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0521812550 - Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity

Andreas Wimmer

Excerpt

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1 Shadows of modernity

Three different points of view dominate the current debate on ethnicity and nationalism (cf. Smith 1998). For some, nations and ethnic groups are genuinely modern phenomena, the by-product of the rise of the territorial state or of industrial development. Others regard ethnic and nationalist politics as transitory phenomena, the birth pains of the modern age that will be forgotten as soon as democracy and civil society have grown to maturity. For still others, ethnicity represents the perennial basis of human history, limiting the range of nationalist inventions and imaginations in modern times.

This book goes one step beyond this debate by radicalising the modernist position. It will be shown that nationalist and ethnic politics are not just a by-product of modern state formation or of industrialisation; rather, modernity *itself* rests on a basis of ethnic and nationalist principles.

Modern societies unfolded within the confines of the nation-state and strengthened them with every step of development. On the one side, the modern principles of democracy, citizenship and popular sovereignty allowed for the inclusion of large sections of the population previously confined to the status of subjects and subordinates. On the other, shadowy side, however, new forms of exclusion based on ethnic or national criteria developed, largely unacknowledged by the grand theories of modernity as a universalistic and egalitarian model of society. Belonging to a specific national or ethnic group determines access to the rights and services the modern state is supposed to guarantee. The main promises of modernity – political participation, equal treatment before the law and protection from the arbitrariness of state power, dignity for the weak and poor, and social justice and security – were fully realised only for those who came to be regarded as true members of the nation. The modern principles of inclusion are intimately tied to ethnic and national forms of exclusion.

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By contrast, pre-modern empires integrated ethnic differences under the umbrella of a hierarchical, yet universalistic and genuinely non-ethnic political order, in which every group had its properly defined place (cf. McNeill 1986; Grillo 1998). This pyramidal mosaic was broken up when societies underwent nationalisation and ethnic membership became a question of central importance in determining political loyalty and disloyalty towards the state.

The thesis

This politicisation of ethnicity is the result of the overlapping and fusion of three notions of peoplehood, on which the project of political modernity is based. The people as a sovereign entity, which exercises power by means of some sort of democratic procedure; the people as citizens of a state, holding equal rights before the law; and the people as an ethnic community undifferentiated by distinctions of honour and prestige, but held together by common political destiny and shared cultural features: these three notions of peoplehood were fused into one single people writ large – replacing the Grace of God as the central point around which political discourse draws its circles. Democracy, citizenship and national self-determination became the indivisible trinity of the world order of nation-states.

The exact relation between the three principles evidently varies according to historical circumstances and the nature of the political process. The French and Swiss states emphasise democracy, deducing nationhood and citizenship from it. Germany, Greece and Israel stress the principle of nationality, from which common citizenship and democratic inclusion flows. The order of the nation-state thus has its own doctrine of trinity, with innumerable variations and much sectarian fighting – nourished, as was the case with theological disputes, by vested political interests.

The definition of peoplehood not only varies from country to country, but also over time. In much of Western Europe, the first half of the nineteenth century was characterised by the emphasis on the principles of citizenship. After the gradual extension of voting rights throughout the second half of the century, democracy became the most important defining criterion. The turn of the century, and even more so the outbreak of the First World War, saw the rapid nationalisation and ethnicisation of the notion of peoplehood, a process to be gradually reversed from the seventies of the twentieth century onwards. By the end of the millennium, most Western societies had apparently returned to older, more

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liberal forms of defining those who belong to its people and those who do not.

Variations among countries and over time also characterise developments in the newly founded nation-states after decolonisation or after the dissolution of the Communist bloc. Different patterns of transformation from citizenship to democracy to *ethnos*/nation as defining elements of the state's people could be discovered, different time-scales, international environments and domestic political dynamics. In each case, however, this transformation was not linear. The history of nation-building is not a one-way road.

However, a unifying motif can be discerned in all these different fabrics of history and context. The fragmentation of modern society into its many national segments, each held together by statehood, democracy, nationality and citizenship, had everywhere a profound effect on the political role played by ethnicity. Since being a part of the sovereign body, and a citizen, became synonymous with belonging to a particular ethnic community turned into a nation, the definition of this community and its boundaries became of primary political importance. Who belongs to the people that enjoy equal rights before the law and in which name the state should be ruled, now that kings and caliphs have to be replaced by a government 'representing' the nation?

The answer was easier to find where absolutist states preceded national ones and created large spheres of cultural, religious and ethnic homogeneity. Where the ethnic landscape has been more complex – usually the product of empires based on some sort of indirect rule and communal self-government – the politicisation of ethnicity resulted in a series of nationalist wars aiming at a realisation of the ideal nation-state where sovereign, citizenry and nation coincide.

Forced assimilation or the physical expulsion of those who have suddenly become 'ethnic minorities' and are thus perceived as politically unreliable; the conquest of territories inhabited by 'one's own people'; encouraging the return migration of dispersed co-nationals living outside the national home – these are some of the techniques employed in all the waves of nation-state formation that the modern world has seen so far. What we nowadays call ethnic cleansing or ethnocide, and observe with disgust in the ever 'troublesome Balkans' or in 'tribalistic Africa', have in fact been constants of the European history of nation-building and state formation, from the expulsion of Gypsies under Henry VIII or of Muslims and Jews under Fernando and Isabella to Ptolemy's night in France or the 'people's exchange', as it was euphemistically called, after the Treaty of Lausanne between Turkey and Greece. Many of these histories have

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disappeared from popular consciousness – and maybe have to be forgotten, if nation-building is to be successful, as Ernest Renan (1947 (1882)) suggested some hundred years ago.

Eventually, this conflict-ridden, warlike process leads to the fully developed nation-state, as we know it from Western societies after the Second World War. It is, indeed, a more inclusive, more accountable, more equitable and universalistic form of politics than humanity has known before – except for those who remain outside the doors of the newly constructed national home and for those who are not recognised as its legitimate owners despite occupying one of its rooms. Political modernity – democracy, constitutionalism and citizenship – had its price, as has every form of social organisation based on strong membership rights. Inclusion into the national community of equals went along with exclusion of those not considered to be true members of the family: those that became classified as foreigners, as ethnic or religious minorities, as guest-workers or stateless persons.

As soon as an educated middle class emerges among these groups, sufficiently established to resist pressures for assimilation, they break the silence of subordination and begin to challenge the national bases of the state. Being excluded from the privileged seats in the theatre of society by virtue of their ethnic background, their discourse of injustice develops along national or ethnic lines as well. They thus draw on the ideal of ethnic representativity, of equality before the law, and of the state's responsiveness towards 'the people', in order to demand a 'just' representation in government, a recognition of their cultural heritage as part of the nation's treasures, a treatment as equally valuable and dignified parts of 'the people'. The vision of a multicultural or plurinational society thus represents a shattered mirror-image of the nationalist project from which they remain excluded. Far from announcing a new age of postmodernism, postnationalism or any other 'postism', the politics of recognition and multicultural justice remain tied to the basic principles of political modernity: the idea and practice of a state representing the people in its threefold meaning of nation, citizenry and sovereign.

This book explores some of these shadow sides of political modernity: the dynamics of ethnic conflict, exclusions along national lines, and institutionalised forms of xenophobia accompanying the formation of modern nation-states. Expressed as succinctly as possible, it centres around the following three closely connected propositions:

- Nationalist and ethnic politics are not merely by-products of modernisation; rather modernity itself is structured according to ethnic and nationalist principles, because

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- modern institutions of inclusion (citizenship, democracy, welfare) are systematically tied to ethnic and national forms of exclusion. Correspondingly,
- ethnic conflicts and xenophobia/racism are integral parts of the modern order of nation-states.

The agenda

What are the political, moral and intellectual implications of such a view of the modern world? Perhaps it is appropriate to make it clear that a political requital with nationalism or with its excesses is not what I am seeking or what I feel competent to do as a social scientist. In any case, finding a moral balance would involve a series of rather difficult ethical choices. How could one weigh, to take just one example, the sense of dignity that the egalitarian ideology of nationalism gave to the previously despised lower classes (Greenfeld 1992) against the sufferings of the victims of ethnonationalist terror (Malkki 1995)?

Following this rather uneasy path of political non-commitment and moral abstinence, this book will not show a way of overcoming the nation-state model. Its agenda is largely an intellectual one: shedding light on what has remained a blind spot in the picture that the social sciences have drawn of modern society. Accordingly, it will perhaps not appeal to the general public of concerned intellectuals and policy-makers. Its audience will be limited, I am afraid, to fellow researchers – scholars from anthropology, sociology, political science and history.

In my eyes, discovering and exploring this blind spot appeared to justify the decade-long intellectual enterprise which resulted in this book. As it seems, the fact that nationalist forms of inclusion and exclusion bind our societies together served as an invisible background, not only of political discourse, but also of the most sophisticated theorising about the modern condition. The social sciences too have been captured by the apparent naturalness and givenness of a world divided into societies along the lines of nation-states (Berlin 1998; Beck 2000). What Billig (1995) has shown for everyday discourse and practice holds true for scientific encounters with the social world as well: because it is structured according to nationalist principles, these become so routinely assumed and ‘banal’ that they vanish from sight altogether.

This ‘methodological nationalism’, as Herminio Martins (1974: 276f.) termed it, has inhibited a true understanding of the nature and limits of the modern project (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, forthcoming). In sociology, it has produced a systematic blindness towards the paradox that political modernisation has led to the creation of community amidst society.

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In political science, it has allowed a mainstream theory to emerge which sees the state as a neutral playing-ground for different interest groups – thus excluding from the picture the fact that the modern state itself has been ‘captured’ by the nationalist project.¹ Interestingly enough, such nation-blind and sometimes even anti-nationalist theories of modernity and of the modern state were formulated in an environment of rapidly nationalising societies and states, sometimes in the middle of nationalist wars. Are social scientists unable to analyse the fundamental principles of their own society because the lenses through which they see the world are coloured by these very principles – in the same way that looking through, for example, yellow glasses, you cannot distinguish yellow?

In any case, instead of melting down communal bonds in the fire of ever more universalistic forms of social organisation, as foreseen by classical and more recent dichotomies contrasting *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, mechanical and organic societies, tradition and rationality, underdeveloped and developed etc., modern societies have created communal institutions with an overwhelming binding power, defining peoples’ access to civil rights, to democracy and welfare, and shaping their feelings of belonging, their notions of just and unjust. The elders of societies we conventionally call ‘traditional’ can only dream of their communities – lineages, villages, guilds – having such capacities to define membership, to enforce loyalty and to guarantee identification.

It is only now that the nation-state has lost some of its steering capacities and power to transnational companies, migrants and information flows, that we see, looking backwards, what shape modernity has taken during the last two hundred years, and that it was cast in the iron cage of nationalised states. It is in the works of Brackette Williams (1989), Gérard Noiriel (1991), Rogers Brubaker (1992), Craig Calhoun (1997), Michael Mann (1999) and others that this transformation of perspective has taken shape.

Perhaps it was more difficult to see the world in three dimensions when the sun stood at its zenith. In the evening, shadows lengthen and allow us to perceive the contours more clearly. This book thus belongs to the twilight genre of retrospective analysis. I have to leave it to more talented colleagues to read tomorrow’s weather from the colours of today’s sunset. Among the more prominent augurs, Anthony Smith stands heroically alone in maintaining that there will be no alternative way of providing the

¹ This is also the central problem of Clifford Geertz’s (1963) approach, otherwise a pioneering text that has, unfortunately, been systematically misread as representing a primordialist, essentialist and statist perspective. See Geertz’s (1993) more recent statement on this.

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sense of dignity and security that nations and nation-states have so far given to ordinary peoples (A. Smith 1995a). Most other authors recommend their readers to prepare for the postnational epoch on the threshold of which they see us standing. Some envision a future society organised around transnational companies taking over the former political role of states (Ohmae 1990). Others discern a deterritorialised, transnational regime of citizenship rights on the horizon (Soysal 1994; Kleger 1997). The dream of a cosmopolitan world will thus be achieved by transnational law and ethics as well as by postnational forms of governance (Beck 1997; 2000). For still others, a world state is what is expected and hoped for in the future (Held 1995; Albrow 1996; but see Hardt and Negri 2000).

This book adopts a rather sceptical stance towards such visions, I am afraid. One should ask if it is at all possible to detach citizenship and democracy from the principle of nationality, with which they have been married. Is divorce an option and at what cost? Can postnational forms of government, such as the European Union, one day become democratic and egalitarian? Or are we heading back to the days of empires, where the price for an ethnically and nationally non-exclusivist political order was hierarchy and inequality? For my part, I would not even dare to speculate on whether there might be a resurgence of the nation-state in new forms after an eventual second weakening or even breakdown of globalising trends, similar to the one following the First World War (cf. Wimmer 2001a).

Overview

The chapters of this book start from different angles, cross various intellectual territories, employ diverse methods of analysis – detailed case studies, comparative reviews, abstract theorising – and relate to a range of different societies – Mexico, Iraq and Switzerland. In all their diversity, they remain tied to the approach just outlined, developing its themes and hypothesis further, providing empirical ground for its general claims and contextualising its propositions. The book has three parts.

The first part presents the theoretical tools employed throughout the rest of the book. *Chapter 2* offers a conceptual framework that avoids methodological nationalism on the one hand and the identification of modernity with universalism, post-communal forms of social organisation and non-particularistic politics on the other. A processual theory of social and cultural transformations seems to offer a solution to both problems. It is, as a theory of cultural and social processes, not tied to a typological exercise of distinguishing *Gemeinschaft* from *Gesellschaft*,

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tradition from modernity, or modernity from postmodernity. In this way, it opens a perspective from which we can observe the communal characteristics of modern societies. The most important concepts are those of cultural compromise and social closure.

A cultural compromise emerges when the actors sharing a communicative space can agree that certain values are valuable and that certain modes of classifying the social world make sense. Such a process of negotiating meaning does not depend on a convergence of interests, since even from different positions in economic, political and cultural hierarchies, individuals may find – albeit for different reasons – a certain way of looking at the world meaningful.

This consent clearly does not take place in the neat and clean world of rational decision-making where all lines cross at a point of enlightened harmony, but is based on already established and internalised modes of meaning-making, a certain habitus in Bourdieu's words. Indeed, a cultural compromise has no life of its own and exists only in its manifold interpretations and variations, nourished and coloured by the specific experiences and social positions of individual actors. When the balance of power changes, the cultural compromise may dissolve into a series of subcultural variations or even counter-cultures that challenge the hitherto accepted rules of making meaning.

The negotiation of a cultural compromise goes hand in hand with a process of community-building. Those that have taken part in the negotiation process stabilise the achieved compromise by closing their ranks, controlling access to the group and marking its boundaries with diacritic elements such as certain dress styles or modes of speaking. A cultural compromise thus entails a certain way of defining the borders between us and them, a blueprint for organising exclusion and inclusion. The realisation of these principles through institutions of boundary maintenance is what I call, following Max Weber, a process of social closure. It can lead to the establishment of ethnic groups, nations, social classes, estates, village communities and so on.

Putting these conceptual tools to work, I will show in *chapter 3* that the formation of nation-states and the emergence of both ethnic and national groups can be interpreted as the most significant forms of social closure and cultural compromising in modern societies. It thus presents the theoretical core of the book in an integrated context of arguments, comparing its propositions with those of other current theories. It gives a black-and-white outline of the drawing, the figures of which will be coloured and refined in later chapters.

The main emphasis will be placed on the aspects of social closure rather than on the characteristics of the nationalist cultural compromise.

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Enough has been written during the last decades on the discursive properties of nationalism, but almost nothing on the mechanisms that tie nationalist principles to the institutionalised practices of inclusion and exclusion in modern states. I will maintain that nation-states are the product of four closely interconnected processes of institutional closure: a political one (democracy tied to national self-determination), a legal one (citizenship tied to nationality), a military one (universal conscription tied to national citizenship) and a social one (the institutions of the welfare state linked to the control of the immigration of foreigners).

It is further maintained that this process of nationalising the principles of social inclusion and exclusion is not self-generating or consequential on the introduction of modern forms of statehood or, as with functionalist theories, on the rise of the industrial mode of production. It depends on a successful compromise between the new state elites and the various component parts of society: an exchange of loyalty for participation, equal treatment before the law and the symbolic capital associated with the rise from *plebs* to nation. If the state's elites are unable to provide these collective goods to the whole population of the national state, we expect similar processes of social closure to develop on a subnational, ethnic basis. The polity will then be compartmentalised and fragmented into ethnic groups perceiving themselves as communities of shared destiny and political solidarity. Politicised ethnic groups and nations are thus likewise children of modernisation. They owe their contemporary appearance and political salience to the hegemony of the nation-state as the modern model of political organisation.

Each of the next two parts of the book follows one of these two paths of modernisation: part 2 (chapters 4 to 6) is dedicated to the politicisation of ethnicity and the divisive consequences this often has. Part 3 follows the other line of evolution leading to what I call the full nationalisation of state and society.

Chapter 4 outlines the mechanisms of politicising ethnic differences in more detail. We will see how in weak states lacking the resources for a non-discriminatory treatment of its citizens and lacking an established network of civil society, ethnic ties become the channels through which the new elites distribute the collective goods of the modern state in order to legitimise their rule, now that the state should be responsive to the needs of 'the people'. In this way, the diffusion and rooting of a national identity is undermined, and ethnic groups are transformed into communities of political interest.

Two variants of this process of political closure along ethnic lines will be discussed. In the first case, the elite of the most powerful ethnic group takes over the new state apparatus after the end of empire, while the

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subordinated groups continue to remain on the margin of political life and public culture. However, as soon as an educated middle class appears that is able to develop a discourse of injustice invoking the principles of representational justice and equal access to citizenship, the ethnocratic rule is challenged. Where relations of power and demography are less clear, the new state apparatus becomes quickly compartmentalised on ethnic grounds and a fight erupts over who will be the state's nation. We will then have to discuss under which political conditions these tensions are more likely to escalate into violence and eventually into armed rebellion or civil war such as in Ethiopia, Sudan, the Caucasus, Rwanda and Burundi, former Yugoslavia and so on.

Chapters 5 and 6 contain case studies from Mexico and Iraq. Mexico is an example of a state with a politically dominant ethnic group which has been transformed into a nation. Shiite Arabs and Sunni Kurds contested the hegemony of Sunni Arabs in Iraq soon after the country's independence. However, these case studies will go beyond a mere illustration of the two variants discussed in chapter 3. They will take into account the specific historical and political contexts of the two societies, thus including issues and themes not addressed by the comparative model.

In *chapter 5*, on Mexico, some emphasis is given to the modes of inclusion and exclusion characterising colonial society. We will see that the universalist ideology legitimising imperial rule – the integration of the Americas into the Christian (that is, Catholic) world and the overcoming of native customs contradicting 'natural law' – was combined with a hierarchical distinction among different status groups according to their 'purity of blood'. This so-called caste system defined the rights and obligations of the subjects towards crown and church. It implied the principles of indirect rule, of legal segregation and paternalist protection with regard to the Indian population.

The leaders of the Mexican independence movement adhered to the egalitarian and particularistic ideology of nationalism; they gradually destroyed the transnational structures of Catholic church and Spanish empire, and abolished, in the name of the equality of citizens, the system of indirect rule and all legal provisions that had kept the different groups apart. As a consequence, those groups that remained outside the newly defined nation of Creoles and (socially) white *mestizos* who enjoyed a privileged access to state power, were rapidly subordinated, marginalised and impoverished.

The politics of land reform and clientelist integration of post-revolutionary Mexico laid the basis for a more inclusive cultural compromise encompassing the majority of the population. *Criollo* elitism was