POPULATION GEOGRAPHY AND ETHNICITY

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POVZETEK
GEOGRAFIJA PREBIVALSTVA IN VPRAŠANJE NARODNOSTNE IDENTITETE

Študije narodnostne pripadnosti oziroma etničnosti so v raziskovalni sferi Geografije prebivalstva dokaj raznolike in specifične glede na dežele in avtorje, ki iz njih izhajajo. Resnici na ljubo je treba reči, da so tako po obsegu kot po številu strokovnjakov v manjšini. Vzroke za tak položaj gre iskati v delikatnosti tovrstnih raziskav (v posameznih deželah sveta), raznovrstnosti in neprimerljivosti doslej uporabljene metodologije ter predvsem v pomanjkanju ustreznih statističnih podatkov. V večini držav sveta je lažje zastaviti raziskave, ki bi bile usmerjene v proučevanje tujcev (denimo turistov) kot poizkušati analizirati etnično razslojenost domače družbe.

V času, ko so v mnogih deželah sveta vršena raziskave narodnostnosti ponovno v ospridružju družbenih dogajanj bi morali geografi, ki proučujejo prebivalstvo odgovoriti vsaj na dve temeljni vprašanji:

1. Kakšna je etnična sestava dežel Tretjega sveta (in nekaterih držav razvitega Zahoda) glede na etnično relevantne demografske, gospodarske, socialne in politične značilnosti in njih medsebojna razmerja?

2. Kakšen je položaj tujskih, neavtohtonih skupnosti v nerazvitih deželah sveta (in v nekaterih držah razvitega Zahoda) glede na demografske in socialne značilnosti ter segregacijske pritiskove, katerim so občasno izpostavljene?

V okviru teh zadolžitev se naloge Geografije prebivalstva prekrivajo z interesi Politične geografije, Socialne geografije in Kulturne geografije. To je kvečjemu prednost in še zdanje ne vsebinska ali metodološka ovira.

Introduction

The study of ethnicity is not restricted to ethnologists, anthropologists and political scientists. It is also a matter of interest to geographers. Ethnicity has in fact belonged to geography since its earliest beginnings. During Antiquity, the Middle Ages, Modern times, and the beginning of the Contemporary period, the study of populations, when it was undertaken by geographers, had a distinct ethnological character. Characteristics such as race, language, religion, clothes, habits, customs and life styles were often mentioned.

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This approach subsequently disappeared to be followed by others but, at the end of the twentieth century, ethnic questions are returning again to the forefront of the headlines. In a great number of countries, ethnic differences are resurfacing with force and they are sometimes the root of bloody conflicts. It is thus imperative to pose again certain questions about the place of ethnicity in geography and more specifically in the field of population geographers. What place does the study of ethnicity have in population geography? What place should it have? What elements must be included to characterise ethnicity? What are the sources of information which underlie a scientific approach? What are the different themes population geographers are interested in? This paper intends to respond to these questions.

What is the place of ethnicity in population geography?

First, it is necessary to assess the place of ethnicity in population geography. A complete survey would be a consuming task. It is more realistic as well as more meaningful to inventory its place in textbooks or in epistemological papers devoted to population geography. The contents and limits of the field are always specified in these materials. The importance given to diverse themes also provides a useful appreciation. For this survey, I have selected about twenty books and articles written in English, French, German, Italian and Spanish; they are certainly not the totality of studies published in this field, but as several have been translated or have inspired publications in other languages, it is fair to say that the sample is representative of the field on a world-wide basis.

1. To begin, it is noteworthy that during the fifties, the founders of population geography, especially Pierre George and Glenn Trewartha, gave a very limited place to ethnicity in their publications. These authors had a large influence, the former in French and Latin countries and the latter in English speaking countries. In George’s books (Introduction à la géographie de la population, 1951, and Questions de géographie de la population, published a few years later) ethnicity simply does not appear. In Trewartha’s well-known paper A Case for Population Geography (1953), race, religion, and customs are mentioned but he does not speak about ethnic groups or language though he has an extremely broad conception of population geography.

2. During the sixties and seventies, when population geography really took off, there were diverse orientations depending on the author. With some of them, though dealing with a wide field of research, there is an absence or quasi-absence of the ethnic dimension. Noteworthy in particular are Jacqueline Beaujeu-Garnier (3 Milliards d’Hommes, traité de démo-géographie, 1965), Mario Ortolani (Geografia della Popolazione, 1975) and Robert Woods (Population Analysis in Geography, 1979). With other authors, the ethnic dimension is more or less present. In Population Geography, John Clarke (1965) briefly treats these questions in an analytic
manner by dealing in turn with nationality, language and religion. In a work of the same title (Population Geography, 1968), Murray Wilson devotes several pages to ethnic structure and illustrates the topic with the case of Malaysia. In Géographie de la Population (1979), I myself devoted a chapter to anthropological differences and another to cultural and ethnic diversity.

It is the American authors who gave the most important place to ethnic questions, probably because they are more sensitive to these issues than European or Australian authors. Thus Wilbur Zelinsky, in A Prologue to Population Geography (1966), vigorously underlines the importance of cultural approaches to the study of populations; among the most significant elements, he considers language, religion and nationality. In A Geography of Mankind (1968), Jan Broek and John Webb, give a very important place to cultural and ethnic aspects (more than 130 pages); of all the works examined, it is in there that ethnic questions are the most developed and it is also where the limit between population geography and cultural geography is the least distinct.

3) During the eighties and early nineties, population geography underwent some changes. It began to analyse population phenomena with greater refinement and got closer to demography and sociology. It became more sensitive to social and political issues. However, the place of ethnic questions remained rather restricted, at least within textbooks devoted to population geography. In several of them, these questions still remained completely outside or almost completely outside the field. This is the case in works by Huw Jones (A Population Geography, 1981), Robert Woods (Theoretical Population Geography, 1982), José-Manuel Casas Torres (Población, Desarrollo y Calidad de vida, 1982) or by Daniel Noin and Pierre-Jean Thumerelle (L’Etude Géographique des Populations, 1993). Even more curious is the example of the Indian author R. Chandna (A Geography of Population, 1986) published in a country where ethnic problems are notorious in so many respects. In other books, ethnicity is present but occupies a rather reduced place. In particular in the books of Jürgen Bähr (Bevölkerungsgeographie, 1983, 1992), Giacomo Corna-Pellegrini and others (Populazione, società e territorio, 1991) or of Maria Luiza Gentileschi (Geografia della popolazione, 1991).

In sum, the place of ethnicity in population geography as surveyed through textbooks which serve students and young researchers is rather modest indeed. When the number of pages is considered, it is about 5% of the total. This measure is of course a rough estimate but it provides a significant order of magnitude.

One may wonder why ethnicity has such a limited presence. Several answers can be given to this question. First a technical response: in numerous countries, information necessary for studying ethnicity is either absent or insufficient. Next a political response: researchers in population geography and all population sciences have
maintained neutrality; they have not wanted to consider delicate issues at a time when ethnic problems seem secondary in regard to East-West tensions, North-South disparities or simply social problems specific to each country.

There is no doubt however that, at the end of this century, the place of ethnic questions should have greater prominence in population geography and in a more general way within population sciences. Keeping in mind the importance assumed by ethnic divisions in developed and developing countries, it seems difficult for population geographers to remain on the side lines vis-à-vis this question. Considering also the importance of cultural factors in fertility, mortality and migration, it seems equally difficult not to acknowledge the importance of these questions.

This is what is perhaps taking place. Thus in West European countries over the last few years, there has been an active current of interest in the study of foreign communities by population geographers, extending the social approaches which characterised the eighties. There is also a current of interest in the study of minority groups and, among them, ethnic minorities.

**How do population geographers approach ethnicity?**

Before going further, it is appropriate to ask how population geographers consider ethnicity and how they study it.

**What is ethnicity?**

What is ethnicity? What is an ethnic group? It is not easy to give a simple answer to these questions.

The problem resides not in the word ethnicity which means quite simply belonging to or being affiliated to an ethnic group. The difficulty arises from the expression ethnic group for which there is no precise definition.

The international diffusion of the French word ethnie is recent. It began to be used in France by sociologists or political scientists at the end of the 19th century but it remained confined to scholarly language until the seventies. At that time, it had a greater utilisation and passed into other languages (ethnie in German, etnia in Italian and Spanish, etnos in Russian, ethnic group in English) (R. Breton, 1992).

The term has various senses. Two at least should be pointed out. In the narrow sense, it is a linguistic or ethno-linguistic group. In the broader sense, it is a human group having a set of common somatic and cultural characteristics, language being only an element of characterisation among others.

Population geographers generally use a broad definition because it corresponds better to reality. A Porto-Rican can live in New York and speak English part of the day for his activity without ceasing to be Porto-Rican, appearing Porto-Rican, or
feeling Porto-Rican. The ethnic affiliation is made up of a set of characteristics. The feeling of belonging to a group to which one physically and culturally resembles is an essential element.

Geographical studies devoted to ethnic groups use this broad definition, as well as dictionaries of geography. For instance, R. Johnston’s Dictionary of Human Geography (1986) considers that an ethnic group is “a distinct category of a larger population whose culture is usually different from its own. The members of such a group are, or feel themselves to be, or are thought to be bound together by common ties of race, nationality, religion or culture”. In R. Brunet’s critical dictionary (Les Mots de la Géographie, 1992), an ethnic group is defined as “a set of individuals considered to be bound together, and whose members share a common culture, notably language, institutions, and customs”. It is the same in dictionaries of demography, notably in the one of R. Pressat (Dictionary of Demography, 1985) where the ethnic group is defined as “a group of persons bound together by a common culture, language, customs, religion and race”.

What are the elements of identification for an ethnic group? They are not exactly the same in the definitions cited above. Neither are they necessarily the same everywhere because a particular element can be more important for defining the ethnic identity of a group. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify at least five elements:

1. **Nationality** is obviously the essential element when one observes foreign populations or populations composing the so called ‘multi-national states’;

2. **Language** is a very important criterion in every case to the extent that it guarantees cohesion to the group and carries its culture;

3. **Religion** is generally no longer an essential identification element for an ethnic group in developed countries because of diminishing religious beliefs and practices, but in most developing countries, religion is still the basis of ethnic differentiation; in either case, it is an important cultural element;

4. Other **diverse cultural elements** can equally serve to define in a secondary way the identity of an ethnic group: modes of social organisation, ways of life and thinking, rites, popular art and literature, and so on;

5. As far as race is concerned, it is also an element to consider even though it is an element which has more to do with current perception rather than scientific analysis; skin colour and the morphology of the face are elements among others; the most significant elements such as antigens and blood groups are not often available. In any case, all elements have only a statistical value as there are striking variations between individuals within the same ethnic group. Race is therefore a criterion which should be used with the greatest precaution.

Ultimately, the concept of an ethnic group merges with the concept of a people.
Some authors make a quantitative distinction between the two concepts, with a people having a greater numerical value than an ethnic group. Thus, in R. Johnston's dictionary (1986), there is a clear difference (an ethnic group being "a distinct category of a larger population ...”). This distinction is not really justified because it leads to limiting the sense of an ethnic group to that of an ethnic minority. If there is a distinction between the two concepts, it is rather in origin and usage. The word people belongs to the current political vocabulary and is associated to state, nation or nationality. Ethnic group belongs to the scientific vocabulary and is more neutral.

Whatever the case, it is preferable to conserve a broad sense and use the expression ethnic group to designate a group of human beings having the same cultural characteristics and possibly the same somatic characteristics. This group can correspond to a nation (for example the Portuguese), can constitute a sub-group within a nation (The Flemish and the Walloons in Belgium) or can be divided between several states (for instance the Kurds who live in Turkey, Irak, Syria, and Iran).

How can ethnicity be studied?

Having specified the way ethnic groups can be identified, it remains to know how they can be spotted, mapped, and analysed in all their diverse characteristics.

Since the seventies, population geographers have mainly worked with numerical data deriving from censuses. Do these censuses provide information about ethnic structure? Yes, but this information is extremely limited. The amount of information depends a lot on the ethnic structure of the country. It also depends a lot on the political situation: sometimes, the presence of different ethnic groups is recognised; at other times, ethnic groups are denied in the name of national unity.

In any case, there is no more than four kinds of information about ethnic characteristics but in many countries only one or two are available:

1. Some censuses directly provide information about *ethnic groups* from the observation of census agents or from the declarations of persons questioned during the census operations. The definitions are not homogeneous as ethnic groups can be identified according to race, language, religion or some other criterion. In the states of Black Africa, ethnic groups are distinguished according to current designations which are either somatic or linguistic. In the United States, there is a mix of anthropological characteristics (for instance Whites, Blacks, Asians, American Indians) and cultural characteristics (for instance Hispanics). Keeping in mind the modalities of data collection, errors can obviously arise; some groups may be underestimated or overestimated.

2. Certain censuses provide data about *language*. This is especially the case for countries where several languages are commonly used. In this domain too, the definitions are not homogeneous: depending on the case, it is the mother tongue, or the
language spoken in the household, and sometimes the capacity to speak the official language of the country. Nevertheless, language is a good indicator of ethnic structure. It allows observation of diverse situations, certain countries being almost unilingual while others offer a real linguistic mosaic.

3. Certain censuses provide data about religious affiliation but they are less and less frequent because the question about religion is now considered as an intrusion into private life. Around 1980, this question still remained in several European countries (Austria, Finland, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Switzerland). Of course, it does not provide precise information as many people do not bother to answer it. In any case, it is difficult to use it for the identification of ethnic groups.

4. Finally, nationality is the only question which follows the recommendations of the United Nations for censuses. This is interesting information for studying foreign communities living in mono-ethnic countries. It is equally so for the study of ethnic groups in countries considered as multi-national. Thus, in the former Soviet Union, about one hundred nationalities were distinguished with in order of importance, Russians, Ukrainians, Uzbeks, Belorussians, Kazaks and many others, without counting the Jewish who curiously enough were considered as a nationality. In China, 56 nationalities were distinguished for the 1982 census. Former Yugoslavia was an interesting case from this point of view: the person being questioned in the census was free to choose his or her affiliations among the 6 peoples of the country or simply say ‘Yugoslav’ or even refuse to answer.

What themes can population geographers consider concerning ethnicity?

The available information determines to a large extent the research themes which can be explored by population geographers in the field of ethnicity. Taking into account different scales, there are at least three main themes: the identification of ethnic groups, their dynamics, and the study of foreign communities.

The identification of ethnic groups

The first theme is the identification of ethnic groups in the world. This identification does not only concern population geographers; it also interests specialists of cultural geography and political geography.

In geographical literature concerning most countries, there are many indications about ethnic groups, but their recognition is far from complete in some countries which are not well known. There is a great number of ethnic groups in the world, even though this number tends to diminish progressively. The number of ethno-linguistic groups is estimated between two and three thousand (R. Breton, 1992).
The number of ethnic groups is a little higher as some big linguistic groups are subdivided into distinct ethnic-cultural groups. The number of linguistic groups, although approximate, gives however an idea of the possible number of ethnic groups in the world.

A general inventory was undertaken about thirty years ago by S. Bruk and V. Apenchenko (*Atlas Narodov Mira, 1964*). This work has to be seriously revised because having been inspired by the soviet concept of nationality, it considers ethnic minorities where there are only small socio-cultural differences (as it is the case in France for instance). It is also necessary to update it and take into account changes in the distribution of ethnic groups as it is the case in former Yugoslavia, the former Soviet Union, Black Africa, South-East Asia and various other parts of the world.

Such a work would certainly be of great interest not only for population studies but also for the study of geo-political problems.

**The dynamics of ethnic groups**

A second theme, which can be studied on intermediate scales, concerns the study of the population dynamics. Ethnic groups, as all human groups, grow or diminish, modify little by little their characteristics, but can also be absorbed in bigger groups. One can find many examples in Europe where the evolution can be followed over several centuries.

This part of the field is almost wide open and remains to be explored. It obviously includes an important demographic facet for which it is possible to collect statistical data in certain countries. Thus, each ethnic group constituting former Yugoslavia had its own dynamics, a certain level of fertility and mortality, a certain age and sex structure, a certain household structure, particular migration flows and so on, themselves linked largely to cultural characteristics. The link between ethnicity and demographic characteristics has not been sufficiently studied. It is an area which is of great interest to better know fertility, which is largely conditioned by cultural aspects, but also morbidity and mortality which are also strongly conditioned by cultural elements, notably diets and life styles.

**The study of foreign communities**

A third area of research, more at regional scale or urban scale, deserves to be greatly developed: this is the theme of foreign communities living in a country other than their own.

With the development of international migrations, these foreign populations are today very numerous. The United Nations has recently estimated them to about one hundred million people, of which 20 million are refugees and 80 million are eco-
conomic migrants. This estimation, blatantly simplified, is no doubt a little high but it provides an order of magnitude which underlines the amplitude of the phenomenon.

There have already been many studies concerning these foreign populations in the developed countries such as the United States, Canada, the countries of western and northern Europe, Australia and New Zealand but still relatively few concerning new immigration countries such as Spain and Italy, and especially countries of the Third World such as Saudi Arabia, the emirates of the Persian Gulf, Ivory Coast or Malaysia.

Here is indeed a large field of research, especially concerning the location of foreigners within cities, the processes of integration or exclusion, the employment market and the housing market. For this topic and some others, population geography merges with social geography.

References:


