

ETHNICITY, GEOGRAPHY AND COMMUNICATION

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POVZETEK

GEOGRAFIJA, NARODNOSTI IN SPORAZUMEVANJE

Vedenje o določenem ozemlju opredeljujejo ponavadi parametri družbenega okolja. Odkrivanje etničnega mozaika temelji na zmožnosti komuniciranja navadnih ljudi med seboj. Prenos besednega in izraznega simbolizma v neposrednem osebnem kontaktu je pomembna sestavina etnične identitete. Družbe z določenimi etničnimi značilnostmi so se oblikovale in se porajajo ves čas človeške zgodovine.

Moderna komunikacijska sredstva omogočajo pripadnikom določene etnične skupnosti vzpostaviti in ohranjati kontakt četudi so le-te nastajale in se razvijale povsem disperzno. Člani skupnosti komunicirajo med seboj in z matico ne da bi si bili teritorialno blizu oziroma bi se kot skupnost identificirali s prostorom v katerem žive. "Skupnosti brez teritorialnega obeležja" so nov geografski fenomen, ki ga ni lahko odkriti, še težje pa zajeti v nacionalnih ali regionalnih raziskavah. Kjer se etnični značaj izraža oziroma je opredeljen z jezikom in kulturo se komunikacija nekaterih simbolnih predstav med člani skupnosti vrši pogosto tudi na večje razdalje, ne da bi pri tem trpela njih vsebina.

Imigrantske etnične skupnosti v Združenih državah Amerike so se najpoprej izoblikovale kot teritorialno bližnje sosedske skupnosti. Sodobni družbeni procesi sicer zavirajo izražanje etnične pripadnosti, vendar jo ne onemogočajo. Meritve disperzne poselitve in povezav med narodnostnimi skupnostmi kažejo na to, da so se medsebojni kontakti v taki ali drugačni obliki ohranili skozi sodobni čas precej preko bližnjega sosedstva. Podatki oziroma dokazi o razširjenosti etnično specifičnega tiska, o razprostranjenosti članstva narodnostnih skupnosti, o sodelovanju pri etnično specifičnih dejavnostih občasno ali stalno tudi tam, kjer ni teritorialne etnične zgoštevke kažejo na to, da se etnične vezi ohranjajo na večje razdalje.

The surfacing of ethnicity as a powerful aspect of contemporary human relationship surprised many researchers who tended to associate emphasis on ethnicity with primitivism, lack of development, and often historically condemned socio-political systems. The assessment of ethnicity was placed side by side with other aspects of underdevelopment; the ideal of modern society emphasized ethnic homogeneity, structural and functional integration, a society where ethnic differences disappear.

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Current happenings, however, indicate that ethnicity deserves to be further evaluated, not only as a static and statistical attribute, but as a dynamic force.

Ethnicity as human property is associated with the space in which it appears. It has been studied as a component of the culturally bounded complex of geographical areas. In the dynamic world in which human interaction is an essential force of social production, ethnicity is considered a prerequisite and a result of human communication, a generator and a product of an interaction process of exchanges. It is therefore relevant to examine the communication process as an important modifier of the ethnic property of geographical area. This essay is stressing the language aspect of ethnicity and leaves aside numerous other attributes. Furthermore, the examination is limited to a micro-scale assessment, to the level of individual and neighborhood communities. Other participants will, I understand, explore ethnicity's other components at different scales.

The dynamic aspect deserving our attention is on one hand the generation and maintenance of ethnicity by participating people, and on the other the changes that spatial interaction produces by functioning in a modified socio-economic and technological system. Language as a communication tool is often the carrier of ethnicity, though not exclusively. The relative significance depends on the specificity of language and also on the surrounding culture. The Irish communities in Brazil experience greatly different challenges than the Irish in the United States. The British cluster in Buenos Aires (Hurlingham) has preserved its identity through a number of generations while their counterparts in the United States have not.

The preservation of ethnicity is functionally related to shared values and symbols, where the sharing is frequently conditioned by the language used for communication. Both the form and the content are relevant.

The spread of computer derived information systems and associated symbols only confirmed the universality of trend, bypassing the peculiarities of individual languages and associated isolated ethnic and cultural compounds.

The fundamental geographical distinction is associated with communication systems and their transformations through time. The transformation is evident in the transitions in American ethnic experiences and is reflected elsewhere in the world.

When the dominant communication mechanism was face to face transfer, the language complementarity and spatial proximity were preconditions for community maintenance and ethnicity survival. The creation and maintenance of spatial clustering enabled the participants to share, to communicate, to exchange. Language complementarity where the speaker and the listener would share a mutually understandable language was of utmost importance. This complementarity expanded in the shared symbols of ethnic experiences and ethnic values. In the ethnic communities in the United States, the carriers of these ethnic symbols were both men and women, in fact the dominant role of women in the ethnic communities is clearly documented in

ethnic narratives. In the society without private automobiles and without easy access to the telephone, interpersonal communication was by word of mouth, face to face communication, with the neighbor, with the friend at the local store or community event, at the local church or school. Although the school was normally an American and English institution, the community support was derived from associated clusters of 'ethnics', who often share after school activities.

The spatial system that was created was therefore the urban mosaic of coexisting ethnic neighborhoods. They existed side by side, sharing some cultural and social institutions where their individual size was insufficient to reach the threshold of minimum magnitude to support community institutions, such as a church that was shared (Croatian-Lituanian, Austrian-Slovenian, Italian-Mexican) or community hall (Slavonic Hall, Italian-Swiss). The size became also the determining factor in maintaining clustering and separation of people by distinct local and regional origins: The Biellesi nel mondo, The Piemontesi, Gurali, Dalmatians, Tyroleans, Prekmurci. This distinction has survived the longest with large communities, especially from areas where political and ethnic integration was not yet achieved in the home areas at the time of emigration: the Poland, Italy, Macedonia, Croatia, Armenia.

The maintenance of clustering faced the major challenge with the second generation, with children of immigrants. Less bound to the language of their parents, they acquired through schools new tools of communication which enabled them to reach beyond the ethnic community. For the English speaking immigrants, the children's learning was less associated with the verbal communication schemes and included the broader assembly of symbolization. The necessity of proximity or individual gratification, ability to communicate, to share, to participate, was replaced with the potential of socially and territorially a much larger realm. This new opportunity created two potential social and ethnic conflicts: the conflict of generations between parents and their children, and the conflicts between various ethnic groups. The clustering that was originally ethnically conditioned gave way to new assemblies where ethnicity became less prominent but class and social status acquired a greater role. The ethnic institutional symbols, essential rallying nodes for American ethnics, became for the second generation a reminder of their parents' past, the holding symbol of primitivism, an obstacle to social and cultural integration in what was described as the "American life".

The conflict between ethnic groups in the first stage was a struggle for a territorial domain of the neighborhood, often aggravated by racial distinctiveness (contact zones between blacks and Croats in Cleveland, Italian and Chinese in New York, Polish and Mexican in New York, German and Korean in Chicago, Chinese and Italian in San Francisco). While it survived as a colorful feature in the American landscape, it was forced to accept the "ethnic diversity" and to adjust to the legislated dictate of ethnic territorial integration.

Two fundamental processes are under way in transforming the original space-bound ethnicity into a new system that is still territorially defined but not any more by spatial proximity measures: the generational transformation where the American born leave the ethnic cluster for a variety of social, economic, and cultural reasons, among them the upward movement that is evident in most immigrant groups; and the communication technology revolution, which enables participants to retain communication links across spatial distances far beyond the locally defined community. While the first component, the generational upward movement, has been extensively studied in general terms and in specific case examples, the communication technology component is less well known.

The circulation element, stressed already by John Gottmann as a building component for national consciousness, has a predominant role in the ethnic maintenance of non-contiguous elements, be it individuals, families, small groups or even larger entities. The individual's needs are being met by establishing and maintaining the communication link, so that the location becomes less relevant than the existence of a functional link. In this transformed set-up, the content and the instrument of communication become dominant, namely the mutually recognizable symbols, whether in vocabulary, or in idiomatic expressions, in recognition of non-verbal symbols. The role of the telephone, and in contemporary conditions E-mail, FAX, and video communication, has taken over the role of previously dominant face-to-face communication vehicles, obviously affecting primarily those who have and can afford the technology. The day-by-day face-to-face communication that has been fundamental for community maintenance in the past is being replaced by telephone conversations and other direct or indirect communications, where the distance is not a deterrent to the same extent as it was in pre-telephone era.

The ethnic groups that moved faster up the socio-economic ladder are more prone to spatial dispersal, while at the same time they are able to maintain communication linkage with their culturally and linguistically akin partners. The reference to community without propinquity is a reality in the American ethnic scene.

On the basis of these premises, ethnic territorial segregation is more common in the pre-industrial social and economic system, the bounded space an identifiable entity and often – as we see in contemporary events throughout the world – a goal of political affirmation. The need for commonness with akin people, be it for their race, language, or religion, or a combination of them, is felt greater where the essential communication is direct, personal, face-to-face. The original need to communicate also generates shared characteristics with shared values and attitudes. The separation from the surrounding that is different, perceived or actual, is spontaneous. Attempts for integration dictated from outside are often perceived as attacks on self-defined and self-determined entities and can trigger a defense mechanism, often portrayed as self-preservation. The "Argentinean miracle" of Slovene communities in Buenos

Aires is an example of such an inward-oriented ethnic community, with strong territorial contiguity of nuclear groups and an active defense mechanism directed to self-preservation.

Modern communication enabled the maintenance of links along ethnic channels even with the territorial dispersal of individual members. The ease of dispersal increased with the degree of adoption of new communication media. The Slovene cluster in Cleveland on St. Clair Avenue in its almost one hundred years of existence passed through these stages from rigid structured beginning, ethnic exclusiveness and creation of community nodes, to the transition of node retention and territorial dispersal. What is described as the Slovene St. Clair community consists today of dispersed ethnic participants linked together by communication media and by instruments of community organization, while in a territorial sense the identification is fading away with the passing of generations. The Census returns, even census tract and block data fail to identify clear spatial distinctiveness of an ethnic group. The resulting conclusion, that the ethnic community is vanishing, fails to acknowledge the continuous operational existence of an interlinked community of dispersed participants.

Geographical analysis of these communities is much more difficult because they do not demonstrate sufficient territorial concentration of properties to be noticeable at first glance. Their existence is revealed indirectly by discerning the behavioral constraints that can hold an ethnic label.

The public intervention directed to eliminate spatial segregation did not take into account these communication considerations. The forceful intervention through the mechanism of court rulings in some instances produced a territorial pattern that shows less concentration of people by race, though the measurement depends on the size of the units of measurement rather than on the social considerations.

To be considered in this context is also the availability of alternatives. For a less educated and monolingual people the alternatives are limited. If and when they intend to sustain their human contacts with the neighboring people, linguistic complementary and complementary in symbol recognition prevails. With increased education and acquisition of multi-set symbols the shifting into a new language pattern and/or communication in the neighborhood through more than one language system becomes feasible. The resulting defense of cultural purity becomes less prominent and the pattern of territorial integration can proceed. The retention of ethnic ties is still possible through communication media which transcend the proximity restraints. The issue remains, nevertheless, if and for how long the common symbols of ethnicity are retained. The evidence shows that the retention of religion and its symbolic sets are retained longer than language systems.

In this light, the ethnic territorial purity and the aims to achieve it reflect the primitivism of social interacting systems. They can be retained with great difficulty

and sustained primarily by rejection of modernization, especially modernization in communication.

We are therefore facing a greatly different complex system, for which we have somewhat limited tools of investigation. In particular, the instruments derived from the presently existing socio-political systems are still based on the premises of territorially based exclusivity and on clear boundaries of 'bonded space' where the attributes are described by their numerical dominance rather by their functional importance. It is therefore feasible to describe an area as 'ethnically integrated' because it appears as such by the co-presence of multi-ethnic components, who nevertheless can be and often are mono-ethnic. It was observed that the multi-lingual areas in New York at the turn of the century consisted on mostly mono-lingual people. When the social links are examined, however, the pattern of mono-ethnic and mono-lingual systems surfaces: the Italians in the neighborhood communicate with other Italians in their own and in other areas; their Hungarian neighbors communicate with other Hungarians more often than with their Italian neighbors across the backyard fence.

It is therefore imperative to recognize the existence of ethnic communities that are dispersed, but nevertheless operating [the Italian community in Seattle never had the 'Little Italy' of an Italian neighborhood. The Slovene community in New York is linked to the Slovene church though the participants dispersed throughout greater New York area].

It is further advisable to seek as a possible solutions of 'ethnic conflicts' the establishment and maintenance of communication links between dispersed ethnically identified individuals and clusters, rather than the territorial exclusivity of mono-ethnic members. The preservation of ethnically exclusive areas runs against the recognition of an interlinked world and can be accepted only as a temporary measure for social organization.

Geographers who seek an understanding of people's spatial behavior cannot restrict their analysis to rigidly bound territoriality of ethnic attributes and are forced to recognize that the functional links, so prominently researched in contemporary economic geography, are similarly dominating the social functioning in a contemporary world.