Ethnicity as Social Fact and Symbolic Construction

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Abstract

Ethnicity is today a controversial concept in social sciences. The belonging to an ethnic group or the claims related to collective identity have a strong ideological charge. For many researchers in the social sciences, who practice the methodological individualism, ethnicity can be explained, but cannot be considered an explanatory factor. I will try to prove the opposite thesis by appealing to ethno-symbolism as legitimizing mechanism of identity feelings and collective rights. That’s why I will explain how collective representations are structured, how myths and symbols that support the identity claims are formed and I will compare two types of nationalism: the ethnic nationalism and the civic nationalism. In conclusion, ethnicity is a social fact because it is a symbolic construction and a vital ingredient of the human condition and therefore can be used as a concept with explanatory value.

Keywords: community; cultural identity; ethnic nationalism; collective rights; ethno-symbolism;

1. Introduction

The present study aims to analyze the ethno-cultural identity both as an anthropological fact and as a symbolic construction. Therefore I will compare some concepts, ideas and theories with normative anthropological value. Unlike the classical approaches, who see ethnicity a contingent fact that can be observed and examined as a passive object, I also believe that ethnicity is a fact, but a necessary one, an unsurpassable horizon that offers meaning to human existence, to groups and individuals. Which means that ethnicity is a fact only if it is a symbolic construction
of man. The symbolic constructivism is not the same thing with the political or ideological one; it doesn’t deny the factual reality of ethnicity (as anthropological invariant) because it retrieves its cultural dimension as given of human condition.

The political constructivism is theoretically supported by methodological individualism. Methodological individualism is the favorite tool of researchers in the field of social sciences today and represents a consequence of nominalism as intellectual attitude and research method: in the analysis of social phenomena, only the individual, with its autonomous intentions and capabilities, has explanatory value. Modern political theories of social contract consider that only the individual is the norm and the bearer of meaning and value, that all social arrangements should have as finality the individual interests, rights and well-being.

In the light of political constructivism, Max Weber claims that members of a group can recognize their common origin and their ethnic affiliation only when they are politically interested and ideologically motivated. However, methodological individualism cannot explain the pathos with which individuals invoke the cultural identity both to support nationalist beliefs and ideologies as well as to legitimate claims for recognition of different ethnic minorities in the public space. Anthony Smith criticizes the instrumentalism and the modernism of some interpretations of nation, nationalism and ethnicity. Individualism, Smith considers, cannot explain the virulence of the ethnic conflicts and how reactive are the people when they claim the belonging to a community that evokes an ethnic origin and common ethno-cultural traditions. (Smith, 1996, p.3/446)

2. Nationalism and ethnicity

The inherited collective identities do not have only an anthropological but also a political and normative significance; and they can always be a vector in configuring the public space. This is expressed in the way that nationalism is related to ethnic community. Some interpreters see them as being distinct:

The distinguishing mark of nationalism is, by definition, its relationship to the state. A nationalist holds that political boundaries should be coterminous with cultural boundaries (Gellner, 1983, p. 1), whereas most ethnic groups, even if they ask for recognition and cultural rights, do not demand command over a state. (Eriksen, 2002, p. 10)

When Renan describes the nation as a daily plebiscite, he does not give a description of the nation in general, but of the French nation, which he opposes the German nation. French nation, Renan thinks, is the result of free elections of its members, is a nation built voluntarily: for the German nation, cohesion and identity are seen as natural and beyond the control of its members. (Calhoun, 2007, p.61) (Renan, 1882) By supporting the civic nationalism to correct the excesses of ethnic nationalism, Maurizio Viroli proposes a republican patriotism. For Viroli, our ability to escape the attachment to our co-ethnics and to deliberately attach to institutions that support the common freedom is a sign of civilization and gentleness. He discusses not only the hereditary basis, but also the cultural aspects of the attachment to the familiar universe of the community of belonging. (Viroli, 2002) An extreme nominalist position considers nations as imagined communities (Anderson, 1991) and for Brubaker: „Race, ethnicity, and nationality exist only in and through our perceptions, interpretations, representations, classifications, categorizations, and identifications”. (Brubaker, 2006, p. 74)

Methodological individualism entails a constructivist and voluntaristic vision over all social relations. Those who interpret ethno-cultural identity in this way does not give it more importance than other markers of identity, or to ethnic communities greater importance than to other groups to which the individual can join. The portrait of man which they make is an intersection of identities. These identities decrease or increase in intensity depending on the concrete existential circumstances in which the individual is included in every particular stage of his life.

The individual identity depends not only on bio-anthropological or psychological constants of the individual but also on the configuration and the significance that different identities of belonging or affiliation have at a time. The identification of an individual with the group of belonging fluctuates according to circumstantial opportunities and interests. In this way the cultural identity is seen only instrumentally, subordinated to the interests of individuals or groups. Can be considered any adhesion of individuals to groups as expression of will? Can they detach by their own decision from the belonging to a cultural community? Locke, who considers that only the individual is a legal and a moral subject, that any form of human association is voluntary and consensual, conceive that is possible for
individual to unilaterally break the social contract and to get out of a society, from a social arrangement that is unjust and violates its rights and interests, the private sphere of thought and action. (Locke, 1980, p. 17) Identity claims are perceived as a reactionary phenomenon, as an irrational aspiration to return to the past, to a passed stage, as an attempt to evade the law or to create a state within a state. That is why, the chosen identities are seen as the legitimate ones and the cultures as contingent forms of life in common, which may eventually disappear in favour of certain forms of cooperation and rational arrangements; the inherited identities (traditions, religions), since they found the social life on determinism and membership that limits the freedom of agents, are regarded with suspicion. Castells, who described the tensions that cultural identity knows in a networked society, says:

Yet, what communalist authors would argue, and what is consistent with my own cross-cultural observation, is that people resist the process of individualization and social atomization, and tend to cluster in community organizations that, over time, generate a feeling of belonging, and ultimately, in many cases, a communal, cultural identity. (Castells, 1997, p.64)

Anthony Smith argues that the nations, although responding to some conditions and to certain modern political imperatives, were formed starting from the ethnic groups and from their natural tendency to gain political autonomy and to form states.

According to Smith (1991, p 21), an ethnic community is characterized by a common collective name, shared myths, a common origin, shared historical memories, an association with a determined territory and a sense of solidarity. By "sense of solidarity", Smith understands the deep feelings of commitment to the group expressed through values and altruistic actions. It includes a sense of membership to a common ethnic group, that in times of crisis is regarded as superior to other forms of social identification. In other words, the ethnic solidarity is an essential condition for the belonging to an ethnic group and overcomes any other individual or collective attachment, attachments such as those based on class, religion, political or regional affiliation.

Although the group solidarity may vary and change over time, including one or more layers of society, to talk about ethnicity in the true sense of the word, it is necessary that this sense of solidarity to animate at least the upper and educated layers of the community, so that they can communicate to other levels of society. (Smith, 1986, p 30) We will call ethnicity the belonging to an ethnic group based on some shared cultural elements. The term culture has an anthropological meaning, but also a normative and existential one. „An ethnic group is a type of cultural collectivity, one that emphasizes the role of myths of descent and historical memories, and that is recognized by one or more cultural differences like religion, customs, language or institutions.” (Smith, 1991, p. 20)

Although he considers the ethnic collectivity as the result of the intervention of historical memory and of symbolic reinterpretation, i.e. a cultural process, Anthony Smith understands well that ethno-genesis, as anthropological fact and symbolic construction, is a given. Culture is the nature of man, its environment, so the ethnic communities are natural and cultural at the same time. For ethnic communities, the demarcation between history and myth often fades. For example, the members of ethnic communities cultivate the mythical feeling of belonging. What really matters for ethnic identification is the attachment, the sense of belonging, the mystical connection with the homeland, not the right of residence or the ownership of land. It is the sacred ground of ancestors, of legislators, kings, sages and poets; therefore it is a homeland and is different from a mere property.

The mutation operated by Frederick Barth in the research field of ethnicity is well known. The identity of a group is not given by some inherent features of the group, but is generated by the boundary. (Barth, 1969) The border is not only the area of symbolic interaction and social exchange with the otherness, but also the area where the identity is symbolically constructed, as reflected by the finding of alterity, of difference. The contact with the otherness offers the possibility of constructing the identity as difference – the ipse identity. (Ricoeur, 1993) Although he emphasizes the borders, the areas of contact with the other, as a decisive factor in defining the identity of a group, Barth remains tributary to an essentialist and static vision of the ethno-cultural identity. Instead, for Richard Jenkins communities are not just things that happen, are not only observable social facts that, according to Durkheim should be treated as things (Durkheim, 1982, p.60), therefore as passive entities, relatively persistent, but as relationships and as processes, as permanent redefinition of the boundaries and of the content. The borders of the groups are flexible, reproduce them, but they reconfigure themselves constantly through social interaction. There is a risk in interpreting cultural identity in the Jenkins manner: to consider the interactions within the group as significant as
those between groups. Ethnic communities are complex symbolic devices that emerge in the social interaction. Communities are generated through shared knowledge, common behavior and established and recognized ways of doing things. And through the way their members perceive themselves symbolically inside in order to dissociate from outsiders, who do not belong to the community, or culture. (Jenkins, 1997, p. 19)

Clifford Geertz talks about the primordial attachment of the individual for the world, which is expressed as an attachment to a particular frame of life. This attachment emanates from the data of the social existence of people: contiguity, kinship, the fact that people were born into a particular culture, with a particular religion, mother tongue, the fact that they share the same social practices. According to Geertz, the affinities (biological, genetic, of speech, beliefs, attitudes or habits) are perceived by people in the same time as inexpressible and overwhelming.

By primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the ‘givens’ of existence or more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed givens of social existence; immediate contiguity and live connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. These continuities of blood, speech, custom and so on are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering coerciveness in and of themselves. (Geertz, 1963, p. 109)

Geertz believes that this attachment is a given. The primordial attachment (in the way of innate human sociability - Aristotle) should be distinguished from other types of social relationships, particularly those arising from interest, named Gesellschaft by Tonnies (1963) and associative relationships by Weber.

A social relationship will be called communal if and insofar as the orientation of social action … is based upon a subjective feeling of the parties that they belong together. A social relationship will on the other hand be called associative if and insofar as the orientation of social action within it rests on a rationally motivated adjustment of interests or a similarly motivated agreement. (Weber, 1968, p. 54)

This primordial attachment is linked to the sense of belonging and to the in-out symbolism of identification. But it could also be associated with other social relationships and attachments, such as those of kinship, neighborhood or territoriality, with the attachment to the common language, common customs, with myths and symbols of a common ancestry.

3. The intimacy of an ethnic culture: Herder’s account

This attachment is the basis of identifications that shape the sense of belonging for an ethno-cultural community, for a tradition. It explains why cultural identity has a pre-eminent proportion in the structuring of individual identity. It nourishes the projects and the ethno-nationalist political discourse, when referring to majority groups, or it supports the claims of identity and the recognition policy, when referring to minorities who strive to live in the multicultural landscape. And in one case and in the other, the stake is the preservation of identity. In the postmodern times, the struggle for freedom and social justice has been replaced by the struggle for recognition, especially of identity.

At the beginning of romanticism, Herder considered that only within a particular culture is realized the full humanity of every person. There is no human nature, no universal "humanity", separate from the particular cultures where people actually live. This doesn’t mean that there is no human nature at all, but that it is expressed only contextually and mediated. And the cultural context, although it can be judged as an accident at the scale of the universe, maintain a privileged and essential relationship with the human individual that it determines. It is what makes the collective and inherited identities aspects which cannot be ignored for the individual profile. Cultural identity is completely different, is the type of identity that, as unsurpassable horizon of the human condition, is expressed by rooting, permanence, fidelity to certain constitutive principles and style. Local specificity, limit and diversity are also important. The nature:
Planted in our hearts the inclination towards diversity; it has put a part of diversity in a narrow circle around us; it has limited the human seeing so that by force of habit, the circle would become an horizon beyond which the man couldn’t be able to see, not even to speculate. I wish, I look for and I adopt all that is related to my nature, everything that can be assimilated by it; beyond that, the generous nature endowed me with insensitivity, indifference, blindness, which can even be turned into disdain and disgust (Herder, 1774, pp. 509-510)

Herder believes that language is what binds the co-ethnics. Natural language and the other forms of symbolic expression reflect a way of life and the unique way in which a people perceive reality. There is also a spirit of language, which cannot be translated. Therefore, neither the sense of belonging, nor the love for the country could be captured in their specificity and the uniqueness of their motivation. The cultures have excellence and singularity, which can be seen not only in the style of indigenous creations, but also in the style which distorts the influences and melts them into a new synthesis. It proves the strength of the structure, of the stylistic matrix, that resist to deformations and alterations.

4. Defending cultural rights

This intimacy felt by the members of a cultural group inside the traditions and inside the inherited forms of expression is progressively weakened by the technological development of the means of communication, especially of the Internet. The Internet as a communicational climax has carried out a paradigm shift in the understanding of social relations. The globalization appears when remote things become directly interesting, familiar and contemporary for everybody.

The communication processes, increasingly sophisticated cross the national borders and even the continents and give the society a more cosmopolitan character. Modern society is a network society and leaves no room for the sense of belonging. (Castells, 1997) On the other hand, the culture as anthropological fact gives legitimacy to the claims of identity. The failure to recognize the cultures and their right of expression in the public space can be compared with a severe form of oppression. Many debates have drawn the attention to the need to recognize the cultural rights. That’s why, some authors have said, the multicultural public space should be structured not only by the principles of justice and by the obligation to protect the natural rights of individuals, but also by promoting policies for the recognition of the irreducible cultural specificity of different groups. (Taylor, 1994)

References