Multi-Ethnic Societies

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In the early 20th century, the influential German sociologist, Max Weber, proposed that ethnic groups were:

human groups (other than kinship groups) which cherish a belief in their common origins of such a kind that it provides the basis for the creation of a community. This belief may be based on similarities of external custom or practice or both, or on memories of colonization or migration. (Runciman 1978, 364)

Whether people constitute an ethnic group, he added, did not depend on their being “objectively of common stock” (Runciman 1978). First and foremost ethnicity is about difference based on the idea of common heritage.

Ethnicity involves ideologies which explicitly or implicitly amplify that idea, specifying who belongs and why, and relationships with others. Like racist discourse and other forms of “cultural-national belonging” (Hage 1998), ethnicity is “multiply inflected” (Back et al. 2001), drawing on a wide range of elements to define commonality (Eller 1999). Different elements appear with different salience in different times and places. Robert Le Page and Andrée Tabouret Keller (1985) list the criteria which Belizeans use to talk about themselves and others: physical features, appearance, provenance, descent, language, nationality, culture, religion and race, sometimes variously or in different situations. In Europe, ideological underpinnings have included some or all of culture, language, nationality, morality, religion, kinship (blood) and race. These may be tightly or loosely linked in a mutually reinforcing circle of meaning, though over time one element may be transformed into another as when caste conflict changed into religious conflict in India, or when religious communities (millets) in the Ottoman Empire became the basis for nationalist movements. In some societies ways of belonging may be in competition or conflict, as in the USA or France, where there are two culturally constructed ways of determining membership, consent and descent, the latter based on the principle of ius sanguinis (blood ties) (Sollors 1986).

Ethnicity entails categorization, but the categories are not necessarily permanent or stable.

Introduction

In multi-ethnic societies peoples thought by themselves or others to have different historic identities and ways of life co-habit the same political space. In the contemporary world of globalization and mass international movement few societies remain closed; almost all are multi-ethnic, though the degree of multi-ethnicity, its salience in everyday affairs and in economic and political life, and the extent to which it is accompanied by tension, discrimination and conflict, varies considerably. There is considerable variation, too, in the ways in which ethnic and related differences are governed.

The literature on multi-ethnic societies is vast, and this article concentrates on situations where ethnicity has become a political issue, where culture in the anthropologists’ sense has been politicized, and its principal concern is ethnicity’s governance. An initial account of the meaning of ethnicity discusses its relationship to “race” and surveys some theoretical approaches and concepts (“primordialism”, “instrumentalism”, “constructivism”, and “boundary”). Ethnic identities are neither predetermined, nor unchanging, but may have great subjective power. Nonetheless, a reading of identities as simply “ethnic” often obscures the way these are rooted in other things, and ethnicity, as an emergent phenomenon, has to be understood in its socio-economic and political context. The article then looks at two typical contexts: states where ethnic, regional or indigenous minorities have been conjoined in a single multi-national polity, and those where there has been large-scale immigration.

The Meaning of Ethnicity

“Ethnicity” came into vogue as an analytical concept in Western social sciences in the 1960s, with landmark accounts in the USA and Europe.1 By the 1970s, it was “ubiquitous” (Cohen 1978), encouraging comparison across different contexts and socio-scientific traditions, and enabling specialists to make links between seemingly unrelated phenomena. But what is its compass? What kinds of identities, categories, groups and relationships does it entail?
Within the same society different people may use different labels, or the same labels differently. Categories may change, and so may use and meaning. In the USA, the same people have been called "Negro", "Colored", "Black", "Afro-American", "African American", "people of color", among other terms deemed highly offensive. Ethnicity is not only about minorities, however. Majorities, too, have an ethnic identity, though, as in the case of "Englishness", for example, it is often largely unspoken. Relationships between majority and minority ethnicities may involve a two-way process (Jenkins 2008) of mutual categorization and labeling, a kind of "ethnic dialectic". The colonizers of Africa or America did not simply take over existing categories, or impose their own. In the shaping and reshaping of ethnic categories (and identities) there was interplay between the colonizer's systems of identification and those of the colonized, and vice versa.

Ethnicity may be described as a "metalinguage", a way of talking about differentiation and difference. There are others. In the Indian subcontinent, "communalism" has been employed to refer to ethnic and related divisions and tensions, while in colonial Africa "tribe/tribalism" was used, officially and unofficially. "Race" is another such language. Both ethnicity and race involve perceptions and constructions of difference, but ethnicity has wider application. Racialists view the world through a prism of biological essentialism and determinism. Human beings are thought to belong to groups based on physical characteristics or genetic make-up, and are "naturally" hierarchically ordered; personality and behavior can be read off from membership. Most contemporary social scientists believe this has no scientific basis. There are no discrete races; everyone has a mixture of genes. Many put "race" in quotes, and have abandoned the term as an analytical concept especially since racial language became increasingly unacceptable in public discourse. However, historically the belief that racial differences are important has been and still is widely held, and racism is part of the reality social scientists must investigate (Wieviorka 1995). Significantly, in policy terms more has been done to curb racism and racial discrimination than to tackle ethnic hostility more generally.

Race may intersect with ethnicity in three ways: as ideological underpinning; as "cultural racism" (biological racism formulated through the language of cultural differences); and in cultural essentialism or fundamentalism (a conception of human beings as "cultural" subjects, i.e., bearers of a culture, located within a boundaried world, which defines them and differentiates them from others; Stolcke 1995). These ideas, which have a lengthy history, are closely bound up with the construction of the nation as the primary building block of political society, local and global.

Ethnic stratification has long been documented, and both race and ethnicity may overlap with other kinds of membership such as class or religion. Religion, too, can coincide with both class and ethnicity, and under certain circumstances treated as if it were an ethnic identity (e.g., Muslims in Europe).

**Theoretical Approaches**

In an essay subtitled "Primordial sentiments and civil politics in the new states", the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1963) observed how personal and collective identities were grounded in ties of kinship, lineage, race, language, religion, custom and region. Geertz, and Edward Shils (1957), are deemed to present the case for regarding ethnicity as a basic, first order identity, like national identity in German Romanticism. Against this view of ethnicity as quasi-natural is that which sees it in processual terms, as something which is continually constructed and reconstructed.²

There are numerous variations on this theme. One is that ethnicity articulates economic or political interest. Thus, Abner Cohen argued that the organization of the collectivity of Hausa people resident in Ibadan (Nigeria) around the Tijaniyya sect of Islam stemmed from their involvement in the cattle trade (1969). In this view, which reflects Marxist conceptions of the relationship between infrastructure and superstructure, it is the underlying interest which is basic: ethnicity, race, and nation, as social and historical constructs, are false representations of "real", i.e. economic, relations, whose function is to disguise their reality. Another instrumentalist view is that ethnicity depends on the use made of it by political leaders who may employ it (sometimes quite cynically) to suit their ends.

A related if subtler constructivist perspective was proposed by Fredrik Barth who shifted attention to the boundaries which define a group (ed. 1969). What needed investigation, said Barth, was the politics of boundary organization and mainte-