

Politicizing ethnicity – ethnicizing politics

Comparisons and entanglements

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When in the course of the year 1990 democratic elections were held for the first time in all republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, political parties with nationalist programs prevailed all over the country. The result of this electoral success was that only a year Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia had all declared their independence, while Serbia and Montenegro joined to form the new Federal Republic of Yugoslavia the following year.

An initial military conflict between Slovenian forces and the Yugoslav People's Army in June 1991 was soon followed by an invasion of Serbian forces in Croatia, which resulted in a brutal war that expanded to involve large parts of ex-Yugoslavia until its end in 1999. About 250,000 people died, sometimes as a consequence of a so-called 'ethnic cleansing'. The massacre at Srebrenica in 1995, when Bosnian Serb army and police units killed some 8,000 Bosnian Muslims, was declared a genocide by the International Court of Justice in The Hague in 2007.

By 2008, the former multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia had disintegrated into the successor states of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Kosovo. Since 1991, about four million people had been forced to leave their homes, in order to meet the stated goal of many politicians and combatants, who hoped to make ethnic and territorial boundaries match in the area of former Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, the frontiers of the new nation-states still remain controversial.

In June 1990, the South American country Ecuador was struck by multi-day strikes, roadblocks and demonstrations. During these events, various ethnic organizations demanded official recognition of the cultural identity, economic

interests and political claims of the country's indigenous population. The protests were aimed at the transformation of a nation-state, which was dominated until the 1980s by a national discourse oriented exclusively toward those members of the population that were considered 'whites' or *mestizos* (people of 'ethnically mixed ancestry'). During the following years political debates and conflicts between indigenous organizations and the democratic governments of the country continued, finally leading to the adoption of a new constitution in 1998, which defined the Ecuadorian state as democratic, pluricultural and multiethnic.

The remarkable thing about the recent Ecuadorian political process is the fact that the level of violence remained low, and no claims or demands for secession were brought forth. On the contrary, during the Ecuadorian-Peruvian border conflicts of the 1990s the Ecuadorian local indigenous population of the affected areas in the southern Amazon region participated in the military defense of the territorial integrity of the nation state.

The political landscape of Ecuador has changed greatly since the 1990s. Today there are numerous civil society organizations, an indigenous political party (Pachakutik Plurinational Unity Movement – New Country) and various indigenous office bearers serving as ministers, constitutional judges, members of parliament, mayors, and provincial governors. In addition, various local and regional autonomy statutes for state-recognized indigenous groups were defined according to the constitutional provisions of 1998 and 2008. The extent of these autonomy rights, and the question of extending such statutes to the Afro-Ecuadorian population are, however, fiercely debated to this day.

The geographical distance between Ecuador and the former Yugoslavia, like the social and political differences between the two, could hardly be greater. However, both cases are comparable as much as they are expressions of a politicization of ethnicity that has become a global phenomenon during the 1990s (Büsches/Psaff-Czarnecka 2007). The reference to ethnic differences between human groups has become a common starting point for political debate. The justification of political viewpoints, actors and practices using ethnic arguments has led to lasting changes in the political sphere. This ethnicization of politics is reflected in discrimination against and – often violent – exclusion of individual social groups (often called 'ethnic minorities' or 'national minorities') from the political community of the nation-state or, on the other hand, in the enforcement of political participation by ethnically defined groups, using quota systems, claims to regional autonomy, or the creation of new independent states.

The cases of Ecuador and the former Yugoslavia also exemplify the Janus-faced character of the ethnicization of politics, which can provoke democratic negotiation as well as political violence. Between these two extremes a variety of

shades, mixed forms and transitions can be observed. The recent immigration debates in Germany, highlighting differing concepts of a ‘dominant culture’ and multiculturalism, have shown that even in countries that traditionally do not see themselves as multi-ethnic states or countries of immigration, the question of how to deal with ethnic identity and difference has become one of the central global political issues today.

The link between ethnicity and politics is not a historically new phenomenon. The question of whether ethnically based claims should be considered socially important, and, if so, how this should be achieved and regulated, is a fundamental political question, and has undergone several conjunctures and variations throughout history. An important break in this history of the intertwining of ethnicity and politics is the birth of modern nationalism. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries the creation of the nation state was accompanied by the “invention of the ethnic paradigm” (Kaschuba 2006: 139–143).

For over a century, it was taken for granted, first in Europe and then in America, that the territorial unity of the nation-state should be based on the correspondence of ethnic and political boundaries. But in other parts of the world too, the entanglement of ethnicity and politics was the model for the founding, political design, and reform of states. In the decolonization process in Africa and Asia during the 1960s, the last global boom of this political doctrine can be observed (Smith 1983).

But since the 1970s, the ideal of the ethnic homogeneity of the nation-state was increasingly questioned by various social movements worldwide. By the 1990s, the protection of minorities, multiculturalism, and pluriethnicity had become key concepts within global political debates.

Following Max Weber (1976) the concept of ethnicity refers to the belief that the cultural identity of a person or a group is based on the idea of belonging to a specific community of descent. It should be emphasized that ethnic and other social identities are essentially based on a combination of self-perception and external attribution. While older, essentialist interpretations have focused mainly on the supposed objective characteristics (language, religion, etc.) of ‘ethnic groups’, more recent constructivist approaches, following Fredrik Barth, have stressed the situational and relational design and changeability of ethnic identities. It has to be noted that, even without sharing the primordial perspective of Clifford Geertz (1994), these constructions or imaginations, and the inventions of tradition that they produce (Hobsbawm/Ranger 1993), are neither self-evident nor arbitrary, but are rooted in concrete historical and social

contexts, and give birth to traditions of invention that, more often than not, survive long-term historical changes (Sheehan 1996).

The constructivist approach of the current research on ethnicity is also reflected in more recent studies on modern nationalism. The concepts of nation and ethnic group have in common the idea of a culturally homogeneous collective. If both ethnic groups and nations can be understood as “imagined communities” (Anderson 1988: 15), the discourse of the nation is generally characterized by its central reference to an existing or desired state.

Since identity politics based on ethnic arguments bind the presence of a group-specific culture to the criterion of descent, they contribute significantly to the production and consolidation of social and political boundaries. From today's scientific perspective, however, nations or ethnic groups are not fixed social groups, as nationalists and ethnic activists like to claim. Rather, the reference to an ethnic or national identity can be seen as a political strategy, or a “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 1988: 13) that social actors use in their struggle for the recognition and enforcement of concrete political goals.

The sociologist Rogers Brubaker (2004: 10) pleads for a distinction between the reifying categories of ethno-political and national activism and the categories of scientific analysis, and for scientists to abstain from involvement with the ‘groupism’ of ethnic or national movements. Ethnic groups and nations should not be understood as social groups, but as patterns of interpretation of reality. From these patterns of social identification and delineation, ethnic or national movements or organizations may emerge – that is, “groups whose members develop a sense of belonging [...] and communicate over a relatively long period of time and continuously interact to achieve a common goal” (Elwert 2003: 263). With regard to the question of the relationship between ethnicity and politics considered here, our analysis should focus on the “practical categories, situational actions, cultural languages, cognitive schemas, discursive frames (frames), organizational routines, institutional forms and political projects” (Brubaker 2004: 27) with which social actors engage in different historical and regional contexts in political debates and practices. This is why and how we can speak of ethnicity as a political resource.

From this perspective a wide range of comparative approaches can be defined that cannot be summed up here in a satisfying manner. In historical science, the comparative approach is used to analyze systematically two (or more) historical phenomena with regard to their similarities and differences, in order to reach a deeper understanding of actions and experiences, historical structures and processes (Haupt/Kocka 1996). While the focus on differences helps us to understand individual historical phenomena, analyzing the

similarities allows us to reach a more general view of large historical structures, processes, and practices. It can be said that every comparative study is looking for both differences and similarities, but often we find a special emphasis on one of the two. This depends both on the interests of the researcher and the object of analysis. We can distinguish between comparative studies, for example, using the criterion of the relative geographical or temporal distance between the analysed historical phenomena in different studies.

According to Magnus Mörner (1992), comparative studies dealing with historical phenomena that are close to each other with regard to space and/or time, and that share a common or similar historical context for the same reason, focus especially on differences. In contrast, a comparison between historical phenomena that are distant in space and/or time, usually emphasizes their similarities.

With regard to our understanding of ethnicity as a political resource, on a macro level of comparison we can analyze for example how the perception of ethnic differences helped to define the borders and inner differentiation of sovereign political communities in different time periods and areas, giving birth to different models of political organization, ranging from (early) modern empires to nation states and multicultural or pluriethnic states (Büschgess 2012).

Regardless of the numerous specificities of the great empires, one of their common key features is the political differentiation and – peaceful or violent – integration of different peoples or ethnic groups (Darwin 2010). In contrast to 19th- and 20th-century nation states, pre-modern empires and their modern successors did not derive their political legitimacy and organization from the cultural homogeneity of the population. On the contrary, imperial political “integration by difference” (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2005: 4) normally exceeded the limits of different ethnically distinguished social and political communities, and on the other hand, these communities were bound, by different, traditional or newly established institutions and practices of domination, to submit to centralized rule.

With the relocation of the source of sovereignty from the ruler or the ruling dynasty to the nation, nationalism has directly contributed to the collapse of empires, by supplying the decisive pattern of argumentation with which the opponents of imperial orders have expressed their criticisms and mobilized their supporters. The imagined community of the nation, and the nation state as its political expression, are based essentially on the postulated accordance of cultural and political boundaries (Smith 1986). The claim of cultural unity of the nation ultimately also applies to those nation states whose official legitimization was initially based less on their ethnic identity than on their political organization. This was the case in both France and the United States. Still, even

in 1882 the French religious historian Ernest Renan characterized the notion of belonging to a nation as a “plebiscite de tous les jours” (cited by Alter 1985: 61), without any reference to an ethnic community. Nonetheless, contemporary colonialism of the Imperial Republic of France offered not democracy but cultural assimilation to their colonial subjects. Although the United States of America is traditionally considered a country of immigrants – a notion reflected in different historical concepts of integration (i.e. melting pot, salad bowl) – attempts to define and defend a national core culture have accompanied all the history of the 19th and 20th centuries, separating the white, Anglo-Saxon protestants from the ‘Indian’ and ‘black’ or ‘Afro-American’ population on the one hand, and impacting upon debates about immigration from Asia or Latin America on the other (Huntington 2004).

If we compare different cases of national movements and nation-state formations, beginning with the breakdown of the *Ancien Régime* during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, followed by the de-colonization processes in Africa and Asia after World War I and II, and up to the breakdown of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe at the end of the 20th century, we can see that the ideology of the nation state is regularly based on an ethnically defined political community.

The ethnic core of the concepts of nation and nation state have provoked growing criticism during the last decades of the 20th century. At the end of the 20th century many so-called ethnic or national ‘minorities’ that have survived within the boundaries of the nation state have claimed cultural recognition and political representation. In view of the ongoing global migration flows, the notion of the culturally homogeneous nation state has definitively proven to be fiction, and seems to be just an intermediate step – or a historical *Sonderweg*? – situated between pre-modern imperial heterogeneity and postmodern diversity.

The decisive political program for the recognition of ethnic diversity has been multiculturalism, which was adopted for the first time as official state policy during the 1970s in Canada. The central goal of then-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau was to strengthen the cultural development and social participation of all social groups defined on the basis of ethnic, religious or linguistic criteria and to promote relations between these different groups (Laczko 1994). In addition to Canada, the USA and Australia are considered the classic examples of countries that pursue an official multicultural policy. In Europe, it is primarily Belgium and Switzerland that are taken as examples, although multiculturalism has been increasingly questioned there during recent times. With regard to its political concept and practical outline, multiculturalism and other related terms and concepts (i.e. pluriethnicity, plurinationality)

ultimately remain faithful to the core argument of nationalism concerning the accordance of cultural and political boundaries. For this reason, multiculturalist positions are often formulated in the language of nationalism. In Canada, ethnopolitical activists define both the Francophone population of the province of Québec and the state-recognized indigenous peoples as ‘nations’, in this legitimizing way their claims to territorial self-government within the Canadian state (Kymlicka 1998).

The language of self-determination that is used by ethnopolitical activists leads us to the meso- and micro-levels of comparative research on ethnicity as a political resource in different world regions, focusing particularly on how ethnically legitimized political agendas are communicated, negotiated, and implemented. As an example, we might consider the concrete implementation of multicultural or pluriethnic policies. Here we can regularly find two key strategies used to ensure political representation and participation of ethnically defined social groups. On the one hand, we can observe the establishment of specific measures to guarantee the political participation of specific ethnic groups within the national political system; on the other hand, local or regional autonomy statutes are implemented for specific state-recognized ethnic groups.

In Germany the abolition of the five-percent hurdle for the South Schleswig Voters’ Association guarantees the political representation of the Danish minority in the state parliament of Schleswig-Holstein (Kühl/Bohn 2005). The implementation of regional administrative autonomy is linked in some countries to historical ‘ethnic enclaves’, as in the case of the total of 562 ‘Indian reservations’ recognized by the US Government, which can in part be traced back to the 19th century. Similar measures can be observed in Colombia in the 1990s, when fifteen *reservas* or *resguardos indigenas* were established and granted autonomy rights (Kloostermann 1994).

With regard to the limits or challenges of comparative research on ethnic identity politics, one general important point has to be taken into account. We must be aware of the fact that localities, nation-states or hemispheres cannot be understood as closed containers, but that more often than not many similarities and disparities between different world regions reflect a geographically far-reaching entanglement of discourses, actors and institutions that have arisen from the increasing transnational flows of people, commodities, and images.

This can be shown for the 1920s with the example of Lenin’s nationality politics, which tried to integrate the various national movements of the late Russian multinational empire into the new political order of the Soviet Union (Kappeler 1993). Lenin’s model was meant to be used repeatedly over the course of the 20th century as a template for legitimacy and the practical implementation

of a political integration of ethnically differentiated populations. This is true even of the most recent heyday of multicultural or pluriethnic politics and states during the 1990s. In Nepal, in the course of the democratic revolution of 1990, the Maoists contributed early and decisively to ethnic mobilization in the Himalayan state and designed a political model that divided the country into autonomous ethnic provinces intended to guarantee the political participation of the population of the country nevertheless divided in different ‘indigenous nationalities’ (Hachhethu 2004).

While the strategy of politicization of ethnicity on the part of the Soviet leadership and the Nepalese Maoists mainly served as a temporary strategy of political mobilization which, it was hoped, would lead in the future to a communist society that would overcome all ethnic and national boundaries. Finally, the concept of nationality has also influenced ethnic movements beyond the socialist world. This is so in the case of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), founded in 1986, which adopted the Soviet concept of nationalities to accentuate the indigenous peoples’ right to political self-determination within the context of a plurinational Ecuadorian state (CONAIE 1997).

The transnational or global dimension of ethnic identity politics can also be seen in the growing number of international meetings and institutions that are dealing with indigenous affairs. In this context, the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (1975-1996) must be mentioned, as well as the UN Working Groups on ‘Minorities’ and on ‘Indigenous Peoples’ set up in the 1990s (Levangie 2008; Kemner 2011). In addition, today’s indigenous organizations not only operate on a local or national level, but act globally in cooperation with other civil society actors and organizations.

Finally, the ongoing internationalization of the negotiations and statutes for the protection of ‘minorities’ and ‘indigenous peoples’ in the 1990s has been accompanied through a worldwide increase in social movements and political demands based on an increasingly standardized “language of ethnicity” (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2012: 63-76). The increasing global attention paid to indigenous interests can also explain why some ethnic activists from various so-called ‘hill tribes’ in Thailand and Bangladesh have quite recently chosen to refer to themselves as ‘indigenous peoples’, although the local cultural traditions do not necessarily include historical references to a particular territory. Comparison seems to be not only a scientific task, but also a political practice of ethnopolitical activists.

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