Introduction: Ethnicity as a political resource in different regions of the world

MARIO KRÄMER

Consider the following political events and developments in recent years: the riots and xenophobic violence against African immigrants in Post-Apartheid South Africa; violent ethnic mobilizations in former Yugoslavia, and the genocide in Rwanda in 1994; nativist right-wing politics in today's Europe and their demands for an end to multiculturalism; Scotland's and Catalonia's claims to independence; indigenous mobilizations in India and Latin America; and the resistance of some African and Latin American governments to agreeing to classify ethnic minorities as 'indigenous', in order to prevent the emergence of plurinational states.

Is it possible and analytically fruitful to compare these different uses of ethnicity as a political resource across different regions of the world? What dimensions and levels of comparison might be useful, and what may be accomplished with a comparative perspective? What are the similarities and differences between 'comparison as scientific task' on the one hand and 'comparison as political practice' on the other? Is it possible to neatly separate the two, or do they go hand in hand when it comes to the use of ethnicity as a political resource?

The four contributions in Section B examine these and other questions from different methodological angles: while Dereje Feyissa and Meron Zeleke, and Li Xi Yuan focus on case studies of specific ethnic minorities and their relationships with their respective nation states, Michaela Pelican makes use of an intra-regional comparison of the political trajectories of three 'indigenous peoples' in Africa. Christian Büschges in turn distinguishes between macro- and meso-/micro-levels levels of comparison and illustrates his arguments with selected examples from different world regions.

At the outset of his contribution on the 'ethnicization of politics', *Christian Büschges* compares the war in former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s with political protests by various ethnic organizations in Ecuador at about the same time: the protests in Ecuador led to political debates between indigenous organizations and the government, and a new constitution was adopted in the late 1990s. Levels of violence remained low, although the extent of autonomy rights is still fiercely debated today. On the other hand, most Europeans are aware of the terrible consequences the war in former Yugoslavia had for human lives and societies in the Balkan states. With regard to our thematic interest, Büschges argues that both cases are comparable and are expressions of a phenomenon he names the 'ethnicization of politics', which he understands as a global development evident since the 1990s. However, the outcomes of specific instances of the 'ethnicization of politics may be very different, from political violence and even war to comparably peaceful democratic negotiations.

Büschges proposes that we analyse situational actions, discursive frames, organizational routines and political projects in order to understand the relationship between ethnicity and politics. From a social science point of view, nations or ethnic groups are not fixed, homogenous entities as national or ethnic entrepreneurs often claim. References to national and ethnic identities serve as a political strategy that is used to gain or consolidate political power. Büschges argues in favour of a comparative approach to look for both differences and similarities in the use of ethnicity as a political resource – although comparative studies often focus on only one of the two. On a macro-level of comparison, Büschges claims that "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". According to Büschges, the ideology of the nation state is based on an ethnically defined political community, and this 'ethnic core' has met increasing resistance from ethnic or national minorities in the late 20th century. In his view, "the notion of the culturally homogeneous nation state has definitively proven to be fiction", and he asks whether it is just a historical *Sonderweg* "situated between pre-modern imperial heterogeneity and postmodern diversity". On a meso-/micro-level of comparison, he suggests, we should focus on "how ethnically legitimized political agendas are communicated, negotiated, and implemented". Regarding pluriethnic policies there are two key strategies adopted to further the aims of national and ethnic minorities: i) specific measures to guarantee political participation, and ii) regional autonomy statutes.

What about the limits of or challenges related to comparative research on ethnicity as a political resource? According to Büschges, it is impossible to understand the similarities and differences between different world regions without taking into account the transnational flow of actors, institutions and discourses. In his view, the ethnicization of politics always has a transnational dimension. One recent example is the notion and discourse of indigeneity: there are a growing number of indigenous organizations and institutions worldwide dealing with indigenous affairs. These organizations not only act on a local or national level but also operate transnationally in cooperation with civil society organizations.

Büschges concludes with a brief but significant comment: that (social) scientists are not the only ones who know how to compare (at least, when they consider a comparative approach to be relevant), and indeed, ethnopolitical activists and organizations may be even better at doing so in the interests of achieving political power and legitimizing the use of ethnicity as a political resource. Furthermore, and as the contribution by Feyissa and Zeleke illustrates, it is not only local political activists or ethnic entrepreneurs who push on with the ethnicization of politics. In some instances international NGOs lay the foundations for the politics of ethnicity – for example, by labelling and advertising certain groups as 'indigenous' and thus giving such 'indigenous groups' the opportunity to start and enforce their struggles for power and resources.

Dereje Feyissa and *Meron Zeleke* examine the notion and discourse of indigeneity, which Büschges understands as a transnational aspect of the ethnicization of politics. The authors compare, in terms of both the 'original' indigenous movement in North America with similar movements in the African context. Their main focus, however, is on a detailed case study of the Anuak indigenous movement, and of the Ethiopian government's reactions to the discourse of indigeneity. Feyissa and Zeleke point to the potential problems and conflicts that may arise if one model or concept is uncritically transferred from one regional context to the other. They argue that the indigenous movement's claims are less contested in the Americas as compared with Africa, mainly due to a different settlement history with more clear-cut cleavages between native populations and European settlers. Indigenous movements in the Americas were able to put pressure on the United Nations, which adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007. This also had an impact on several African states and various groups of people: they adopted and applied the powerful term 'indigenous' in order to improve their political, economic, and social situations.

Feyissa and Zeleke make clear that the application of the term 'indigenous' in Africa is not only contested by the political actors and institutions involved

but also among scholars from different disciplines. Whereas some argue that indigeneity is an empowering discourse for marginalized groups, others criticize or even condemn the notion of indigeneity and its use as a political resource. Their critique has at least three aspects; they argue: i) that Africa is different from other world regions due to its more complex and ongoing "histories of migration, assimilation and conquest" (referring to Pelican; see also below); ii) that the concept of indigeneity as it is defined by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights is "too broad to be useful", at least in the Ethiopian context; and iii) that the notion of indigeneity and the related political claims are largely "externally driven" – that is, that the discourse of indigeneity is "imported" by NGOs and applied to specific hunter/gatherer and/or pastoralist groups in various African countries, and that these groups are thus "essentialised" as so-called indigenous peoples.

In order to study the politics of indigeneity in Africa, Feyissa and Zeleke suggest two comparative approaches: the first involves investigating why most African governments resist it, while the second involves research into how local actors in Africa appropriate the concept and internationally legitimized discourse of indigeneity so as to reframe claims to power and resources. With regard to the resistance put up against such actions by African governments, Feyissa and Zeleke distinguish three general objections: i) many African governments refer to the "dynamic population movement in all directions at various times". and thus argue that *all* Africans are indigenous; ii) some governments have adopted a modernist perspective and label indigenous claims as a form of cultural essentialism; and iii) several others again are concerned about "the conflict-generating potential of the term 'indigenous' when it is used in the historical and exclusive sense". The Ethiopian government is one of the most vocal in its critique of the concept and discourse of indigeneity, and also puts forward an additional objection: the concept is seen as irrelevant in the new federal order of the Ethiopian state. The government has recognised the rights of ethnic groups to self-determination, and has thus gone beyond the demands of the global indigenous movement – at least on paper. According to Feyissa and Zeleke, the problem is not the legal framework but the federal encroachment into regional and local autonomy. The Ethiopian government has adopted an alternative terminology – that of 'Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' – which, from its perspective, renders the term 'indigenous' irrelevant.

If we look at the local appropriation of the notion and discourse of indigeneity, the Anuak case study illustrates how an NGO (with the programmatic name 'Cultural Survival') defined this group as indigenous in several publications in the 1980s. Only about a decade later, this label was then

used by Anuak political actors as a tool in their struggle for power and resources in the Gambella region. The establishment of the Gambella regional state in 1991 "has put a new premium on the regional politics of number". In comparison to their more numerous Nuer neighbours, the Anuak are in a minority position, and use their supposed status as 'first-comers' to legitimate their claims as indigenous people. With the assistance of the Anuak diaspora, they "insert Anuak politics into global civil society" and thereby challenge the modernist paradigm of the Ethiopian state. The discourse of indigeneity also enabled the Anuak to achieve a dominant political status in the Gambella region until a power-sharing arrangement was introduced in 2005. Feyissa and Zeleke show that the application of the notion of indigeneity fuelled existing tensions between Anuak and Nuer, since the latter also claimed to be indigenous peoples of the region and were recognized as such by the by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

The authors conclude by rejecting the concept of indigeneity with regard to the Ethiopian context because of its lack of usefulness and because of the inherent potential for (violent) inter-group conflict; they rather view a functioning federal system with a robust minority rights regime as a better way to promote specific cultural rights and the common good.

The contribution by *Michaela Pelican* also focuses on the concept and discourse of indigeneity, and particularly on the political dimensions as exemplified in the international indigenous peoples' movement. A comparison of the way that the concept and discourse of indigeneity is interpreted in different regions of the world reveals the strongly politicized character of indigenous identities and indigenous rights movements in Africa, which differentiates them from some of their counterparts in other regions of the world, such as the Americas and the Pacific, where indigenous identities have a much longer history and, besides their political uses, may be filled with historical memories, cultural practices and emotional attachment.

Pelican argues that indigeneity has been a highly contested concept, particularly in Africa and Asia, where indigenous rights movements have only recently gained significance. Within the past twenty years, many ethnic and minority groups in Africa have laid claim to indigeneity on the basis of their political marginalization and cultural distinctiveness in their country or region of residence. They have drawn inspiration from the United Nations definition of indigenous peoples as a legal category with collective entitlements, and have linked up with the global indigenous rights movement. With the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007 many

African governments have made attempts to integrate the indigenous rights discourse into their policies and development programs – with varied outcomes.

To give an idea of the varied experiences and political trajectories of indigenous peoples in Africa, Pelican draws on three case studies: Mbororo pastoralists in Cameroon, Maasai pastoralists in Tanzania, and San hunter-gatherers in Botswana. She outlines commonalities and differences and argues that there is no single, coherent indigenous rights movement in Africa, but rather a variety of movements which are shaped by their divergent national and local contexts. The three cases have in common that the groups were able to use indigeneity as a political resource. The movements went through various phases: from expectation and success to disillusionment and pragmatism. As part of this process, they adopted changing and alternative strategies to deal with the adverse consequences of their claims and to improve their respective situations. While in the Mbororo case indigeneity has remained a viable category of identification, the Maasai in Tanzania have shifted from an indigenous rights discourse to a livelihoods discourse, and the San in Botswana have largely withdrawn from the political sphere, concentrating on daily coping strategies at the local level.

Relevant factors shaping the different outcomes of the three indigenous rights movements include the groups' historical and economic situations within their national frameworks, as well as the divergent approaches of the specific national governments in relation to indigenous and minority rights discourses. Here it is important to distinguish between governments that promote a multicultural vision of their respective nations (e.g. Cameroon), and those that promote national identity over regional or ethnic identities and prefer to provide differential treatment on the basis of economic rather than cultural differences (e.g. Botswana, Tanzania). From this point of view, the use of indigeneity as a political resource has proven most effective and lasting in the Cameroonian case, while within the Mbororo community it has engendered disagreement over the cultural and social appropriateness of identifying as an indigenous people. In this sense, for most Mbororo, indigeneity has remained only a political identity, and has not (yet) become a source of shared meaning and belonging; indeed, it is doubtful if it ever will.

Finally, the contribution by *Li Xi Yuan* discusses the minority policy in contemporary China and its impact on ethnic conflict between ethnic minorities and the Han majority population. The case study of Uyghur (and African) migrants in the Xiaobei quarter of Guangzhou illustrates the articulations of ethnic identities and their use as a political resource. Li Xi Yuan argues that the Chinese minority policy shapes ethnic identifications and boundaries on the one hand and the relationship between majority and minority populations on the

other. However, she claims that the central government's minority policy "no longer matches the current ethnic diversity of China's urban centers that has resulted from the past twenty years of economic opening-up coupled with internal and international migration". The minority policy was first implemented in the 1950s in order to address the imbalance between the Han majority and other minorities (*minzu*). More precisely, the policy was implemented within the *minzu* autonomous districts and was thus bound to specific territories.

Xiaobei is a multiethnic quarter, with Uyghurs and Africans being the most numerous immigrant communities. They occupy separate economic niches, and most Uyghurs settled in Xiaobei after several instances of ethnic conflicts in 2009. In one of these violent conflicts, Uyghur and Han workers clashed in June 2009 in a factory, leaving two Uyghur workers dead and about 120 injured. It was the beginning of a series of ethnic conflicts between Uyghur and Han in the months to come. The impact of these conflicts on Uyghur migrants in Guangzhou was significant: the working and living conditions deteriorated and many Uyghur moved to Xiaobei quarter. Furthermore, the self-identification of Uyghurs shifted, from an identity as one of numerous Chinese ethnic minorities to a more deliberately emphasized religious identity as Muslims.

In order to explain the origins and outcomes of the ethnic conflicts in 2009, Li Xi Yuan points to the so-called Western Development Plan that was implemented in 2000. It poured billions of US dollars into Xinjiang (the Uyghur autonomous district) and created distribution conflicts between Uyghurs and Han, who were seen as 'invading' the regional and local economies. The plan thus increased (instead of decreased) ethnic competition and conflicts in Xinjiang. The Guangzhou government enforced control over Uyghur migrants in the aftermath of the ethnic conflicts in 2009, and the migrants moved to Xiaobei to avoid the increasing pressure that was put on them. According to Li Xi Yuan, the Uyghur migrants in Guangzhou also started to use religion as a political resource in a hostile political environment, and the strengthening of a Muslim identity served as a shield to protect the Uyghur migrant community from the Chinese state.

Li Xi Yuan concludes that the Chinese minority policy, which "could once maintain a balance between the majority and the minority in the relatively homogeneous society that existed before", has reached its limits due to migration, urbanisation and diversification in contemporary China. Ethnicity and ethnic conflicts remain a sensitive topic, and the Xiaobei case demonstrates that people continue to make use of ethnicity as a political resource and that "the frontier has now moved from marginal ethnic regions to central city areas".