

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "ETHNICITY"? TOWARD A DEFINITION AND TYPOLOGY

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POVZETEK

KAKO TOLMAČIMO BESEDO "ETNIČNOST"? – POIZKUS DEFINIRATI IN OPREDELITI POJEM V GEOGRAFIJI

Ne glede na zavidanja vreden porast zapisov in študij ter povečanega javnega zanimanja za vprašanja narodov, narodnosti in narodnostnih skupnosti se zdi, da je vsebina etničnosti slabo razumljena in opredeljena. Da, prav zares smo še daleč od željenega cilja definirati pojem "narodnost". Pričujoči prispevek poizkuša kritično raziskati in ovrednotiti problem in ponuditi rešitve, ki bi bile za geografijo merodajne.

Vsebina problema je kompleksna in zamotana. K že dobro poznanemu problemu razmerja med narodnostno pripadnostjo na eni in prostorskim ter socialnim potencialom, versko identiteto, rasnim razlikovanjem, socialno segregacijo in nacionalizmom na drugi strani, bomo dodali nekaj globljih, temeljnih dilem časa v katerem živimo. Kako lahko z vso resnostjo in strokovno avtoriteto trdimo, da je etnična pripadnost nekaj danega in nesprejemljivega tako na zasebni kot skupinski ravni, če se kopičijo dokazi o spremembi navad in običajev skozi čas, kar vse priča o konstantni etnogenezi, ki jo sprožajo pogoste in nenadne družbene spremembe? In zatem, ko smo se prepričali, da v pojmu "narodnosti" ni nič absolutnega, bazičnega in enoznačnega ter ko ugotovimo, da so bile sile asimilacije in akomodacije v posameznih družbenih okoljih različne, kako nam bo uspelo dokazati in časovno in prostorsko soodvisno opredeliti in tipizirati pojav tako, da bi bil za vsa okolja verodostojen in realen ter uporaben za nadaljne raziskovalno delo? Ali bomo prisiljeni najti nove pojmovne oznake in znanstvene formule, ki bi razlikovale med narodnostmi Vzhodne Evrope in Zakavkazja od narodnosti Wisconsina ali Floride? Ali bomo prisiljeni ločevati med različnimi Španci v Španiji in tistimi narodi, ki jih najdemo v Saskatchewanu? Ali bomo morali razločevati etnični mozaik Bombaya in Johannesburga od istega v Chicagu ali Melbournu? Odgovori na ta vprašanja niso niti lahki niti enostavni.

There are certain words with so much potential for creating mischief that we should handle them gingerly, and never take them for granted. We would do well to remind ourselves that there are few better examples of the perils of ambiguous or misleading labels for important concepts than the term "ethnicity" or such kindred

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items as "ethnic community", or even the simple adjective "ethnic". These words have acquired so many different meanings and nuances for so many different users that we would do well to step back for a moment to consider some of the problems they pose for us.

It is essential to frame such issues in historic perspective. In doing so, it is truly startling to learn that the term "ethnicity" appears in the Anglophone scholarly literature no earlier than in the year 1941 in a study by sociologist W. Lloyd Warner. In other literatures the chronology is similar. Before then, of course, persons known as ethnographers as well as others had been busy for some time studying exotic communities, often characterized by the epithet "primitive", or some similar adjective, but never employing the term "ethnicity". At the same time, other writers would refer habitually to "immigrant groups", "foreign stock", "aliens", "minorities", "nationalities", or similar locutions, and always, interestingly enough, with the implication of otherness, or either quaintness or a condition not qualifying as fully civilized.

New words seldom materialize unless there is some need for them, that is, whenever something novel or striking appears on the scene. Conversely, if some object or concept has endured for a long time and has been deemed worth noticing, it will long since have earned its place in our lexicon. Thus, although many of us have been wont to regard ethnicity and ethnic groups as something ancient or even primordial, as well as eternally salient, the belated emergence of those words seems to sabotage any such notion. To the contrary, I would suggest that the concept of, and hence the word, ethnicity is a product of modern history, rather like such latterday coinages as nationalism, patriotism, citizenship, bureaucracy, evolution, civilization, adolescence, ecology, or alienation. If we can agree that ethnicity, or at least some awareness of its existence, is something associated with a certain stage of the modernization process, then it also follows that it is too much to believe that its meaning is invariant, something permanently fixed. It seems implausible that, as of 1993, ethnicity would have the same intrinsic character that it might have had in 1893, if indeed anyone had thought of taking notice of any such development back then as we now apprehend it.

As you no doubt already suspect, the point I am driving at is that ethnicity, like the related, even more troubling concept of human races, is a social construct, and one that happens to be time-specific. Moreover, it is only one member of a sizeable family of social identities, of ways of classifying ourselves and others. (All of them, incidentally, historically mutable, to some degree or other.) Thus we can group human beings into such relatively intimate clusters as the family, clan, village, urban neighborhood, work or military unit, social club, church congregation, or school population, any or all of which can have powerful meanings for their participants. Or, at a grander scale, we have regional identities, socioeconomic classes, occupa-

tional or professional affiliations, religious denominations or even more inclusive major faiths, the nation, and so-called races, and, at the pan-human level, the two genders and the confederacy of youth. The question I find so intriguing is why ethnicity has so abruptly become such an urgent device for categorizing so many different populations in so many different parts of the world, a phenomenon that, I take it, is the essential reason for convening the Ljubljana Symposium on Ethnicity and Geography in September 1993. But this is a historical riddle too deep and vast for any explanatory speculation I can offer in the limited space available here.

What I can do is note some of the pitfalls in arriving at a meaningful definition of ethnicity as we now use or abuse the term. There are two definitional propositions I believe we can all assent to, or at least discuss without acrimony. First that, as many writers have indicated, the ethnic group consists of a number of persons who believe they share some inherited, presumably precious bundle of cultural attributes and traditions that set them apart from all other communities. Whether such a heritage is real or fictive is beside the point; the "imagined community", to use Benedict Anderson's phrase, can be quite as potent a concept as any other. It follows that ethnicity refers to the special core of sociocultural traits in question whether the possessors thereof are actively aware of them or not.

A second attribute concerns magnitude. An unspoken consensus seems to prevail as to minimum size, namely that an ethnic group embraces at least several thousand individuals, a number, as well as territory, too large for direct personal acquaintance among all the members thereof. Be that as it may, there is no agreement as to maximum size. Although most observers tend to regard ethnic groups as subnational in scope, as confined to a limited section of the nation-state's territory, I would contend that we can set no quantitative ceiling and draw no valid boundary between nationality and ethnicity. There really is such a thing as an American ethnicity, especially for those residents of the United States of European-Caucasian ancestry. Similarly, we can recognize a French ethnicity, an Italian, German, Mexican, Indian, and Spanish. At the same time, we can also admit the reality of a Corsican or, if you prefer, a Provençal, ethnic entity within France, Sicilian within Italy, Galician in Spain, Punjabi in India, Yucateco in Mexico, and on and on. The fact of the matter, then, is that we are dealing with a hierarchy of overlapping units, that the grander ethnicities are divisible ones, and in such instances as Indian or the Trans-Caucasus we have a bewildering set of interlocking ethnicities operating in more than one dimension.

There is much irony in the fact that just when the scholarly world, and the population in general, is becoming so keenly aware of the salience of ethnicity, the phenomenon becomes more and more difficult to pin down with any precision. If we assume, perhaps rather fancifully, that once upon a time various social-cum-geographic units existed that were genuine, readily recognizable, place-bound ethnic communi-

ties, whether or not the members thereof were cognizant of the fact, the situation today is considerably more vexed. Thus the recognition of an ethnic group may be an official finding at the national level, a top-down decision subject to political considerations, and something changeable over time and not necessarily from one nation-state to another. As an example, we have more than a few cases of the U.S. government asserting a given group of Native Americans does or does not constitute a valid "tribe" and thus entitled to various benefits. It can also happen that members of an officially designated tribe in the U.S.A. will not be so recognized in Canada or Mexico, or vice versa.

Approaching such questions from another angle, we find that in scholarly circles, and in the mind of the general public, there can be much confusion as to whether a linguistic community is equivalent to an ethnic group. Similarly, we have the question of whether to define some ethnic groups in terms of religious adherence, as in the cases of Jews, Parsees, the Amish, Mormons, and Druse. And how can we ignore the temptation on the part of so many laypersons to equate ethnicity with presumed biological race, however dubious the latter identity may be.

But it is the conditions of modern life that create the greatest perplexities for the definers of ethnic identity. Large-scale international migration has led to the fabrication of ethnic identities that are patently devoid of historical antecedents. Ethnogenesis is mostly a latterday process, and sometimes an abrupt one as well. The most outstanding example may be the creation of an Afro-American selfconsciousness among the descendants of involuntary migrants from many diverse, culturally disparate sections of Africa. In their homelands the ancestors certainly lacked familiarity with, or even knowledge of, most other African groups, so that any semblance of Pan-African sentiment was unimaginable. In similar fashion it took time for the quite distinct Jewish communities who landed on American shores – the Sephardic and later the larger numbers from Germany and Eastern Europe, each contingent keenly aware of the grating cultural differences with the others – to merge after a fashion and form a united ethnic front. In a parallel process it is only recently that any hint of a Pan-Indian movement has begun to crystalize among the aborigines of North America.

The literature abounds with reports of newcomers from some remote corner of Italy, for example, who did not realize they were Italians, or Italian-Americans, until so informed by the larger American community. The same stories can be told about some of the earlier Germanic arrivals in the U.S.A., or persons entering the country from Spain, the Philippines, the Balkans, or other portions of the Old World where newly minted nation-states had not yet forged any meaningful sense of nationwide identity. At this very moment one can observe the Latinos of the United States trying to decide whether they should somehow amalgamate into a single more or less uni-

form mass in keeping with the perceptions of the non-Hispanic majority and so many Federal agencies or, alternatively, retain a degree of distinctiveness as Chicanos, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Cubans, Colombians, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Spaniards, or whatever – or, in the case of Mexican-Americans how to cope with their several regional affiliations. Compounding the dilemma is the nontrivial matter of agreeing on some portmanteau term, such as "Latinos" or "Hispanics", to embrace the entire heterogenous constituency.

Advanced modes of travel and communications mean greater mingling of members of previously relatively isolated populations, a cohabitation that occurs in conceptual as well as physical space. And such mingling leads, of course, to a substantial amount of miscegenation or intermarriage and generations of progeny with more than a single choice of ethnic affiliation, or perhaps none at all. Among the cruelest of historical tragedies is the plight of the offspring of the many mixed marriages in such countries as the late lamented Yugoslavia and Soviet Union in an era when "ethnic cleansing" in one form or another becomes state policy.

But even in happier circumstances, as in the United States, Canada, or Australia, uncertainties can abound. Many recent studies have shown us how, at the personal level, those of us of complex ancestry can shop around for identities, frequently switching among the various choices in order to maximize the political, economic, social, or psychological advantages of the moment. Further complicating the ethnic scene is an expanding menu of geographic options. International migration has never been an absolute one-way street. Immigrants by the millions have moved back to the homeland or elsewhere from the Americas and other countries from the very outset of large-scale transoceanic traffic. But today the increasing pace of oscillations back and forth, for example, of sojourners in the U.S.A. from Mexico and the West Indies, leaves unresolved the question of regular or permanent domicile and thus a binding ethnic designation. Something similar may be happening in Western Europe with its recent infusion of workers and their families from the Middle East, Africa, and the Caribbean, persons whose ultimate status remains in a kind of limbo.

Going beyond all the many quandaries in applying ethnic identities to groups of people or individuals, there lurks an even more intriguing problem, and one that defines lexical, statistical, or cartographic solution. As suggested earlier, the very concept of ethnicity, one that I argue was somehow generated by the forces of modernity, may be going through a basic restructuring. A generation or two ago, at least in the U.S.A., "ethnics" or immigrants in general were treated as something of a lesser breed during their probation period of acculturation and Americanization. Indeed xenophobia and unabashed bigotry in places high and low toward persons of non-standard appearance or cultural behaviour was more the norm than the exception. Today, despite all the attendant controversy, the doctrine of pluralism or mul-

ticulturalism has surely been making headway. Nowadays, ethnicity, or, if I may use a still vague term "pan-ethnicity", has become chic. And interethnic, and interracial politeness in public utterances is now *de rigueur*. Moreover, mainstream Americans go out of their way to indulge their appetites for whatever smacks so tantalizingly of the unfamiliar, of the deliciously ethnic. In large numbers they patronize ethnic restaurants, museums, and festivals, browse in ethnic specialty shops, sample ethnic music and dance, and admire the exotic costumes, jewelry, and hairdos, in addition to actually visiting as many exciting foreign locales as possible as tourists. Clearly the *Zeitgeist* has become hospitable to the Other. And Otherness has acquired a new, more positive meaning. One can only speculate how much further this trend will develop. But life and history seldom move along straight, predictable grooves. Thus, if we can discern an ongoing trend – one that is most pronounced in First World countries – toward greater tolerance of alien cultures and a growing catholicity of tastes and sensibilities, we also find, in dialectical fashion, intensifying divisions and conflicts, indeed outright hostilities, among ethnic groups today in a wide range of nation-states, including some of the most advanced. We have here a major paradox, but one so recent that no one has yet adequately defined and described it, much less explained it. It is a topic we must set aside for later exploration.

The best I can do in summarizing on the ever so slippery question of defining ethnicity is to emphasize once again my principal claims: That we are dealing here with a historical phenomenon, something time-dependent rather than primordial, that ethnicity is a multifaceted entity contingent upon circumstance and angle of perception and is variable not only over time but at various social and geographical scales. My mission here is not to propound any definitive answers to the challenges of definition and classification but rather to alert geographers and other scholars to the daunting perplexities that confront us and to stimulate some creative discourse about these issues.

But, after having offered such sage counsel, I crave the reader's indulgence as I volunteer just one specific, albeit crude, effort toward a typology of ethnicities, one of particular utility for geographers. Would it not be useful to dichotomize the ethnic communities of the world between those, on the one hand, that are strongly territorially rooted in specific localities and all those others who have migrated over considerable distances, then re-established old, or created altered, identities in alien places?

The first group claims title to certain parcels of land by virtue of long-lasting occupancy, sometimes extending, in myth or reality, back to some prehistoric era. The boundaries of such tracts may fluctuate considerably over time, and their exact delimitation as of any date can cause heated debate or even bloodshed, but there is seldom any doubt as to the reality of some durable, authentic innermost territorial core.

One may also claim that such close affiliation with a particular corner of the world is essential to the maintenance of a unique identity. There are hundreds of possible examples in Africa, Eurasia and its archipelagoes, and aboriginal Australia, but the cases of the Basques, Bretons, Slovenes, Macedonians, Abkhazians, or Eritreans should suffice. In North America, in contrast, I can cite only a handful of possible cases, namely, the Quebecois, the Cajuns of Louisiana's Acadiana, the Chicanos of the southwestern Hispanic Homeland, the Pennsylvania Germans, or a few Native American groups, such as the Cherokee, Hopi, and Navajo.

When we turn to the second category of ethnic communities – those of colonial or settler origin in what I call the "Neo-European" lands – we find that earth-boundedness is much weaker or totally missing. Just where such immigrants happen to alight, whether in town or country, is a matter of blind chance or perceived economic or social opportunity. More importantly, neither they nor the larger national community expects them to remain wedded very long or firmly to a particular locality. Indeed the general expectation, especially in metropolitan areas, is that any given hyphenated group will move on to greener, or at least different, pastures within a few years or decades. The prevalence and vigor of spatial churning, the recycling of ethnic neighborhoods, is the most impressive and its existence verily one of the fundamental axioms of urban social geography in America. It follows, of course, that, given such mobility, there is scant emotional attachment to turf, an evanescent nostalgia at best, on the part of such footloose "ethnics". However viable the future existence of the transplanted or syntesized ethnic group may be – a question of a certain urgency to all concerned – it will be the product of complex cultural, social, and institutional factors, but will have little or nothing to do with real estate.

The place-based dichotomy I am proposing has important policy implications in terms of governance and the economy and manifests itself in many aspects of human geography. Ethnicity 1, if I may so designate the more venerable type, finds its participants clamoring for a place on the map, quite possibly a specially labelled and bounded territory, and for some measure and/or cultural autonomy within the larger national polity, for equitable formal representation within the legislative, executive, and other governmental instrumentalities operating at the national level.

Things are quite different where Ethnicity 2 prevails. Leaving aside reservations for the surviving aboriginal populations, no one would dream of agitating for presumably permanent ethnic districts, enclaves, or any other variety of officially sanctioned tract. The apparent exception in the U.S.A., i.e., electoral districts drawn to provide representation for a substantial racial or ethnic community, is actually an ephemeral phenomenon, since such entities can be redefined every ten years or so, or simply abolished. There is no denying the importance of the ethnic vote and ethnic lobbies at various times and places in Neo-European lands, or of certain informal ar-

rangements in the allocation of various appointments and other types of governmental bounty, but nonetheless the political geography of Ethnicity 2 is a far cry from that of Ethnicity 1.

If this crude dihotomy has any merit, perhaps we can go further and devise a more elaborate typology of ethnicities, one that will not only encompass our contemporary array of attitudes and arrangements within an exceedingly complicated world but would also allow for changes over time. It is a difficult, perhaps impossible challenge, but I leave you with the thought that the intellectual rewards of confronting the impossible could be well worth the effort.