

Introduction

Liberals have generally taken the view that, as mankind moved from a primitive, tribal stage of social organisation towards large-scale industrial societies, the various primordial ties of religion, language, ethnicity and race which divided it would gradually but inexorably lose their hold and disappear. The great forces of trade and industry would bind continents together and erase internal barriers and differences. Ancient customs and traditions would become obsolete, and the myths of common ancestry would be recognised for what they were and consigned to the museum of mankind's memory. True, large-scale industry would require an effective territorial base for its markets, and for a period the 'nation-state' might provide a suitable framework.¹ But, as industrial capitalism expanded its operations, the boundaries of the nation-state would impede further economic development, and it would be necessary to organise production and trade on a regional, continental and ultimately global scale. Technological advances, after all, know no barriers. Economic booms and recessions respect no frontiers. In an age of swift development, protectionist controls are an anachronism and impede the growth of global interdependence. So are frontier controls for the movement of labour. Men, after all, will go where economic prospects are brightest; and industry, in turn, requires a high level of geographical mobility and an increasing level of technical skills.² Thus the rational use of skilled labour, as of scarce raw materials and other resources, must render old cultural differences and political divisions increasingly irrelevant, or positively harmful. Besides, the vast expansion of communications across the planet, the growth of mass tourism, the exposure of huge publics to interlinked mass media, must erode all cultural barriers as they diminish cultural distances, and create in their place a single, standardised mass culture with perhaps even a global lingua franca in which to purvey that culture. In such a world, what room would be left for the ancient customs of a diminishing countryside, and for the ancient cultures of ethnic minorities? Would they not become, in Engels' graphic phrase, so many 'ethnographic monuments'?³

This, then, was the liberal reasoning, which foresaw the imminent dissolution of ethnicity. If we examine it closely, we see that it is based on three main propositions. The first is that industry and commerce would dominate the world economy, reducing agriculture and the peasantry to a residual role; and that an industrial society requires achievement and universalist values which are incompatible with the retention of ascriptive cultural and historic divisions and identities. A second proposition maintained that worldwide communications would inevitably bring about a cultural fusion, an inter-

Introduction

mingling of all that was best in the several national cultures, as travel and education broadened men's minds and caused them to reflect on the virtues to be found in lands and communities other than their own. Besides, the mass media would create a mass public, fed on the same diet of information and entertainment, and would help to convince humanity of its global interdependence and underlying unity of thought and emotion. Finally, liberal reasonings assumed the transitional character of nation-states and nationalism. They conceded, with Mill, the right of self-determination based on popular consent and mutual sympathies;⁴ but they regarded such political decisions as a transitional phase, and a natural result of the expansion of industry and communications, which created problems of personal and collective adjustment, that in time would find a more rational global solution. Perhaps, too, early industrialisation and modernisation were unable to erode cultural cleavages, and might even sometimes exacerbate them at first. In the long run, however, free trade and industrial abundance would, along with enhanced communications, render such cleavages obsolete.

It is, of course, easy to criticise the naive optimism and confidence of the liberal assumptions. Clearly, none of them has stood up well to the facts of historical development in the last century or more. The very economic and industrial trends that they assumed would undermine tribalism and nationalism, have instead tended to reinforce ethnic and national divisions and loyalties. The creation of vast factories and plants, massive urbanisation and slum conditions, fierce competition for jobs and housing, the rise of mass literacy and the impact of radio and television, have all tended to bring new insecurities, anxieties and frustrations which unscrupulous demagogues could manipulate by appealing to the comforting warmth of old ethnic bonds. To be restored to one's cultural family, to be an equal in one's own closed circle, to receive the protection of one's brethren, seems the only sure route to sanity and dignity in the computer age. Communications, too, have only accentuated ethnic antagonisms, and heightened the visibility of national differences. Far from creating a single world culture, the mass media have been ready instruments of state authorities, who have used them to mould or instil a national culture in every citizen and every household. Industrial society has been able to accommodate ascriptive bonds, and in many cases to incorporate a large rural sector with its ancient village traditions and customs, even after capitalist farming has been introduced. Travel and education can just as easily bring home to men and women their cultural differences and reinforce their national loyalties as erase them; and, all too often, this is what has happened. So

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-29885-8 - The Ethnic Revival
Anthony D. Smith
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

that, far from being merely transitional phenomena, the nation-state and nationalism have become more firmly entrenched within the world order, even in the most advanced industrial societies. Indeed, within Europe itself, in the industrial heartlands of the West, we are witnessing a resurgence of ethnic nationalism in the wake of an era of massive economic growth.⁵

So impressed, indeed, have many observers been by today's ethnic resurgence that a new orthodoxy may soon replace the outworn expectations of liberalism. It is now becoming fashionable to argue that industrial capitalism actually generates ethnic protest, and that modernisation endows ethnic bonds with a new political salience and importance. Ethnic movements, especially the post-War European ones, should be viewed as a product of economic development and capitalist industrial expansion, and not as some regrettable deviation or culture-lag of modernisation. Nationalism is therefore an inevitable concomitant of industrial development, and its uneven diffusion, even within Europe.⁶

The main difficulty with this critique of liberalism, as I shall endeavour to show at greater length later, is that it remains firmly within the orbit of the liberal assumptions. To be sure, it reverses the causal arguments; yet it ends up with much the same kind of conclusion, although for different reasons. That is to say, ethnicity and nationalism are still viewed as 'transitional' phenomena, although perhaps a little more durable now. They will pass away, when modernisation or industrialism or capitalist expansion has been completed, and when the ethnic regions and communities that have to date been neglected hinterlands or latecomers in the race of modernisation, catch up with the more modernised central areas. When that happens, even mass communications will reinforce the unity and equality of different regions within and between states; for communications *per se* merely amplify and accentuate existing trends.

While this kind of position undoubtedly represents a great advance upon previous liberal arguments, it too places a disproportionate weight upon economic and economically oriented factors, with the result that it presents a rather one-sided picture of the ethnic revival, and reduces its long-term significance. This is in line with the current fashion of presenting many cultural and political issues in economic terms, a fashion to which many current ethnic nationalists themselves subscribe. As a result of such economic preoccupations, other important factors – cultural, psychological above all, political factors – have received less attention than they merit.

It is no part of my intention to deny the short- and long-term im-

Introduction

portance of economic factors and technological developments. Nor do I exclude such factors from the analysis presented here, part of which turns upon the role of occupational mobility. But, if we are to grasp the long-term significance of the ethnic revival, and not reduce it to the limited issue of the current upsurge of ethnicity in the West, which has provoked so much comment, then we have to take a much broader historical perspective and shift our emphasis away from immediate technological or economic issues to a consideration of the slower rhythms of political formation and cultural change. My aim, therefore, is to redress the balance of scholarly argument, by presenting an alternative which, while it does not exclude economic factors, gives more weight than is customary to other kinds of development. Hence, no attempt will be made to present some sort of 'synthesis' of existing approaches, which would be premature in this field and in the present state of research. On the contrary, the present interpretation attempts to place political, social and cultural changes at the centre of analysis, and to treat economic developments, like the economic arguments that are so much in vogue, as catalysts, triggers, and contributory factors in the process of ethnic revival. Because ethnic nationalism is ultimately a cultural theory and an ethic of politics, a central role in any explanation of the ethnic revival must be accorded to the conjuncture of culture and politics; the parallel economic developments will then be found to reinforce political and cultural trends, or to act as catalysts in particular situations.

The critique of predominantly economic definitions and explanations of the ethnic revival goes hand in hand with a rejection of the fashionable view of that revival as a phenomenon of the later twentieth century, particularly in the West. Again, I do not wish to deny the special character of the post-War resurgence of ethnicity in the West; indeed, I devote a chapter to considering the more specific factors involved in this recent renaissance. But I also claim that that resurgence is a special variant, and extension, of a much broader trend of ethnic revival, which began in the eighteenth century, and even earlier in Western Europe. It is this broader historical definition and perspective on the ethnic revival, which forces one to re-examine the close links which much current theory assumes to exist between industrialisation and ethnicity. For the modern ethnic revival – and there have been previous revivals in history – assumes special forms and demands a distinctive political ideology, that of nationalism; and these new factors, which differentiate the modern revival from every previous ethnic revival, call for a different kind of approach and explanation.

Introduction

It is this broad socio-historical approach which dictates the structure of my argument. The latter falls into three parts. In the first part (Chapters 1 to 3), I examine the general evidence and isolate the main forms and antecedents of the modern ethnic revival; and then go on to assess the strengths and limitations of some recent economic and culturalist theories of that revival. In the second part (Chapters 4 to 6), I set out an alternative interpretation based upon this broad socio-historical approach. Chapter 4 discusses the main features of ethnicity and ethnic community, and suggests some factors which may account for the persistence, with cyclical fluctuations, of ethnic ties and sentiments in the pre-modern era. In Chapter 5 I examine the cultural basis of the modern ethnic revival, notably the movement of 'historicism', which attracted so many secular intellectuals, and discuss some of the reasons for their rediscovery of ethnicity after 1750. Chapter 6 turns to consider the related problems of the professional intelligentsia, whose expansion and mobility the rise of bureaucratic states has both fostered and restricted. I also discuss some of the reasons for the radicalisation of the professional intelligentsia, and for their gravitation towards the ethnic historicism of the intellectuals, in coalition with other new strata. The third part (Chapters 7 to 9) applies this scheme, with necessary historical modifications, to three main types of ethnic revival in different continents. For example, Chapter 7 looks more closely at the role of the imposed post-colonial state in Africa and Asia, and its dependent position in the world economic and political order. My aim is to identify those features of the political situation which tend to promote ethnic separatism, and to assess the special role of the 'Third World' professional intelligentsia who generally assumes leadership of such movements. I also attempt to relate these more local developments to the geopolitical situation of the superpowers and their client-systems, which both encourage ethnic movements and curb their secessionist tendencies and impulses. The next chapter takes a brief look at the rather different 'communalist' movements in America, discussing the debates about ethnic pluralism and 'symbolic ethnicity' in the United States, and the special character of non-white, notably Black, ethnic movements. Chapter 9 examines some of the reasons for the recent wave of 'autonomy' movements in Canada and Europe, laying emphasis upon the contraction of opportunities for social mobility, especially among peripheral professional elites, following the massive shift in power, prestige and economic outlets away from Europe. This geopolitical situation is also related to the vastly increased interventionist powers of the scientific state, and to the influence of 'Third World' ideologies of liberation on western

Introduction

minorities who have become disenchanted with the class-based parties of liberal democracies.

By way of conclusion, the final chapter attempts to assess the long-term significance of the modern ethnic revival as a broad historical and sociological phenomenon; and to show how it is related to other major trends, notably the rise of the scientific state and the demands for greater mass participation. As I hope to show, the modern ethnic revival is unlike any previous revival. The modern revival is simultaneously an ethnic transformation, whose ideal, as yet largely unrealised, is the full and genuine nation-state. The distance between reality and ideal gives one some idea of the likely course and persistence of this ethnic revival and its national transformation.

Pluralism and ethnic conflict

colonial state rather than on ethnic communities and divisions, with a few exceptions in Burma and Iraq. Even the so-called communal differences of southeast Asian colonies appeared to be held in check;¹ and in Latin America, hispanicisation seemed to turn ethnicity into a modern irrelevance.

Today, thirty years later, such optimism seems naive and myopic. Today, more and more people are realising that the world is 'plural'; that is to say, the so-called 'nation-state' is rarely a true appellation, for very few states have ethnically homogeneous populations. On the contrary: most of them are composed of two or more ethnic communities, jostling for influence and power, or living in uneasy harmony within the same state borders. Large and small states alike often possess sizeable minorities, and most states have small ethnic minorities. Take first of all the states with fairly large minorities. They include: Canada, the United States, Mexico, Brazil, Peru, Trinidad, Bolivia, Guyana, Paraguay, Ecuador; Britain, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Spain, Yugoslavia, Rumania, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Cyprus; Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and Iran; Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Burma, Sri Lanka, China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Laos, the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand; and in Africa: Morocco, Algeria, the Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia, Angola, the Congo, the Cameroons, Nigeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Senegal and many other new states. If we extend this list to include states which have small minorities – like the Frisians in Holland, the Tyrolese and Friulians in Italy,² the Lapps in Sweden, Karelians in Finland, the Gypsies, Armenians, Turks, Pomaks, Wallachians, Karakachani, Gagauzi and others in Bulgaria,³ the Sorbs or Wends of Lusatia in Eastern Germany,⁴ the Ainu of Japan, the hill peoples of northern Thailand,⁵ the Saharauis of ex-Spanish Sahara incorporated in Morocco,⁶ and the Amerindian minorities in Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Belize⁷ – few states today can claim to be 'pure' nations, with a completely homogeneous ethnic composition. Portugal, Greece, Iceland, Malta, West Germany (despite some few North Frisians), Norway and, with the exception of the Ainu, Japan, may be ethnically homogeneous; even Denmark has Eskimo and Faroese minorities, and Austria has its Slovenes. But, the fact is that very few of the world's states are ethnically homogeneous, and many of them are distinctly polyethnic in composition. According to Walker Connor, of 132 independent states in 1971, only 12 were ethnically homogeneous, representing 9.1% of the total, while another 25 (or 18.9%) have a single ethnic community comprising over 90% of the

An 'ethnic revival'?

state's population. A further 25 have a single ethnic community comprising 75–90% of the population, and 31 have an ethnic community representing 50–74% of the state's population. On the other side, in 39 states (or 29.5%), the largest ethnic group comprised less than 50% of the population; while in 53 states (40.2%), the population is divided into more than five significant groups.⁸

Clearly, the very term 'nation-state' is a misnomer. Ethnic pluralism rather than ethnic homogeneity appears still to be the norm, despite the acceptance of the principle of self-determination. Most state structures to this day take little cognisance of ethnic aspirations, although some states have made provision for safeguarding the cultural rights of their ethnic minorities. In a few cases, like Yugoslavia, federalism is enshrined in the constitution, and in some others it is to all intents practised. But most states make little provision for ethnic rights, and are even less sympathetic to ethnic aspirations for greater autonomy.

Little wonder that many poly-ethnic states are bent upon rapid 'national' integration. In their desire for social integration, the leaders of these states generally employ policies of cultural assimilation. As we shall see, the new states of Africa and Asia are particularly anxious to counter the fragility and artificiality of state borders by integrating their culturally disparate populations. Haunted by a fear of 'balkanisation', African leaders are especially keen to counter 'tribalism' and ethnic movements by turning the members of often antipathetic ethnic communities into fraternal citizens of the new 'national' state.⁹ Unfortunately, the very act of integrating such divided peoples may well exacerbate ethnic antagonisms and highlight ethnic solidarities, at least in the short run. In fact, the role of state homogenisation policies in reinforcing ethnic cleavage is not confined to 'Third World' countries. Its effects can be witnessed in the West and the East, even among the most liberal and 'consociational' systems. Pluralism and integration are woven together in a complex nexus, and provide the political basis for the increasing salience of ethnic cleavage today.

For the crucial fact is that interethnic conflict has become more intense and endemic in the twentieth century than at any time in history. Few countries have been able to avoid serious ethnic conflicts. There have been ethnic riots in Malaysia, chronic ethnic antagonism between Burmese, Karen, Shan and Kachin, conflict with the Chinese, Ambonese and Achinese in Indonesia, between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, a war against Huk and Moro guerillas in the Philippines, ethnonational conflict between Khmers and Vietnamese, Chinese conflict with Tibetans, Japanese hostility to Burakumin,