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The Historical Lexicon of Nationalism: Ethnicity, Ethnos, Race, *Volksstamm*: Historical Footnotes

Abstract

This paper is primarily concerned with the etymology of some terms in the historical lexicon of nationalism: ethnicity, ethnos, race, *Volksstamm*. It is argued that European and US usages of *race* are radically different. It is also argued that the Habsburg-era term *Volksstamm* was the basis for the term *narodnost* in Socialist Yugoslavia.

Keywords: historical lexicon, nationalism, race, *Volksstamm*, ethnos, Habsburg era, Yugoslavia.

In 1975, Glazer and Moynihan argued that "Ethnicity seems to be a new term. In the sense in which we use it – the character or quality of an ethnic group – it does not appear in the 1933 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*." After a brief purview of changing meanings of the term, they added: "the reader [may] ask how useful this 'new' term is. […] Does it mean anything new, or is it simply a new way of saying something old?" In fact, the sociologically-sounding "ethnicity" had begun to emerge (in its current and prevalent usage) in the early 1960s, and at first in the USA (Glazer & Moynihan, 1975, p. 1). In 1993, Thomas Eriksen noted that

the word "ethnic" […] is much older [than "ethnicity"]. It is derived from the Greek *ethnos* (which in turn derived from the word *ethnikos*), which originally meant heathen or pagan. […] It was used in this sense in English from the mid--fourteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, when it gradually began to refer to "racial" characteristics. In the United States "ethnics" came to be used around the Second World War as a polite term referring to Jews, Italians, Irish and other people considered inferior to the dominant group of largely British descent (Eriksen, 1993, pp. 3–4).

These examples well illustrate the tendency to conflate the issue of the *appearance* of a term with the issue of the different *usages* of a pre-existing term (or a newly-coined term). Social science debates are generally oriented towards discussing the second issue but they frequently make references to the first issue (etymology), since the presumed "antiquity" of a terms seems to confer greater respectability, much as the idea of a continuity of settlement of a territory "since time immemorial" is supposed to confer legitimacy on present-day claims to that same territory. In fact, many etymologies proffered in studies on nationalism are used to legitimize a specific theory of nationalism.

Any adequate discussion of the etymology of "nation" (and of its cognates, starting with "nationality," often used as an equivalent term) would involve an overview of European linguistics, theories of nationalism and related subjects (see Gschnitzer, Koselleck, Schönemann & Werner, 1992). The remarks which follow are intended as historical footnotes.

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Etymology cannot prove that a term is "new." It can prove (to the extent that it can prove anything at all) that a given usage was "new," i.e. that there is documentary evidence to the effect that at a given moment in time the term was used in a specific sense, perhaps for the first time. For example, the term *nation* (and its translation into various European languages) was in circulation for many centuries (covering a wide range of quite different meanings) (see, e.g., Zernatto, 1944; Kamusella, 2009). It acquired what is nowadays known as its "modernist" meaning (i.e. nations as a basis for conscious self-identification) only at the end of the eighteenth century, or even later. Similarly, the term "nationalism," which emerged at the same time, covered, and continues to cover, a wide variety of meanings in different European languages (Franzinetti, 1996).

"Ethnos" has a more specific history. The existence of the term in Classical Greek has conferred on it an aura of respectability which other terms lacked. In Soviet anthropology, "ethnos" played a key role in the system of classification of social and cultural groups (Dragadze, 1980; Shanin, 1986):

Ethnos (in the narrow sense of the term) can be defined as a firm aggregate of people, historically established in a given territory, possessing in common relatively stable particularities of language and culture, and also recognizing their unity and difference from other similar formations (self-awareness) and expressing this in a self-appointed name (ethnonym) (Bromley & Kozlov, 1975, quoted in Dragadze, 1980, p. 162; see also Bromley & Kozlov, 1989).

Dragadze argued that the fact that

such a group is called an "ethnos" and not by some other name can be partly accounted for by pointing out that in Soviet terms the word "society" is the Marxian term for a particular socio-economic formation: feudal society, capitalist society. Similar difficulties arise with the use of terms such as "community," "nationality," "nation" and "people" – *narod* in Russian – which for some time have had definite, acknowledged meanings which are best not tampered with (Dragadze, 1980, p. 163).

Anthony D. Smith coined his own term, "ethnie," to "bring out the differences and similarities between modern national units and the collective cultural units and sentiments of previous era, those that [he defines as] *ethnie*" (Smith, 1986, p. 13).

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The etymology of "race" is a more complex matter (Conze & Sommer, 1984). Leo Spitzer and others have argued that the term derived from *ratio* (Spitzer, 1941; Merk, 1969) but Gianfranco Contini has provided evidence demonstrating that it derives from *haraz*, an Old French term which refers to horse breeding (Contini, 1959, 1961; Sabatini, 1962, 2013; Coluccia, 1972).

The usage of "race" in European languages involves a series of quite distinct issues. The first concerns the medieval period. There is a wide--ranging discussion amongst medievalists on the issue of the use of "race" in medieval sources. Roger Bartlett argues that "while the language of race – *gens*, *natio*, 'blood,' 'stock' etc. – is biological, its medieval reality was almost entirely cultural" (Bartlett, 1993, p. 197, quoted in Nirenberg, 2009, p. 235). There is a strong diversity of opinion among historians on this specific point. On the basis of his comprehensive review of the issue of Jewish "blood" in medieval Spain, Nirenberg argues cautiously for a recognition of the not merely "cultural" but also "biological" aspect of the Spanish use of the term "race" with reference to Spanish policies towards the Jews (Nirenberg, 2009).

A second issue concerns the usage of "race" during the Enlightenment (Hudson, 1996). Here, too, historians are divided between the "culturalist" and "biological" understanding of the word. This debate leads on to another

discussion, on the usage of "race" in nineteenth-century Europe, especially in Britain (Mandler, 2000). Once again, there is a sharp division between authors who are inclined to see those uses of "race" as already "racist" in the twentieth-century sense, and others who see them in terms of a (non--nationalistic) "civilizational" approach (Jones, 2006).

In a general European context, it is essential to bear in mind the quite different usages of "race" in the continent and outside the continent, in the colonial empires. Outside Europe, the term was generally associated with local ("indigenous") populations, variously classified as "races," associated by phenotype (ultimately in a biological sense, and often with racist implications). In Europe (e.g., in Austria-Hungary), the term "race" was in fact used as an equivalent of "nationality." When in 1908 Robert W. Seton-Watson published a book entitled *Racial problems in Hungary*, he was referring to the nationalities question in Transleithania, the Hungarian part of the Habsburg monarchy. Similarly, when a British author would discuss "the Irish race," this meant quite simply the Irish as a nationality. The characterization could also acquire a racist tinge, if the author so intended – but this was not the starting point.

American English usage of "race" has consistently been different from European usage. This is not at all surprising. On the one hand, in the USA the use of "nationality" (to refer to a specific social or cultural group) would have sounded at best strange, and at worst an incitement to secessionism (as advocated by the Communist Party of the USA in 1928–1935 for the "Black belt"). On the other hand, the history of the USA was based on the presence of three distinct groups: (1) "native Americans" (the adjective is revealing of a semantic awkwardness); (2) voluntary immigrants (generally oriented towards more or less voluntary assimilation); (3) involuntary immigrants (slaves, and later descendants of slaves, who were not encouraged to assimilate, and were in fact segregated). It was thus much more logical to adopt in the USA a classification based on "race," which reflected an essentially binary logic: free white men, as opposed to unfree "colored" men (and their later descendants). (In South African English, the term "coloured" was used to refer to "A S. African of mixed descent"– cf. Branford, 1980). Other "colored" populations (e.g., Chinese immigrants coming to the West Coast of the USA at the end of the nineteenth century) were not welcome, and were tainted (due to their "color") by the association with the "colored" population of former slaves, the African Americans. In short, this was a binary opposition. On one side there was a colourless population, since "white" is a default term to indicate the absence of color, even if it does not even remotely describe the appearance of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. On the other side there are "colored" populations (whose phenotype was stigmatized).

This situation inevitably changed over time. By the early 1960s, Americans were discovering that the "melting pot" (an expression coined by an Eastern European Jewish immigrant, Israel Zangwill) was no longer working, and immigrants (Europeans at that point considered "white") were becoming "hyphenated" Americans (Italo-Americans, Polish-Americans, and so forth) (Glazer & Moynihan, 1963). For their part, African Americans were emancipating themselves from segregation and the discrimination determined by Jim Crow laws. Native Americans, for purely quantitative reasons, were not yet playing a significant role.

In that context, it made perfect sense for Americans (of all "shades") to maintain a binary, "racial" and "color-based" system of social classification, epitomized in the "one drop rule" (according to which one drop of "non--white" blood makes a person "non-white").

For exactly the same reasons, it did not make any sense for Europeans to adopt such a system, and Europe had in fact not adopted a binary system of classification.

The starting point should then be to see how the term "race" in this meaning actually came to Europe. Gerald Stourzh (a scholar who has worked both in the USA and in his native Austria) has described how this happened, at the time of the Peace conference after the end of the First World War:

> How did the provisions on "race" enter the Paris [Peace] Treaties? […] It appears that "race" and "racial" applied in Anglo-American parlance to entities that were referred to as "nationalities" ("*Nationalitäten*") in Central European, notably Habsburg Austrian, parlance and that now [1994] tend to be qualified as "ethnic" groups (Stourzh, 1994/2007, p. 173).

In other words, "race" was slipped into the text of the Peace Treaties (with reference to the Minorities treaties envisaged for the newly established states) as a way of rendering into English the term *Nationalitäten*. This does not mean that there was no usage of the term "race" before 1919. On the contrary, there was a well-developed vocabulary of "race" in all European languages. What it does mean is that American usage of English did not envisage an adequate equivalent for *Nationalitäten*; clearly, the American delegates were not satisfied with "nationality" (which of course existed, and had been used by British authors throughout the war).

The term "race" has therefore had a quite distinct American usage (Smedley, 1993), dominant until the end of the Second World War, with the rise of anti-segregationist movements and more generally what is known as "ethnic politics" (Hobsbawm & Kertzer, 1992). It is still striking, for a European reader, to see how liberally the term is applied in American

social science literature, without any second thoughts on its use. There is even an organization which cherishes the term: the National Council of La Raza, founded in 1968, which is the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States, working to improve opportunities for Hispanic Americans.

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The last notion this paper will discuss is *Volksstamm*. This word is rarely used outside the field of Central European studies, mainly of the Habsburg area. The term can be easily rendered as "tribe," but also "stock." The French equivalent could be *souche*. The Italian is *schiatta* (which in turn is related to *Geschlecht* and – according to some authors – the Polish *szlachta*). If one looks for equivalents in Slavic and other European languages, one finds a consistent pattern of kin-related (if not race-related) terms. In Spanish: *estirpe*, *linaje*, *raza*; in Serbo-Croat (as it was used in the former Yugoslavia): *pleme*, *rod*, *pasmine*, *rasa*; in Polish: *plemię*, *ród*, *pochodzenie*; in Romanian: *neam*, *familie*, *stirpe*; in Russian: *род*, *племя*; in Albanian: *race*, *skotë*, *fis*, *familije*.

I list these equivalents of *Volksstamm* to underline the common elements in the etymologies of these terms. The term *Volksstamm* was (and is) the origin of the term rendered into the Serbo-Croat of the Socialist Federation of Yugoslav Republics (SFRY) as *nacionalnost* (as opposed to *narod* or *nacija*, "nation"). As Tone Bringa explained:

> Yugoslavia was a multi-national federation with a three-tier system of national rights. The first category was the "nations of Yugoslavia" (*Jugoslavenski narodi*), of which there were six (Serb, Croat, Slovene, Macedonian, Montenegrin and Muslim), each with a national home based in one of the republics and with a constitutional right to equal political representation. [...] The second category was the "nationalities of Yugoslavia" (*narodnosti*), which were legally allowed a variety of language and cultural rights. There were ten ethnic groups officially recognized as "nationalities," the largest being the Albanians and Hungarians. The third category was "other nationalities and ethnic groups" – Jews, Vlahs, Greeks, Russians etc. (Bringa, 1993, p. 85).

The hierarchy implied in the different categorization of the ethnic groups is apparent: nations are first class, nationalities second class, other nationalities third class. This was made quite clear in the Yugoslav Constitutional system, and especially in the 1974 Constitution. All Communist regimes in Eastern Europe had an equivalent scheme of categorization of ethnic groups, with variations determined by the political system.

The implication of the choice of the term *narodnost* is quite evident: it is a term reserved for the politically more marginal ethnic groups. It clearly echoes the old Habsburg term *Volksstamm*, which also referred to relatively marginal ethnic groups. All the equivalent terms in the different European languages reflect not only the relative marginalization but also the clear basis in terms of kin, if not *race*. In this sense, *Volksstamm* is an equivalent of "race," but in the strictly European sense of "stock," rather than the phenotype-related term.

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Historyczny słownik nacjonalizmu:
etniczność, *ethnos*, rasa,
Volksstamm: Przypisy historyczne.

W moim artykule koncentruję się przede wszystkim na etymologii wybranych terminów w historycznym leksykonie nacjonalizmu: etniczność, *ethnos*, rasa, *Volksstamm*. Argumentuję, że europejskie użycia terminu „rasa" całkowicie różnią się od amerykańskich. Staram się unaocznić, że używany w czasach imperium Habsburgów termin *Volksstamm* stał się podstawą dla terminu *narodnost* w socjalistycznej Jugosławii.

Note

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