paths and refer to the same groups that have been examined for decades and even centuries along the same lines. Authors of well-meaning analyses of 'the Karen', 'the Malay', or 'the Sami' in regard of their respective cultures/societies/plights may certainly have good intentions, but from a scholarly perspective the question remains as to whether such approaches could actually produce meaningful results; presumably, no more than any broad analysis of 'the French', 'the Germans' or 'the Americans' would be able to. Still, it would not be a solution to just leave concepts of race and ethnicity out of the equation altogether. These notions have very real impacts on concrete lives, and simply stating the constructedness would be stopping halfway down the road.

I would therefore propose a two-step approach: Firstly, to identify whether the issue at stake must necessarily be framed along the lines of identity-group categories, especially when a certain degree of conflict is involved. Conflicts 'at home' would first and foremost be examined along the lines of more complex categories, such as class, gender, state power, or center-periphery relations. Certainly, this requires a much deeper understanding of the specific society, but in regard to the resulting findings, this is certainly a much more worthwhile endeavor than oversimplifying one's perspective by using excessively broad categories. Secondly, if the subject of analysis is a conflict in which specific reference to identity groups is obvious and also works as a (key) mobilizing factor, then I would argue that a processual approach provides more accurate results than just taking the group formations as a given. The concept of ethnicization, including the layers of manifestations and implementations, provides a framework which does not reinforce static notions of group identity and belonging, but rather helps to disentangle the manifold ways in which race and ethnicity have become rooted in various societies, and can (and should) even be applied 'at home'.

As a consequence, speaking of 'ethnicized' rather than 'ethnic' groups is more than just another supposedly 'politically correct' term, as it underlines a fundamentally different approach when describing identity-group formation processes: whereas the ascriptive 'ethnic' stands for mostly homogeneous groups, the adjective 'ethnicized' represents not only the constructedness of such concepts but also the powerful processes that lead – at least discursively – to identity-group formation.

When we take up the introductory quote from Mahathir, in which he labeled those who say "forget race" (Mahathir 1970: 175) as either naive or knaves, he is correct if we take him literally: race and ethnicity cannot simply be forgotten. However, he is incorrect if he assumes that not forgetting race and ethnicity means simply accepting them, which would mean, in the end, actually reinforcing them. It remains a not always easy task, both scholarly and in everyday lives, to find a suitable approach to address the issues at stake in different contexts in a meaningful way. The framework of manifestations and implementations of ethnicization can be one of them.

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