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Tackling Ethnicity from Different Sides

Marc Howard Ross' Work on Culture and Conflict

A Review Article

Günther Schlee

Asked to write a review of Ross¹, I had a brief look at this fascinating volume and then decided to do just that. In the course of reading, however, I found that the book is actually part of a kind of trilogy, somewhat unevenly distributed in time (two volumes in 1993² and the one in 2007). Ross (2007: 13) refers to the two earlier volumes saying that “[e]valuating competing theories of ethnic conflict is not a goal here as I have treated this

1 Ross, Marc Howard: Cultural Contestation in Ethnic Conflict. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 360 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-69032-4. Price: € 17.99.

2 Ross, Marc Howard: The Culture of Conflict. Interpretations and Interests in Comparative Perspective. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. 240 pp. ISBN 0-300-05273-1.

Ross, Marc Howard: The Management of Conflict. Interpretations and Interests in Comparative Perspective. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. 226 pp. ISBN 0-300-05398-3.

question in prior publications.” He then (2007: 13 f., 14, fn. 13) summarizes his earlier findings at some length. The 1993 volumes are thus presented as the theoretical framework into which the rich case studies of the 2007 volume are meant to fit or to which they at least somehow relate. I understood that as an invitation to read all three volumes. I asked the editors of *Anthropos* for some more space to expand the review into a review article about all three books, and they generously complied. While the recent volume (2007) is richest in historical detail and political observations, “The Culture of Conflict” (1993a) is the most ambitious of the three volume in its theorizing. I, therefore, take it as a starting point and discuss the three volumes in chronological order: Ross 1993a, 1993b, and 2007.

As the “The Culture of Conflict” is no longer a new book, let me give one more reason (apart from the references to it in Ross 2007) for going back to it. In my view, its findings are important and of lasting value. Many futile debates, both past and present, would not have occurred, or could have been greatly abbreviated, if more people had read it.

The last time I went online to check was in November 2008, in rural Sudan, where the internet connection is not particularly fast. There I got 2,750,000 Google hits in 0.18 seconds for “resource-based conflicts” and 820,000 hits in 0.19 seconds for “identity-based conflicts.” I found that to be somewhat frustrating, because I have been trying to convince people that there is no such thing as a “resource-based conflict” or an “identity-based conflict” for a long time now, beginning before these terms became fashionable. My position is that there is a resource aspect in all conflicts and that, in these same conflicts, identification plays an equally important role. In fact, these two aspects of any conflict never compete with each other on the same scale of importance, because they address quite different questions. The resource question concerns *what* people are fighting about, while the identity questions concern *who fights whom* and *who fights alongside of whom*; or, to combine the two identity questions in one, *who takes whose side against whom*. One can say that one kind of question is about the objects of a conflict, while the other one is about the subjects. The resource question (whether a conflict is about oil, water, employment opportunities, or power – which can be an aim in itself or an indirect resource for the acquisition of other resources) never determines the identification of friend and foe. There is no commodity determinism. I say that there is no “determinism”, but there may be subtle influences between the kinds of

resources contested and the identification processes leading to the choice (or affirmation) of persons to be included as group members or allies or to be excluded from participation or even fought as enemies. Whatever these influences may be, they are never strong enough to allow us to predict in a strict sense who is going to side with whom. The world of conflict is full of unexpected instances of alliance formation and fissioning, which often occur where people who focus only on the resource map least expect them. Applications of stereotypes to enemies and justifications for including people in groups and alliances are most often made with reference to such dimensions of identification as ethnicity, religion, nationality, historical affiliation, or language. None of these are universal or eternal; all of them are constructs of the human mind. But these are the categories that happen to have evolved and become dominant in current political discourses, globally, regionally, and locally. And wherever these *who* categories are used, we find them in the context of a *what* question: What or, rather, which resource belongs or should belong to whom?

Had more people had a look at Ross (1993a), the barren and misleading dichotomy of identity-based and resource-based conflicts might never have developed.³ His position on the issue is not as blunt and basic as mine, but it combines well with it and could be used for purposes of refinement. Like myself, he abstains from dichotomizing conflicts according to the putative dominance of either the identity or the resource question; and he distinguishes forms of identification and kinds of resources analytically and then observes their interplay empirically – which is just what one would expect a scientist to do.⁴ One special feature of his

3 Rothman and Olson (2001), who include Ross (1993a, b) in their references and nevertheless make a great deal of “identity-based conflicts” versus “resource-based conflicts,” should have known better. I have had a look at some of the literature citing Ross and some reviews about his work only after writing this article. Rather than disrupting the flow of my argument, I have, therefore, decided to relegate comments on the secondary literature to the footnotes. Eriksen (2008: 470), in his review of Ross (2007), also recognises that Ross cannot be subsumed under either of such dichotomizing labels. “The argument ... is mainly directed against the so-called ‘realists’ of political science, whose view is that conflicts are fought over scarce resources conventionally defined ... but it may also be invoked against ... cultural determinism.”

4 Strangely, for anthropologists, this no longer seems so evident. Rather than finding and refining generalizations on the basis of empirical data, many are more interested in proving why it is impossible to do this and naive to attempt it. Others strive at originality by coining new concepts, which are then

perspective is his concern with the cultural perception of resources. The subtitle of both 1993 volumes is “Interpretation and Interests in Comparative Perspective,” and in these volumes he asks what makes a resource valuable or what makes something a resource. It is here, in the cultural attribution of practical and symbolic values, that things are interpreted as resources and interests are attached to them. We shall note below that the interaction between resources or interests, on one hand, and identifications and interpretations, on the other, could have been pursued much further.

Summarizing his approach, Ross (1993a: 21) explains: “In short, a culture of conflict is what people in a society fight about, whom they fight with, and how they go about it.” This may sound basic, but is important as a starting point, as it keeps the identity and the resource aspects analytically separate and helps to avoid many pitfalls, such as the premature and all too frequent conclusion that “ethnic conflicts” are “caused” by ethnic differences or the already mentioned fallacious distinction between “identity-based” and “resource-based” conflicts. There are, however, also problems with Ross’s way of looking at culture and conflict.

One problem is that the question of what shapes this culture of conflict is hardly asked. In many instances in the book, the emphasis is on culture as an independent variable, as if culture shapes conflicts but conflicts do not shape culture. The other problem is hidden in the phrase “in a society.” The singular form implies a bounded and well-defined unit. In many cases such well-defined units could be shown to be artefacts of anthropological writing, i.e., of the tradition of writing *monographs* in the triple sense of one author writing one book about one people. Especially in the context of conflict, the idea that “a society” in the singular is the appropriate unit of study is problematic. In conflicts, units of social organization may change their composition, and what appeared to be “a society” at the beginning of the conflict may no longer be one, or may no longer be the same one, at the end of it. Distant relationships may be given a new emphasis that they did not have before. New alliances may be forged, and new group members may be recruited if the enemy is perceived to be numerically or technologically superior. Identities and alliances are widened if one set of actors feels the need to mobilize more people in order to strengthen a weak hold on a particular resource. Conversely, they are

defined more narrowly and exclusively by people who feel strong, i.e., who do not perceive a threat to their possession of resources and who want to share them with as few others as possible. At the conclusion of a conflict, losers may join the winners. They may be incorporated, at first, in an inferior position, e.g., as slaves, herd boys, concubines, or second wives; and then, gradually, over the years or over the generations, they may improve their status and become full members. Conflict can change boundaries, be it of groups, or of their territories, or both. A conflict theory which takes “a society” as a fixed unit of analysis will hardly be able to deal with these changes.

This shortcoming cannot be blamed on Ross. It is inherent in the material he uses. He has studied ethnographic monographs on various “societies” and databases derived from such monographs, in particular the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) and the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS) developed by Murdock and White. He has then sought statistical correlations between different features of these societies and the characteristics of the conflicts they engage in. His findings are by no means trivial.

As there is no space here to summarize the whole book, let me focus on one theory addressed by Ross, namely the one about cross-cutting ties. These are found to have different effects, depending on whether they are internal or external. Cross-cutting ties are found to be negatively correlated with internal conflict and to be weakly correlated or uncorrelated with external conflict. If, inside “a society,” there are multiple reference groups (defined by locality, descent, professional role, etc.) which overlap (e.g., if local groups are made up of different clans that are also found elsewhere), this is found to be negatively correlated with conflict. The underlying causal mechanism is that a person one opposes in one capacity might be badly needed in another. Therefore, in most of the literature, cross-cutting ties are believed to create social cohesion and to prevent or to de-escalate conflict.⁵

used as catch-all terms to describe complex phenomena, new “glasses” for seeing the entire world differently, so to say, rather than at making distinctions and defining variables.

5 In some cases, not among the ones studied by Ross, cross-cutting ties, contrary to the peace-enhancing character attributed to them by Gluckman (1966), can even be found to have escalating effects. Among the Tauade of New Guinea, where local groups cross-cut descent groups, the first victims of revenge killings tend to be the members of the clan that has just become hostile and who live in one’s own midst; and these killings may then lead to a full-scale war (Hallpike 1977). As the people Hallpike found to be at war with each other intermittently were all “Tauade”, Ross would have classified this violence as “internal.” Harrison (1993) describes a dynamic of conflict in which violence is directed against outsiders with whom rivals in one’s own village

In Ross's discussion, cross-cutting ties are relevant for external conflicts only insofar as they strengthen internal cohesion, thus enabling people to engage in external conflicts successfully – especially in societies without central control. In cases of politically centralized societies, this effect is absent or negligible, because central organization provides other mechanisms for the recruitment of a fighting force. No cross-cutting ties appear to exist with the external enemy, or at least Ross does not discuss such ties. The problem, here, has already been addressed above with reference to the definition of “a society”: How does one draw the boundary between external and internal?

Internal peace and shared organizational or political forms, such as age sets, a king acknowledged by all, or a common cult, are often central elements of the definition of a group. David Turton (1994) rejects the label “ethnic groups” for the smaller peoples of the lower Omo valley in southwestern Ethiopia (although they are linguistically distinct, they have their distinctive forms of cultural habitus and are referred to as ethnic groups by everyone else). He prefers to call them political groups, because the reason for their existence is joint defence. Sometimes, depending on the circumstances, decimated groups, too weakened to maintain a separate existence, have to combine with others and are obliged to change their language and “culture” in the process. At this scale, although there may be fights and killings within a political/ethnic group, organized group violence (war) is external almost by definition. But does that mean that there are no cross-cutting ties? There are. People are aware of clans and fragments or remnants of clans, and some might have clan brothers or people with whom they share a vaguely recollected affiliation to now extinct groups in other political/ethnic groups. People along the lower Omo are aware of a history of recombination of clans and clan fragments into changing ethnic configurations.

It goes without saying that, in complex societies, there are cross-cutting ties involving millions of people on even higher levels. These ties may be and often are external to ethnic groups and nations. People belong to different nations but share a church affiliation; they might belong to different states but share a language, etc. People belonging to different language communities or living in different parts of the world are united by a world religion such as

Islam or Christianity. A fuller discussion of cross-cutting ties in conflict theory certainly cannot end with its effect on the internal cohesion of small communities.

Possibly because of his dependence on established anthropological conventions and because of his choice of “a culture” or “a society” as a starting point, Ross identifies many ways in which culture or “psychocultural” factors and “identity” shape perceptions of resources and goals and influence the level and kind of conflict. He never turns the perspective around to ask how material incentives or political and economic aims, or even the course of conflicts themselves influence cultural identification, be it by gradually modifying the symbolic content and the normative implications of an identity or by inducing people to convert from one cultural identity (e.g., ethnic, national, or religious) to another. The same applies to “structure.” He uses “structure” exclusively as an independent variable. He does not ask how structures (groups, categories, identifications, political forms, boundaries) change in response to the actions and decisions of people engaged in a conflict.

Although in the sister volume (1993b: 192), Ross observes that “the substance of conflicts, the parties, and their goals change over time,” he does not discuss a single case in which the composition of the parties has changed in the course of a conflict. Such a change of composition would entail changing cultural identifications or self-definitions, changing interests (the interests of a group would not necessarily remain the same if the composition of the group changes), and changing standards of behavior. Cases of reaffiliation for strategic reasons or the loss of a separate identity following defeat and submission would have been the strongest tests for the “cultural” factors, which appear to be so pervasive in Ross's analysis. How much of their “culture,” “disposition,” or “socialization” can people throw overboard if they are forced to do so at gunpoint or if they are facing starvation after expulsion from their economic or ecological niches?

I suppose that for many “social” anthropologists (including myself, I admit), Ross's diction is too heavily psychological. In his discussion of Gorer (1993a: 92, especially fn. 16), he explains that this author was “quite ready to move from a Freudian interpretation of experiences on the individual level to a social interpretation.” He could have said the same thing about himself, but prefers to leave his own relationship to Freud implicit. Statistically, he finds that “psychocultural” factors, basically meaning socialization practices, explain much of the variation in conflict behavior.

maintain relationships. This, too, seems to be a case in which cross-cutting ties are used to generate rather than to prevent conflicts.

Ross engaged in this exercise at a time when deconstructionism was at its height, and anthropologists tended to deny the usefulness of any of the findings of their own discipline. Maybe that is why it took a political scientist to take anthropological writings seriously, and to use them for a large-scale comparative project.⁶ And one must say that Ross has done quite well in handling anthropological data. The lack of anthropological training only shines through in very few places.⁷

Ross was aware that, by 1993, fashion in anthropology had moved away from cross-cultural studies and that his interest in large-scale comparison was “in contrast with many interpretationists, particularly in anthropology, who want to render an account only of individual cases and profess no interest in generalization” (1993a: 68).

In the volume on conflict management, Ross (1993b) takes up the distinction between structural and psychocultural causes of conflicts, which corresponds to the dichotomy between interests and interpretations.⁸ Conflict management needs to look at both. Purely incentive-based approaches tend to ignore the cultural load of certain issues. Cross-culturally, values are not expressed in the same currency, and what appears as an incentive to some may not be much of an incentive to others. Understanding the fears and sensitivities of the other side and reflecting on one’s own are among the most important steps in making these currencies convertible and putting things on the negotiation table. Ross allows us a deep look into the toolbox of conflict management and conflict mediation by discussing all sorts of organizational and procedural setups

that enhance empathy, reduce fear, and soften hardened positions, thus making them negotiable.

Intercultural comparison is taken up again in a description of forms of conflict management in societies with low levels of conflict. These are societies which are also characterized by lenient and caring childcare and relatively weakly marked gender identities. So, the absence of harsh, macho dispositions results in low levels of conflict, and specific forms of social monitoring and community involvement lead to non-violent forms of resolution when conflicts do arise.

In rendering the chain of thought that leads from Ross (1993a, 1993b) to Ross (2007), I quote at length, restricting my comments to footnotes: “The roots of this inquiry [Ross 2007] lie in an earlier study I conducted on cross-cultural differences in conflict and conflict management in 90 pre-industrial societies (Ross 1993a; 1993b). That analysis showed, first, how both structurally rooted interests and psychoculturally based identities⁹ independently explain a society’s level and targets of conflict and violence,¹⁰ and second, that both also matter in conflict mitigation. Despite being a political scientist I became particularly interested in the psychocultural side of conflict and its management and argued in my conclusions that interpretations are central to conflict behavior because conflict evokes deep-seated emotions in situations that are highly ambiguous and often unstructured. The combination of emotion and ambiguity readily produces psychic threat, leading to regression with a return to earlier experiences, and shapes how participants react to conflict. Such interpretations are cultural, not just personal, when they are nurtured and socially reinforced, linking individuals in a collective process (1993b: 192). I hypothesized that especially in long-term intractable conflicts a pre-requisite to constructive conflict management is modifying competing psychocultural interpretations or narratives so that the parties in conflict come to believe that there are people on the other

6 A more recent example of a political scientist engaging in a very serious way with ethnography is Viktorova (2008). She also refers to Ross.

7 With reference to the Yanomamo, Ross (1993a: 4) writes: “The preferred form of marriage – bilateral, cross-cousin exchanges within the village (in which a man marries the daughter of his father’s brother or his mother’s sister) – means that the social links which might extend political alliances are very narrow indeed.” FBD and MZD are, of course, parallel cousins, not cross-cousins. Yanomamo indeed prefer to marry cross-cousins, i.e., FZD and MBD, and a bilateral cross-cousin would be one which is FZD and MBD at the same time, as a result of the circumstance that the MB has married the FZ; and precisely this occurs if two patriline repeatedly intermarry, as they often do among the Yanomamo.

8 The two pairs of concepts are used in a parallel fashion. Their precise relationship is not explained. The frequent claims that both need to be addressed in conflict management often make it sound as if they could be addressed separately. Interests and interpretations, however, refer to the same things. By interpreting a thing as useful or important (economically, symbolically, or in whichever way), interest is attached to it.

9 Under the label “psychoculturally based identities” (which may or may not be fortunate), Ross combines variables such as “harsh socialization practices,” “warm and affectionate socialization,” and “male gender-identity conflict” (e.g., 1993: 196). The Freudian undercurrent in Ross has been mentioned above.

10 If these two sets of variables *independently* explain levels and forms of violence, that would mean that their influences can be demonstrated statistically, even if each of them is regarded separately. From a different angle, it would be interesting to study forms of identification and structural variables (e.g., land rights, the organization of production and reproduction, and resource distribution) not independently of each other but in their interaction.

side with whom they can negotiate, and issues that are negotiable. After completing the cross-cultural study, I began asking myself why in so many ethnic conflicts expressive practices and sacred places produce intense disputes that outsiders quickly dismiss as irrational, and how a better understanding of this phenomenon could help us to manage these conflicts more effectively. This volume brings together my answers to these questions, placing at center stage the competing accounts of participants in conflict" (2007: 4).

In terms of method, the 2007 volume is a radical departure from the earlier volumes. The method is no longer large-scale statistical comparison for the purpose of discovering correlations, combined with a number of short case histories exploring mechanisms of causation; rather, it now consists only in extended case studies, one about Northern Ireland and one about Catalonia, followed by a chapter on the controversy about Islamic headscarves in French schools. There is a chapter about Israel/Palestine, two chapters on political symbols in post-apartheid South Africa and one about the South of the United States and the Confederate battle flag. The case studies have historical depth and are rich in detail, combining personal observations and media reports. The method used here is "qualitative."

Along with the methods, the theoretical emphasis has shifted. While the 1993 volumes pay equal attention to "structural" and "psychocultural" factors, now the "psychocultural" ones are clearly in the foreground. "In focusing on narratives," Ross asserts (2007: 30) "I am not dismissing the importance of structural features of states or the international system, or the competing interests of different actors." Nevertheless, the exclusive focus remains on narratives, and this is unfortunate. Of course, there is no way to tell Ross that he should have written about a different topic. The choice of a topic belongs to the author. Anyway, that is not the problem. The exclusive focus on narratives is unfortunate because, especially in the case of narratives of identification, it would have been interesting to observe the role played by the structural factors that Ross relegates to the margin. How are these narratives shaped by the constitutional order, by international organizations, by the political/diplomatic world order, and by global discourses, both governmental and non-governmental?

As has already been pointed out in the discussion of one of the earlier volumes (1993a), Ross cannot be subsumed under labels such as "identity" theorist or "resource" theorist. He observes the interplay of culture and material interests. Taking up an idea that one can also find in the earlier work, he

complains that "most existing work has little to say about how interests are developed and defined in different societies" (2007: 1). So what does *he* have to say about this? "People begin conflicts, often for what they believe ... [to be] economic and political reasons" (2007: 18). Here, Ross suggests once again that different cultural preferences play a role in defining different things as resources or assets. This is a relativist twist to materialism and an interesting one. Still, Ross does not seem to see forms of identification as responses to economic and political incentives. He makes a great deal of the distinction between inclusive and exclusive narratives, contrasting the case of Catalonia (inclusive) with Northern Ireland (exclusive).¹¹ He does not discuss the economic conditions which lead to exclusive or inclusive forms of identification, such as incentives for cooperation or for refusing cooperation so that one can consume one's goods or take advantage of one's opportunities alone wherever this is possible – obvious ideas from a utilitarian perspective but somewhat alien to Ross's emphasis on cultural causation.¹² Rather, for him it is the work of the conflict manager or mediator to convince people to open up their identifications and to replace their exclusive narratives by more inclusive ones. This is a narrative-imminent approach to conflict management.¹³

11 The Catalans, in Ross' interpretation, are ready to accept anyone as Catalan who lives in Catalonia and makes an effort to speak Catalan. Levels of violence in the post-Franco era have been relatively low and the transition from a centralist to a federalist and linguistically pluralist state has been smooth, as far as the Catalan case is concerned. The Protestant and Catholic identities in Northern Ireland, on the other hand are mutually exclusive and, therefore, much more difficult to reconcile. For a somewhat more complex view of the matrix of identification in Northern Ireland, see Zenker (2008).

12 Identification is not explained. That there is something missing at this juncture has also been noticed by Eriksen: "the prevalence of particular principles of identification needs to be explained or at least mentioned as something that needs to be accounted for" (2008: 471). Lee makes a similar point: "while showing that cultural symbols can be redefined to become more inclusive, [Ross] neglects to explain what made such transformations possible" (2008: 855).

13 I do not doubt for a moment that reminding people of what they have in common and appealing to wider identifications can have a deescalating effect on conflicts. Dealing with conflicts on this rhetorical level can also be much cheaper, though it would possibly be less sustainable than addressing the material aspects of conflict, such as gross economic inequalities. I think conflict mediators, especially those with a low budget, can learn a lot from Ross. My criticism is just that he leaves out interesting elements of conflict theory by underemphasising the economic or utilitarian/opportunistic factors at work in processes of identification and by restricting himself too much to what he calls "culture."

The focus on culture and identity, already apparent in his earlier work, becomes more exclusive in the 2007 book. He even speaks of “identity-based ethnic conflict” at one point; but a few lines later he explains that, for the people involved, “the conflict becomes such a central part of their identity that giving it up is giving up a part of oneself.” If this is so, then, for me, it is a clear case of a conflict-based identity, not of an identity-based conflict.

Despite his efforts to define his terms carefully, Ross uses concepts such as identity, culture, and ethnicity much in the same way as they are used by the media and in politics, i.e., in the rather loose way in which these concepts have been used by people who have failed to solve the problems these concepts were meant to describe. In one place we read that “a first take is that culture and identity might pose nothing but problems in ethnic conflicts” (2007: 17). Here, the relationship between culture, identity, and ethnic conflict is far from clear. How can there be anything ethnic without culture and identity? Ethnic groups are defined by cultural discontinuities.¹⁴ And what is ethnicity if not a form of identity? If a collective identity is based on a plurality of features, it is commonly called ethnic¹⁵; if it is based on just one dimension of identification, say language or religion, one tends to speak of a linguistic or religious group. All these are identities, and they are all cultural. So what does Ross mean if he invites us to imagine an ethnic conflict without culture and identity?

There are places where one can only agree with Ross. “Culture is neither the root cause of ethnic conflicts nor an epiphenomenon. Rather, conflict is about both material interests and collective cultural identities” (2007: 21). It is insights like this one that should be taken as a starting point for further analysis, either in a fourth book by Ross or by other conflict analysts. Yes, it is about both material interests and collective identities. But it is about both these issues in quite different ways. Cultural identities define who is taken into the boat to pursue shared material interests, and who is left on shore. There is no way of calculating 50% causation by

interests and 50% by culture. Both factors are always found in specific forms of interaction, and it is this interplay, not the factors taken in isolation, which account for 100% of the cases. There is not a heap of cultural components and a heap of economic components, one being bigger than the other. The components react with each other and form something new. Compare this to a chemical reaction. Not one of the characteristics of water can be explained in terms of the distinctive properties of hydrogen and oxygen. And all of them can be explained by the reaction of these atoms with each other and the forces at work between them.¹⁶

On a descriptive level, some light is shed on this kind of interaction by the holy sites and monuments that Ross writes about. There is a symbolic and a resource aspect to such sites, both of which are inseparably intertwined and simultaneously present. A monument does not only stand for a cultural (e.g., religious or ethnic) identity. It is also situated in a geographical space and thereby marks a claim to a territory, which is not only of symbolic importance but comprises a land where people live (a “home”) and a locus of economic resources (which, as we have learned from Ross, are, in turn, not just given but culturally defined).

The merits of this book (2007) lie less in its contribution to a systematization of a theory of conflict, which is somewhat limited. Although the book is also a rich reservoir of ideas for theorists, we could not fail to notice some loose ends, gaps, and conceptual inconsistencies. Its merits lie in the richness of the description of the cases presented. If it is read not as a book on conflict theory but as a book on history, then it must be judged to be excellent. The cases described also provide inspiration for the mediation of conflicts elsewhere. The central message in the field of practical application – namely, that cultural narratives, including old and persistent ones, are constructed and can be made the object of a dialogue, that they are negotiable and can be restated in less exclusive and more accommodating ways – comes across very clearly and is of great value.

14 Cultural discontinuity occurs at an ethnic boundary, where many cultural features change at the same time. Some of these features are used consciously for drawing lines of distinction. These are called markers. This, at least, is the established terminology since Barth (1969).

15 Lists of features used to define different ethnic groups tend to differ. By no means do they always include, first, language, then religion, then, dress, and so on, even if this is sometimes the case. In the next case examined, the number of criteria, their salience, and the order in which they are applied might be quite different.

16 The same kind of thought can be applied to the old nature/nurture problem or the pet question of the media regarding the “percentage” (the question itself is wrong) of intelligence that is hereditary and the extent to which it is dependent on environmental factors. Most complex phenomena are not explained by addition but by interaction.

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