

Introduction: Ethnicity as a political resource across different historical periods

SARAH ALBIEZ-WIECK

UNIVERSAL OR HISTORICALLY SPECIFIC?

Is ethnicity a universal social categorization that has existed since the beginning of humankind or is it historically contingent, with its beginnings in a specific historical period? Scholars from various disciplines have answered this question quite differently, as do the contributors to this volume. Generally speaking, we can distinguish three groups of arguments: those in the first group assume that ethnicity is a human universal which has always existed (e.g. Antweiler 2009; also this volume; Gat/Yakobson 2013) or at least has done so in a couple of pre-modern societies; those in the second group associate the emergence of ethnicity and/or race with European colonialism (e.g. Quijano 2000; Thomson 2007); while the third group of arguments state that ethnicity is entirely modern (e.g. Hannaford 1996), or at least did not exist before the formation of nation states (e.g. Klinger 2008; Müller/Zifonun 2010). Of course, there also exist intermediate positions, like that of Wimmer (2010: 120), who is convinced that pre-modern territorial states were also interested in ethnic boundaries, but that this interest became much stronger with the formation of the nation states; or that of Takezawa (2005; also this volume) who distinguishes between several dimensions to which she assigns different historical starting points – although she speaks of race rather than of ethnicity. Dealing with colonial authorities and with the state in general is often mentioned as fostering ethnogenesis (e.g. Stark and Chance 2008), and the importance of European overseas expansion and the colonial encounter(s) are often mentioned as an important turning point in the history of ethnicity. The first guiding question for this chapter, therefore, is whether we can conceive of ethnicity without reference to the European

expansion. The second question is twofold and more specific, and concerns the general topic of this volume: Has ethnicity been employed as a political resource in other, especially pre-modern, historical periods? If so, when and where did this apply?

The time period covered by the contributions in this chapter ranges from early medieval times (Pohl) to the present (Sáez-Arance) and includes both specific case studies – which may address rather short- (Manke) or medium-range periods (O’Toole) or span several centuries (Sáez-Arance, Pohl) – and more theoretically oriented texts (Gabbert).

As seems natural, most answers in this chapter are offered by historians, but there is also one contribution from an anthropologist (Gabbert), who is nevertheless quite concerned with historical periods reaching far back into time. Also, there is a strong predominance of scholars working on Latin America. On the one hand, this has to do with the Forum’s internal structure and the unpredictable changes the elaboration of an edited volume often suffers. On the other hand, Latin America seems to be an especially fertile ground in which to seek answers to the guiding questions of this chapter. The whole region was subject to European – mainly Iberian – colonialism from the sixteenth to the 19th century, in the process encompassing different steps in the modernization of the Western world and the emergence of the idea of the nation state. Furthermore, we can talk about colonialism in some parts of the subcontinent even in pre-Hispanic times, as carried out by the Inca, Mexica and Tarascans, among others. The reference to pre-Hispanic times as well as to the colonial experience is an important topic in the discourse of many indigenous movements and NGOs today, which use the colonial oppression as a central argument in their struggle for political rights. They argue that the Europeans in the 16th century encountered ‘native inhabitants’, the indigenous people, whose ethnic identity has persisted in its original form to this day (cp. e.g. CONAIE 2011; *Pueblos y Organizaciones Indígenas del Continente de Abya Yala* 2005). In this they are supported by many scholars, generally implicitly. Many others argue that the Europeans brought the idea of ethnicity, which they more often call race, to the Americas, but also point to the continuous transformation of ethnic identities. It therefore seems especially interesting to look into European conceptions of ethnicity or similar categorizations before the European expansion took place, as Pohl does in this chapter. He also mentions the fact that in European historiography the concept of ethnicity has been linked to (proto-) national narratives since the late 18th century.

Although not addressed by a specific contribution in this chapter, experiences from other parts of the world should also be taken into account when

delving into the history of ethnicity. Two types of comparison seem particularly enlightening: On the one hand the one with the European colonial expansion into Africa which was mainly considerably later than in the American case, and may be referred to as the ‘classic’ period of imperialism which lasted from the 1880s to the First World War (Osterhammel/Jansen [1995] 2012: 26–28). Parallels may be found in the colonialism that took place in parts of Asia and Australia, which, like that in Africa, was mainly carried out by the non-Iberian states. As to Africa, according to many scholars, European colonialism there was instrumental in the creation of ethnic groups and boundaries which did not exist previously (cp. e.g. Ranger 1981; Lentz 2001), although some acknowledge the existence of ethnic markers before this period, as does Marx (2003) for the centralized kingdoms in the Transvaal region of South Africa in the beginning of the 19th century. Contributions on the African perspective in this volume are offered by Feyissa, Pelican, and Widlok. On the other hand, the comparison with non-Western forms of colonization in Asia, such as the case of imperial Japan, as studied by Takezawa in this volume, can offer interesting insights, as can the contributions on post-colonial states in Asia (Holst on Malaysia, Büschges on Nepal among others) or on those who were never (fully) colonized and/or colonized others (Li Xi Yuan on China).

So, can the concept of ethnicity primarily be traced back to European colonial expansion, or might we also envisage it against the background of other empires in history or other cycles of global development? And since when has ethnicity been employed as a political resource?

DEFINITIONS SHAPE ANSWERS AND TERMINOLOGIES

Surprisingly, the answers in this and other chapters of this book (e.g. Holst, Antweiler) as well as in other works do not seem to depend so much on the period or region studied as on the respective definition of ethnicity. Or, to put it more provocatively: It seems possible to find arguments for one’s own position in nearly every region and period, and thereby to interpret the available evidence in favour of one’s reasoning. The definitions used by the scholars are generally closely intertwined with their respective academic backgrounds, as is the terminology employed, the usage of which is to be distinguished as being either emic or etic. The authors are aware of the importance of their definitions and the terminology employed. The most visible and discussed difference in terminology concerns the opposition between *ethnicity* and *race*. The positions in this chapter reflect the most common viewpoints in the academic and socio-political world.

The German (and Austrian) scholars in this section (Gabbert, Pohl, Manke) employ only the term ‘ethnicity’, which reflects to some degree the experience of the Holocaust, after which the term ‘race’ has for the most part been banned from the German public and scientific discourse and, if used at all, is generally placed in quotation marks. This tendency has been strongly supported by the several statements on race by the UN starting in 1950, which favour the employment of the term ‘ethnicity’ instead (Unesco 1969). Scholars from the US, like O’Toole, however, don’t have such reservations about using the term ‘race’, which in their country is still used widely in census data and plays an important (historical) role in political struggles. But even regarding each of these terms separately, definitions and answers to the guiding questions may still be quite different in different cases.

Wolfgang Gabbert, whose text has a rather theoretical focus and spans an especially long period of time and a broad variety of regions, defines ethnicity as “a phenomenon of social differentiation in which actors use cultural or phenotypical markers or symbols to distinguish themselves from others. It is a method of classifying people into categories which include individuals of both sexes and all age groups using (socially constructed) origin as its primary reference.” He uses ‘ethnicity’ as a strictly etic term and highlights that ethnic groups are “imagined communities” not congruent with cultures, kin, or residential groups. He would not speak of ethnic groups existing in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, and comes to the conclusion that ethnic groups are not universal forms of social categorization. He believes, however, that ethnicity as a form of social categorization existed before the European expansion and outside of Europe, but that it was much boosted by European colonialism and the rise of the nation state.

Pohl’s temporal focus on the ‘migration period’ after the fall of the Roman Empire lies mainly prior to Gabbert’s, but in contrast to the latter, Pohl prefers the employment of the term ‘ethnicity’. He is in favor of historicizing the term and is against cultural definitions, but his definition is wider and more operational, and encompasses both emic and etic conceptions. He sees ethnicity as “a principle of distinction between social groupings that can be more or less salient or relevant according to the context”, taking into account external as well as internal ascriptions, and also denotes biological frames of reference in the historical terms. In his opinion, it makes sense to apply the concept of ethnicity to many, but not to all pre-modern societies. Interestingly, he finds important parallels between the politics of the Roman Empire toward alleged ethnic groups and the politics employed by later European colonial empires.

One of these European empires, that of Spain, or more specifically of the Peruvian Viceroyalty, is discussed by O'Toole. According to her, this fully fledged colonial system employed racial discourse which developed out of Iberian ideas of 'blood purity' linked to religion and social categorizations. These racial categorizations were employed by colonial authorities as well as by their subjects. She prefers to use 'race' rather than 'ethnicity' because in her point of view the former term draws attention to "the ways that situations became fixed and [to] their material implications", which she calls "the work of race". But she is of the opinion that ethnicity was also an identity present in colonial Latin America, which mainly differentiated the different racial groups internally through cultural characteristics. Cultural characteristics were also part of the racial ascriptions, which furthermore included concerns with descent, blood and physical characteristics – which, however, were not fixed as they are in modern definitions of race. Though not directly answering the first guiding questions, she hints at the intensification of racial categorizations by the Spanish colonialism and combines emic and etic usages of the term 'race'. When comparing her work to those of other scholars on colonial Latin America, it seems striking that those working on Afrodescendants seem to favour the term 'race' over 'ethnicity'.

Sáez-Arance points in his contribution to the fact that the European colonial enterprises can be seen as a continuation of domestic state-building processes. They, as well as the later Latin American national historiographies, emphasized a presumed evolutionary gap between 'highly developed civilizations' and 'primitive peoples', and alluded to 'pre-conceptions' of ethnicity as deeply rooted in European culture, thereby connecting to ideas about European medieval categorizations such as 'Germans', 'Visigoths' and 'Romans', as studied by Pohl, which were sometimes transferred to Latin America. As Sáez-Arance shows how in current national Chilean historiography and also in the wider society as reflected in some newspapers, assumptions of superiority about the Mapuche still linger.

Cuba was one of the last colonies to gain independence from Spain, only to be subsequently heavily dominated by the US – a domination which ended with the Cuban revolution of 1959. Manke's article addresses this period, particularly focusing on the ethnically marked mobilization of Chinese Cubans in the context of a situation in which the revolutionary discourse tended towards a de-emphasizing of ethnic boundaries.

Another point which distinguishes the different contributions is the importance given to historical and local or emic terminology,¹ as well as to their interdependence with other types of social categorizations.

While Gabbert argues strongly for the historical contingency of terms and for taking into account other types of social categorizations, especially when it comes to premodern periods; Pohl thinks that emic medieval terms such as *ethnē*, *gentes*, or *nationes* can correctly be described as referring to ethnic groups. O'Toole, though having favoured the colonial term *casta* in her earlier work, now argues strongly for the employment of 'race' instead; she also highlights important intersectionalities with gender and class/labour issues. Similarly to Gabbert, Sáez-Arance makes a strong case for emphasizing the concrete temporal and regional contexts of every term, and for deconstructing myths of homogenous identity and criticizing organic and biological metaphors. As Manke studies the history of the 20th century, he has the advantage of being able to access emic categorisations directly via interviews.

ETHNICITY AS A POLITICAL RESOURCE

Another dimension along which to compare the contributions in this section is to ask what relevance they attribute to the employment of ethnicity as a political resource, and how this is realized in the cases studied by them. Answering this question may involve two or even three aspects: On the one hand it is possible to look at how the actors in each case historically used social categorizations to achieve political means. On the other hand, it is also possible to ask how discourses about history are exploited in political debates much later, even today. Lastly, we can also examine the positioning of the scholar.

The first line of enquiry is especially clear in the case study offered by Manke, which researches the agency of the Chinese Cubans defending the revolution and asks whether they employed their ethnic identity as a political resource, researching this aspect on several interacting levels. The article by Pohl aims in a similar direction. Dependent on the sources available, imperial politics are the easiest to analyze, but the agency of elite groups and some ethnic minorities can also be addressed. According to Pohl, the actions such actors take aim at different ends: the reinforcement of ethnic cleavages; the improvements

1 Examples of this can be found in the other chapters of this book, e.g. in Li Xi Yuan's contribution, which elaborates on the Chinese term *minzu*, sometimes translated as 'nationality' and sometimes as 'ethnic group'.

of some groups' status and prerogatives; or the legitimization for ruling – in all such cases there is a definite preeminence on ethnic politics from above. Pohl also addresses the second strand mentioned above, noting that the Early Middle Ages have been regarded as the period of origin of most European nations – but he points out that this process was not as linear and clearly defined as is often presented, and that it included many mythical aspects exploited for political ends. He only sees an intermittent continuity in what he calls the “model of ethnic rule”. Gabbert, too, addresses this hypothesis of some ethnic groups being the ‘forerunners’ of modern nations, but is even harsher in his criticism towards its posterior constructedness than Pohl. As already mentioned, Sáez-Arance bridges back to conceptions of the ‘Other’ fostered by European overseas colonialism, which framed mutual cultural perceptions and justified the quality of the response of the colonial power. The ‘evoking power’ of these ‘ethnic’ categories, in his point of view, were inherited and amplified by the modern nations and legitimized the rule of their elites. He also argues in favor of a reflection of the positioning of the scholar *vis-à-vis* current political debates; something which Gabbert tries to stay out by restricting himself to an analysis of the scientific realm. O’Toole is the author who most clearly positions herself as a scholar by making clear that she consciously chooses the term ‘race’ over *casta*, *calidad* or ‘ethnicity’ to highlight the impact of slavery, colonial exclusion and discrimination, the effects of which can still be felt today.

To a certain point, this can be connected to the current debate about indigeneity which has been linked to European (settler) colonialism (De la Cadena 2007: 203), although Merlan has convincingly argued that it is mainly a product of the ‘postcolony’ in an “effort to move away from colonial relations” (2009:319).

In every single strand mentioned, one issue that shapes social categorizations, among them ethnicity, is more or less visibly present: power relations. They are detectable in the imperial ascriptions, and often transferred to legal categorizations, in the Roman Empire and Early Medieval kingdoms as well as in prehispanic and Hispanic colonial Latin America. They are also traceable in the relationships between settlers of Northern and Central European descent, between the Mapuche and the Chilean state, and between the Chinese militia and the leaders of the Cuban revolution. The authors of this volume describe various elites’ strategies of domination, as well as those employed by the subordinated in reaction.

METHODOLOGY

Texts are the principal sources the authors in this chapter use to investigate ethnicity as a political resource. For those scholars researching periods stretching far back – mainly Gabbert and Pohl – archaeological remains would be an alternative source. However, archaeological data present a problem in that they do not tell us anything about group consciousness, and ethnic boundaries are not necessarily marked by extant remains of material culture (Albiez-Wieck 2013). Or, as Quilter (2010: 228–29) puts it, the “one-to-one correspondence of an archaeological assemblage with an ethnic or cultural group” has already been undermined by many studies. Gabbert shares my skepticism about making inferences about ethnicity on the basis of archaeological data. He is even cautious about contemporary texts about distant periods such as pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica or the European Middle Ages, since they reflect mainly elite points of view. In this regard, Pohl is less prejudiced, and seems to judge it to be possible in principle to gain insights based on the richness of the archaeological record, but is quite skeptical regarding the possibilities offered by data from the early medieval period.

All authors agree on the importance on focusing of the precise meaning and context of the terminology employed in the sources, since the historical meaning might differ from that valid today. Manke is the only author who draws on oral history for his case study, which enables him to gather subjective meanings and identifications more easily.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS

Many aspects of the contributions in this chapter have already been mentioned, but I want to very briefly sum up their content to facilitate the readers’ orientation throughout the chapter.

The article by *Wolfgang Gabbert* has a rather theoretical focus, and elaborates widely on conceptualisations and dimensions of ethnicity. To support his argument that probably “ethnicity was rarely present before the 17th or 18th century AD or cannot be proven due to the lack of data”, he draws on an ample variety of examples, ranging from Ancient Greece to that of present-day Tukanoans in the Northwest Amazon. He lingers a bit longer on the case study of pre-Hispanic central Mesoamerica.

Walter Pohl’s argumentation is in many aspects contrary to Gabbert’s. His temporal and regional focus is on Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages,

especially the 5th and 6th centuries AD, where he detects the emergence of an ethnic rule. He argues that discourses of ethnicity and political strategies highly influenced later perceptions of identity and otherness.

Rachel Sarah O'Toole presents the strategies adopted by people of color in a 17th-century Peruvian city to maintain and improve their status, making delicate distinctions when employing colonial terminology in the legal record. These examples are used to demonstrate how race was constructed in colonial Latin America on multiple axes.

Antonio Sáez-Arance's case study is about the current and historical conflicts in southern Chile and the present-day historiographic and political debates about the role of the Mapuche activists and the violent so-called 'pacification of the *Araucanía*' in the 19th century. He points to the homogenizing and often racist lines of argument used by historians as well as journalists.

Compared to most of the other contributions, *Albert Manke's* text analyses a rather short period of time, framed by the larger scope of Chinese migration to Cuba since the early 20th century. By addressing the period of the early Cuban revolution, he relates the situation of the members of the 'Popular Chinese Militia' in this new setting. However, by drawing on oral history, among other sources, he shows the uniqueness of the ethnicization of this political conflict.

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