

Making majorities ethnic

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Ethnicities
2025, Vol. 0(0) 1–6
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DOI: [10.1177/14687968251409959](https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968251409959)
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Twenty-five years ago, in the first issue of this journal, I urged approaching ethnicity less as inheritance or fixed identity and more as “active, creative participation in social life.” I was worried not just by the too common treatment of ethnicity as essentially defensive, a residue of Bagehot’s ‘hard cake of custom’, or a reflection of failed incorporation into civic identities and states – but also by a growing trend to make essentialist assertions of ethnic identity the bases for demanding recognition. Despite the considerable success and wide readership of *Ethnicities* (Congratulations! Happy anniversary!), my little essay seems not to have stemmed the tide of identity politics that exaggerated the fixity and internal uniformity of ethnicity (winking emoji here).

Even as I suggested that ethnicity was a matter of open futures not the settled grip of past over present, I wanted to affirm its importance. As I wrote in the journal a few years later (2003), the excesses of essentialism do not indicate that ethnic groups lack reality. Ethnicity is contested precisely because there are ‘stakes’ to struggles over definition and salience. It does work in people’s lives, and it is sometimes reinforced by ascription. Both essentialist claims and notions that people live without forming groups are illusions. This truth is now shaping a new politics of claims to majority ethnicities.

Identity politics often collapsed into calls for recognition of minorities with the implication that their internal identity was essential and fixed in advance even if it was contested. Both insurgents and figures of authority – whether self-proclaimed or legitimated by custom and applause - made careers out of asserting (or calling for) more permanence, more normative conformity and sharper boundaries than reality allows. This was contrary to earlier thinkers who had stressed a politics in which identities were remade rather than one based on clear and established identities. Alas, the more reductionist view spread in academic analyses as well as practical politics. This invited debunking.

My 2001 and 2003 contributions – and much more importantly the creation of this journal itself - were part of a wave of greater and deeper engagement of social scientists with the interrelations of ethnicity and democracy. Migrations were central to this. There were some exciting studies of the making and remaking of ethnicities along the paths of

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migrations and in back-and-forth flows. But the wave of new analyses focused especially on how ethnicities complicated domestic politics and social integration. It remained common to think at least tacitly that ethnicities constituted minorities. This is how they figured in much identity politics and perhaps most criticism of identity politics. To critics this meant that they split potential majorities – of the working class, of democratic citizens, or of nations. But identity politics is as central to construction of inclusive solidarities as to calls for recognition of marginalized minorities.

Identity politics is often blamed on those championing insurgent minorities and previously marginalized identities, but the biggest recent successes in ethnic identity politics have been majoritarian and often ethnonational. Making Englishness ethnic (again) was a central driver of Brexit. Once-powerful memories of the British Empire and British struggles in world wars faded along with the project of building progressive British institutions – from the National Health Service to the Open University. Branding exercises like ‘cool Britannia’ and ‘Britain is Great’ proved ephemeral. With St George’s crosses flying, English ethnonational identity came to the fore.

The National Front and now the National Rally made similar claims to an ethnic French identity in the face of long assertions that the Republic was essentially civic. Ethnicization of German, Hungarian, and Italian identities seemed more familiar because this had been treated (misleadingly) as a pattern of East not West. Across Europe, majoritarian ethnonationalism shaped resurgent rightwing politics and wider self-understandings. Anxieties about immigration informed more panicked anxieties about ‘replacement’. But neither immigration nor response to identity politics grounded in immigrant identities fully explained the ethnicization of majority identities. This was also a response to economic globalization, social change, and political failures. Even new technologies contributed to the sense of pressure on old cultures and identities.

This was not simply a European pattern. In his speech to the Republican Party convention that nominated him, US Vice-President JD Vance asserted that “America is not just an idea. It is a group of people with a shared history and a common future. It is, in short, a nation.” He went on to make clear that he understood this nation in ethnic terms. It made room for newcomers, he said, though “we allow them on our terms.” Vance’s assertion challenges the American myth of almost pure creation triumphing over inheritance and at the very least qualifies and downgrades the narrative of a nation of immigrants.

The BJP and RSS rose to power and prominence in India partly by making Hindu identity more ethnic. Bolstered by a rising middle class, they challenged both Nehru’s story of a transethnic and largely secular Indian self-discovery and the subcontinent’s continued diversities of histories and cultures. Struggles over ‘Chineseness’ figured prominently in the late 20th and early 21st centuries with ethnonationalism advancing especially under Xi Jinping - and against liberals with ideas of civic solidarity (and liberties) as well as against Uighurs, Tibetans, and other non-Han peoples. Minorities in the People’s Republic of China, these of course were often majorities in their ancestral lands, at least until central government policies of moving in large populations of ethnic Chinese and limiting the teaching of Uighur and Tibetan language and history. Likewise, ethnonationalisms proliferated in the former Soviet Union, including not least Russia. This ended discussion of a possibly postnational, postethnic ‘new Soviet man’ and shaped

conflicts over disputed territories. Vladimir Putin's claim to Ukraine was not just that it was part of Russia and the Soviet Union but that it was not a 'real' nation and that Russians and Ukrainians are one people.

This new right is not simply 'ethnonational'. Across Chinese, Persian, Turkish, Russian-Eurasian, Western and other cases there is renewed exploration of civilizations as crucial units organizing history and belonging. Some are straightforward declarations of the decline of the West, indeed its potential death by the suicide of submission to immigration, declining birthrates, and tolerance of deviant sexualities. Ethnicized and sometimes racialized, civilization is regarded less as an achievement in which culture and ideas come to include diverse peoples and more as a matter of descent.

Many views are cyclical. Theories of civilizational rise and decline are popular today as they have not been since the early 20th century. In addition to Spengler and other staples of rightwing thought, there is renewed interest in esoteric traditionalism like, notably, that of Julius Evola who closely influenced but also kept a distance from fascism. Evola found inspiration in Asian civilizations and cyclical accounts of history. The term he appropriated to describe the current age of discord, the *kali yuga*, is once again familiar to youth on the Right – and echoed in concepts like the 'fourth turning'. Currently influential figures from the Russian Eurasianist Alexander Dugin to the former Trump adviser Steve Bannon connect such ideas into practical power politics.

The new Right they help to animate includes neomedieval and neopagan thinkers - and rock bands and cosplayers. In an era when liberals and the Left were often censorious and puritan, the Right celebrated its transgressive style. It organized festivals and mass semi-ritual performances. It developed not simply alternative news channels but much wider engagement in cultural production. This helped with mobilization, directly informed the ethnicization of nationalism, and spread ideals of virile, masculinist strength, worries about falling birth rates and racial suicide, and near panic over nonstandard sexualities.

Whether in civilizational or national frames, ethnicization invites current rightwing obsessions with 'unconventional' sexualities, family, fertility, race, immigration, and purity. Behind the various ideological assertions and debates is a tendency to imagine that there is a 'true' or 'natural' reality and within it, identity which is not the product of efforts to combat heterodoxy with orthodoxy.

Religion has a prominent but complex place in this New Right. There is still much antisemitism but there are also new connections to parts of Judaism. Under Netanyahu, Israel exemplifies a national conservative state almost as much as Hungary under Orban. It is admired as an advanced producer of military and surveillance technologies, central to rearming Europe. And it is respected for survival against the odds.

Evangelical Protestants, conservative and often integralist Catholics, and Orthodox Christians are politically connected as much as doctrinally competitive. Religious symbols and declarations are prominent; there are subcultures of intense religious commitment; it is not clear how widely those politically endorsing religious identities are also religiously observant. Sometimes the ethnic claim to religious identity comes with decline in specifically religious engagement.

Most of the faithful are committed – and often explicitly *recommitted* - to their own natal traditions, but conversions and boundary-crossing explorations are not uncommon. If Orthodoxy has been pre-eminently organized in ethno-national traditions, for example,

it now also receives a growing number of converts in and from the West. Mysticism and monasticism are both attractive as thinkers ask whether religion can recover and triumph over the fallen, broken secular world. Some, like the American convert to Orthodoxy Rod Dreher, now resident in Hungary, urge a 'Benedict Option' of preparing to survive and keep tradition alive in small communities defended against the decadent, dangerous world outside.

Bemoaning the state of Europe, others seek a new Renaissance. Alain de Benoist was a late 20th Century pioneer. His *Nouvelle Droit* connected then current postmodernism to antiliberalism, provided an intellectual complement to the National Front, and paved the way for later popularization of denunciation of European 'submission' to immigration and calls for ethnic homogeneity. The movement did more to promote Christianity as a component of ethnic nationalism than to bring a renewal of active lay Catholicism. It was accompanied, though, by a notable clerical Right.

As narrations of history and identity cohere into traditions, religion, language, kin structures, laws, cuisines and attachments to territories may each be prominent and integrated into collective narrations in varying degree. All these dimensions of ethnicities help to organize both difference and solidarity. Media and other technologies matter too. Print fixes oral traditions into texts which in turn produce new traditions of interpretation. Broadcast reaches large populations across ethnic differences. Both encourage linguistic integration and consolidation, often reinforced through state-managed centralization but also facilitated by capitalist markets. Of course, common language does not guarantee conformity of thought. Media can underpin dissent and debate within as well as among ethnicities. And it's not clear that new media support language in the same way as old; they don't seem to be friends of reading. They also fragment easily, though whether on balance they produce more difference or similarity of culture is not clear. Nonetheless, new media circulate images and music particularly well and help ethnicities live through dispersed sources of creativity. Almost all media can also be mobilized to help maintain ethnic (or ethno-national) ties when migrations disperse members; they can facilitate both commonalities over long distances and differences from new neighbors. But with attention organized through commitments to homeland and history, they also facilitate the tendency of diasporas to become conservative about ethnic traditions.

Borders, distances, and different paths of migrations not only separate ethnicities from each other but often internally divide them by situating communities in different contexts. Pan-ethnic and sometimes national movements arise in response. Enslaved peoples of different backgrounds make new ethnicities in hostile contexts, with varying degrees of creolization with new neighbors. Sometimes class difference is ethnic, as when invaders form an aristocracy and prior inhabitants are both oppressed and at once distinguished and internally unified by culture. Internally, ethnicities span class differences though they may not completely erase them. Ethnicization today has reinforced the intense emphasis on masculinity in today's far right.

Wars disrupt and sometimes destroy ethnicities. They disperse others, creating diasporic ethnicities. At the same time, they integrate ethnically diverse soldiers into shared armies. Not least, as Charles Tilly stressed, wars shape states – and are doing so once again in Europe. But state capacity to wage war is also linked to state capacity to maintain internal order – as basic a factor in state development, as Michael Mann has argued. The

challenge of maintaining order is accentuated not only by war but by capitalism itself, by sheer societal scale, and by the pace of change itself.

Ethnicities live only as they integrate innovation and the challenge of new circumstances into their reproduction which often happens only with contestation. Among the possible new circumstances are empires and more compact states, sometimes with a single nation at their core. Trading networks create enclaves in cities and sometimes larger migrations as well as wider cultural awareness. World-religions and world-languages transcend sole identification with locality or ethnicity, necessarily embracing multiple traditions and variations.

Think of the differences among Armenian, Greek, Ethiopian and Russian Christians – all Orthodox – not to mention Roman Roman Catholics and Protestants, Anglicans whose very name reflects ethnonationalism and yet also African Anglicans who like African Catholics challenge normative assumptions of the established hierarchy. All of these contexts and shifting circumstances make ethnicities salient as the basis of intermediate scale identities. Local communities and kingdoms may be multiethnic; empires always are.

Ethnicity is not the only way to weave culture together with social relations or to produce and reproduce social solidarities and ways of life – but it is a central one. Offering a sense of belonging to many ‘insiders’, it is also reinforced by external ascription. Ethnicities often appear in the form of minority groups, populations marked as distinctive in relation to an ostensible national or other majority treated as simply normal.

Theorists as different as Edward Shils and Pierre Bourdieu have rightly pointed out that specific traditions and claims to cultural identity are typically articulated not just against a visible majority but against the imagination of a prior reality in which the ground of understanding could truly be taken for granted, assumed as natural. “We didn’t have to think about it,” people say, “back then we just knew; everyone knew.” But a perfectly *doxic* condition is not actually available; we experience only attenuated versions. We only see our traditions as such when they are not fully incorporated into *doxa*. Cultural difference can thus seem a provocation. The provocation occasions not just reflection and understanding, but often into attempts at repression or implicit quarantine.

Imagining difference against the background of ostensibly normal uniformity is of course misleading. Difference is a ubiquitous and normal feature of human existence. It has been organized into plurality of ethnicities for millennia. Even small bands of hunters and gatherers had neighbors with different traditions – and sometimes languages and gods. From the beginnings of urbanization there were differences between cities and their hinterlands, among cities, and within each city. Trade commonly brought ethnic enclaves; construction often meant important artisans from other places – and peoples. There were priestly elites; rulers often reflected conquests and were distinct from locals, sometimes as nobility. Armies were often ethnically diverse, reflecting the integration of those conquered in the past into forces for new conquests. They overlapped various forms of servitude, slavery, personal loyalties, and castes.

Empires, ubiquitous through history, were crucially organizations to manage multiplicities of more-or-less distinct peoples and smaller polities. Though they were of indefinitely expandable scale, empires were not precisely universalistic. ‘World religions’, like certain philosophies, more clearly promoted universalism. They were projects of cultural integration – though also, of course, cosmic connections, eschatology, salvation, morality,

and more. Ethnicities were and are precisely not universal but rather limited, socio-cultural locations in the world, not claims to the world as a whole.

Conquerors sometimes demanded conformity in belief but by no means always. Conquest could place a new premium on the distinct traditions of those subordinated. They could chafe at the yoke and try to throw it off or develop ways to accommodate, but in either case commonly developed internal mechanisms for maintaining identity and authority. In other words, they enforced orthodoxy in identity. Religions also pursued projects of orthodoxy. But in both ways of life and religion the appearance of orthodoxy reflected heterodoxy. It was a powerful and common mode of narration to suggest the prior ubiquity of unchallenged *doxic* conformity. But it was narration not reality.

Moreover, it was not just difference from 'other cultures' (including religions) that sparked efforts to articulate and enforce orthodoxy. It was also innovation and dissent within cultural and religious traditions. Those condemned as heretics and deviants might be cast out but they did not necessarily come from outside. And this remains the case with ethnicities and religions today. Projects of common identity are advanced by claims to right ways of belonging, believing, and behaving – the ways that can properly count as 'our' ways. Perfection is often asserted as past reality as well as claimed for efforts to enforce orthodoxy. But the idea of perfection puts the contentions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy into relief. Moreover, orthodox projects of perfection can make traditions brittle, and contending heterodox traditions more often try to assert their own new orthodoxies than to create conditions for multiple heterodoxies and paths of innovation to flourish.

Majorities are made ethnic today in response to external pressures as well as internal differences and dissent. Sweeping geopolitical changes are one factor. The successes of capitalist globalization are another. Disappointment with centralized states – whether on grounds of ineffectiveness, bias, or corruption - is a third. Pushback entails claims to autonomy and strong accounts of belonging together. Making these ethnic has reordered thinking about ethnicities, the role of religions, and relations to both national and imperial projects.