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the Dynamics of Culture-based Politics

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Politics and Cultural Discrimination
The dynamics of culture-based politics

Staffan Zetterholm

Contents

Introduction

We all know that there are times and places when a multicultural society with day-to-day interactions between the different cultural groups can function peacefully and with tolerance. An example, turned both ironic and tragic by political developments, was Sarajevo before the present war. It has been described as a tolerant multicultural community with no ethnic or cultural clashes between the different groups living there.

On the other hand we also know that under some circumstances the peace and tolerance between different cultural groups is disrupted, with a growing mental distance between the groups, lack of trust, hostility, and in some cases political conflict aiming at changing the basis of the political system: either in the form of demands for constitutional changes in the direction of local or regional self-determination within a federal or confederal framework or in the form of demands for secession and the creation of new totally independent political units.

The aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between cultural differences and political strife, by trying to delimit and point out some factors which contribute to a political system becoming divided along ethnic/cultural lines including a discussion of some institutional mechanisms, which are used in order to contain the political conflicts of a culturally divided society.

It might be useful to start by making a distinction between two types of culturally based political conflicts:

a) Conflicts about which cultural traditions or principles that shall be prominent in the society, e.g. confessional or not confessional schools. What language shall be the official one etc. (=Cultural policy)

b) Conflicts about the distribution of values in the society - values like wealth , status, political influence - between different ethnic/cultural groups, i.e. a distribution based upon cultural criteria or rather upon membership of a cultural community.

It is the relationship between these two conflicts which I would like to expand upon today from the conviction that this interplay is important when 'cultural diversity' in the sense of different traditions, religions and languages, is being politicized and transformed into

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political conflict threatening the political cohesion of a multicultural society. My discussion to-day is an attempt to make more explicit (at least part of) the logic of the politicization of cultural diversity. Thus it is an exercise in political theory and construction of a political model.

When does cultural diversity become the base of political perception and organization, e.g. become the base of the political structure?

The concept of discrimination

Let us start with the existence of a multi-cultural society, where there are different cultural groups, distinguishable by criteria such as language, religion, ethnic origin and different ways of life. The groups or cultural segments are defined by these 'objective' criteria, i.e. it is not the free choice of the individual whether to be a member of the one or the other group.

The number of groups are not important to my argument, as long as they are at least two, and not so many and small that they cannot generate some social power base in relation to the central government.

Let us now introduce in this multicultural context an (ideological) principle, which we can call *the principle of cultural discrimination*. I mean by this that a criterion for distribution of status, wealth and political influence is used, which is based upon membership of different cultural or ethnic groups. Discrimination are practices, which aim to exclude members of a particular group from benefiting from certain valued circumstances, be they rights to participate or access to goods and so on. The important aspect here is the criterion used for excluding people: their being members of a particular ethnic/cultural group.

One possible objection may be voiced. The crux of the matter is not whether the aims of the practices are discriminatory. As long as the result is a *de facto* discrimination, even if unintended, that is enough ground for political mobilization along ethnic/cultural lines. In many explanatory models of support for e.g. ethnic-cultural movements the decisive factor is expressed as 'the perception of relative deprivation' of the ethnic region[1]. I would like to stick to my formulation not in the sense that the *real* aims of the discriminatory practices are vital, but in the sense that the

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[1]   R.J.Thompson and J.R.Rudolph, Jr 'The Ebb and Flow of Ethnoterritorial Politics in the Western World', in Thompson RJ and J.R.Rudolph, Jr. (eds) *Ethnoterritorial Politics, Policy, and the Western World*, Lynne Rienner publ. Boulder and London, 1989, p. 5.

perceived aims are an integral part of the definition of discrimination.

One can here make the distinction between cultural discrimination, on one hand, (threats to the group's culture, its possibilities to preserve and develop its culture, its own language, its way of living) and political and economic discrimination, on the other. In the case of cultural discrimination its `societal security', to use a term from international politics[2], is threatened. To the extent that enough members of the ethnic/cultural group value their culture, this could naturally be expressed as a common group interest.

But even if the cultural existence or autonomy of the group is not experienced as threatened, the interests of the members of the group could be defined in terms of the group. This could happen if economic, social and political discrimination was practiced against the group. To the extent that members of an ethnic minority group are seeing themselves as being discriminated against because they are members of a specific ethnic/cultural group, the political mobilization and support potential seems very large.

The differentiation between cultural, political and economic discrimination is not simple or clear-cut. The demands of ethnic/cultural groups may be a combination of cultural autonomy and demands for another economic policy.[3] Depending on the political regime and the political responses of the government we may get a *circulus vitiosus*, where one form of discrimination will be followed by the other forms as a result of efforts by the ethnic/cultural group to change its position.

Discrimination is normally related to a social ideology, which legitimizes the discrimination, by arguing for unequal - social and economic and political - treatment of one ethnic/cultural group. The arguments can have very different character: they can be based upon the contrast between one's own cultural identity and the characteristics of the cultural 'alter' as in the case of a racial superiority ideology. They may also include threats to the continued existence of one's own cultural identity, and/or a history of social, economic and political grievance, caused by the other ethnic/cultural group, which is described as hostile and aggressive through history. Thus, unequal treatment can be legitimized either by the *inferiority* of the group and/or by the *threat* it poses for

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[2]   Cf. Ole Wæver et al., *Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe*, 1993, Ch. 2.

[3]   The experience of Belgium shows the success of ethno-territorial parties to integrate class and general economic dissatisfaction into their list of demands. Cf. Rudolph, J.R. 'Belgium: Variations on the Theme of Territorial Accommodation', in Rudolph & Thompson, 1989, p. 90-113.

the discriminating group in terms of economic, social welfare or cultural existence[4].

The acceptance of group-discrimination is furthered by mental distance and the perception of cultural distance. The more different you are, the easier it is to build a negative stereotype of the other group, which legitimizes unequal treatment. In this respect cultural diversity supports or alleviates discrimination.

Discrimination and the definition of political reality

The practice of social discrimination according to cultural criteria has even more fundamental implications: it influences how political reality is conceived.

One traditional and very common way of looking at the political system, which we find expressed in classical political theory, is to see the basic political relationship as one between government on one hand and the citizens on the other. This is the liberal tradition, beautifully expressed in the concept of a contract between the individuals to create a government, or a contract between the individuals on the one hand and the government on the other. In modern democratic theory, we have of course both political parties and interest organizations as transmission belts between the government and the individuals. But still it is the interests of the citizens as individuals which are being pursued by the organizations intervening between the individuals and the government. The basic political unit in this understanding is the citizen, and the citizen as individual has some social and political rights. The implication is of course, that these rights are equally distributed, they are not contingent upon membership of a special subgroup of the society. (We all know that sometimes these rights are seen as more formal than real and that these rights do not imply an equal distribution of wealth or quality of life or life-chances and so on)[5].

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[4]   Cf. the subtle argument by Norbert Elias on the relations between the superior, established group and the outsiders, the target group for discrimination, in his *The Established and the Outsiders*, 1994.

[5]   Renan, according to Ernest Gulnare, singled out the most crucial trait of a nation: the anonymity of membership. 'A nation is a large collection of men such that its members identify with the collectivity without being acquainted with its other members, and without identifying in any important way with sub-groups of that collectivity. Membership is generally unmediated by any really significant corporate segments of the total society. Sub-groups are fluid and ephemeral and do not compare in importance with the "national" community.' Gellner 987:6.

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The use of cultural criteria for the implementation of discriminatory practices implies[6] the construction of another kind of 'political reality', by which I mean the basic way to perceive and conceptualize political life: the basic political units and the fundamental relationships between them[7].

- The basic social units will be the cultural/ethnic groups, not individuals. To these groups *as collective units* are accorded or withdrawn rights. There is thus an (explicit or implicit) recognition of the ethnic/cultural groups as the base for allocation of social, economic and political resources.

  In this situation the individual is defined by his group membership. His wealth, status or influence is determined by his membership of an ethnic/cultural group. His possibilities to advance his material or non-material situation as an individual and apart from his ethnic/cultural community are small or non-existing and under all circumstances imply giving up central cultural values such as religion, language, way of life etc.

- If the ethnic/cultural group is the unit to be awarded or deprived of *rights* it becomes important to mobilize and organize the group in order to change the situation of discrimination.

- As the ethnic/cultural organization is the agent of collective action it is important to make use of efficient mobilizational criteria like *the demand for group purity (group exclusiveness)* and *the demand for the ethnic/cultural cleavage to dominate over other types of social dimensions.* Thus you might expect a tendency - from mobilizational reasons as well as from the fact of being excluded to join organizations as a part of the discrimination - to organize exclusively (within the ethnic/cultural group): schools, labour unions, social organizations will be group exclusive.

- Intentional unequal treatment will lead (not by logical necessity but by psychological probability) to the *demand for retaliation*, i.e. the acceptance of inequality in treatment of members of the originally discriminatory group and the result will be polarization of conflict.

- The group conflict tends to be *cumulative*. Your cultural or societal security

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[6] And, of course, the more dominant and more encompassing that the discriminatory practices based upon cultural criteria are, the more clear and unequivocal will this perception of political life be.

[7] The expression 'the construction of political reality' is intentionally used to associate to 'The Construction of Social Reality' by Berger-Luckmann.

interests[8] coalesce with your economic interests for a fair, reasonable part of the values and resources, in short the wealth of the society. This coincidence contributes to the intensity of conflict. Compromise is seen as a failure. According to this logic we get what in the literature is called *a plural society*. 'The characteristic expression of cultural pluralism takes the form of dissensus and conflict between segments which are based on ethnicity, religion, ideology, or regionalism on the basis of which important political structures, such as political parties, interest groups, and other voluntary associations are organized'[9].

The fully developed political world-view of a plural society thus has a strong affinity to the political world-view of traditional or neo-realist perceptions of the *international political system:* the collective units are the states to which rights are conferred or withdrawn, there is a traditional feeling of antagonism between the units, the individual is dependent upon his survival unit etc. It is the power resources of the states and the balance of power that determine the stability of the international political system.

The difference between how the neo-realists perceive the international political reality and how the segments or groups of a plural society perceive their political reality, is of course that in a multicultural plural society there exists a political superstructure, a state.

Political management of ethnic/cultural conflicts

And, as we all know, the political system is not only an instrument that can be used to redress social wrongs, it can also be a direct part in discrimination or legalize oppressive practices.

In a plural society with its practices of discrimination and the actual or potential conflicts between the cultural segments, the political system will not function in a stable way, unless it does try to handle cultural diversity through some institutional mechanisms. The aim of these is to minimize the risk that strife between the cultural groups spills over

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8   Societal security means to secure the survival of your own cultural community in its essential character under changing conditions, your traditional patterns of language, culture, religion and custom.

9   J.Tindigarukayo: 'The viability of Federalism and Consociationalism in Cultural Plural Societies of Post-colonial states: A Theoretical Exploration', in Plural Societies, vol. XIX, No 1, September 1989, p.44.

into the political government and threatens the stability or even - through secession demands - the existence of the political system.

According to the theory of consociational democracy, which has been developed specifically to explain the existence and paradoxical stability of politics in plural societies, the political mechanisms used are 1) a high level of segmental autonomy, combined with 2) elite cooperation in government, and 3) elite capacity to secure acceptance from the cultural segments.

The theory of consociational democracy has been criticized by many both on account of its logical and its empirical inconsistencies[10]. According to some critics[11] the whole explaining power of the theory hinges on the *will* by the elites to cooperate politically and not on the constitutional arrangements. And, of course, it is true that if there is no will by the elite or the majority of a cultural group to remain within the same political system or to accept the prevailing power balance, then the cooperative regime is likely to collapse. On the other hand, constitutional rules 'do matter' by raising the costs of non-compliance and by establishing explicit or implicit agreements to accept and maintain mutual political/legal guarantees to the different cultural groups.

In the following, I would like to concentrate on the role of the political level to manage ethnic/cultural conflicts. These conflicts are transformed into political conflicts[12]. Attempts to redress discrimination turn to the political system in the form of demands for political change, either in the form of policy-change or in the form of change in the political authority structure.

One way to classify the political demands of ethno/cultural political groups and movements is to distinguish between

a) Demands for *changes in the political output*, be they either economic demands for redistribution of economic means (like the location of a plant in the region) or cultural demands for the redress of cultural discrimination (like the implementation of legal anti-discriminatory measures, e.g. affirmative action rules).

b) Demands for *constitutional change*, to strengthen the competences and influence of the ethnic/cultural group within the political system (e.g. by changing rules of representation

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[10]   Cf. the overview in Pappalardo, 1981.

[11]   Cf. Barry 1975a and 1975b.

[12]   In the case when there is not effective political authority to turn to, as in the examples of ex-Yugoslavia and ex-Soviet Union, the conflict as a result often develops into direct violent conflicts between the ethnic/cultural groups.

in political institutions, changing decision-making rules, introduction of policy decentralization to a regional level)

c) Demands for *independence (secession)*.

The actions or tactics used by ethnic/cultural movements can be classified along the dimension of *violence/disobedience* versus *system-participation* (playing according to the rules of the political game). The strategy may of course be a mixture of violent, extra-political means and of participation through legal political actions like party representation in the central parliament, etc.

Constitutional principles

In the following we are going to focus upon demands for constitutional change, for institutional mechanisms, which are supposed to secure stability in plurally divided societies:

It might be argued that the plural political system will be characterized by a low level of legitimacy and by political instability, as long as the political system is perceived to accept or further the discriminatory practices or be based upon a principle of political inequality. Of course, if the discriminated groups are very weak, in numbers, organization and economic and political capacity, the stability of the political system may be maintained: This case may be seen as a parallel to non-democratic systems, which may for long time periods suppress ethnic and cultural conflicts with the help of their repressive capabilities.

The demands for constitutional change may be seen as expressions of two basic political principles:

1) *The principle of autonomy*: the creation of ethnic/cultural group autonomy within certain policy-areas, creation of financial and legislative autonomy to directly elected regional or segmental assemblies. Two distinct autonomy unit types may thus be separated: territorial subunits with autonomy in certain areas and segmental, non-territorial subunits. 'The major difference seems to lie in the fact that regional (territorial) units within a federal system may not necessarily coincide with cultural or social cleavages, while segments within a consociational system do so coincide'.[13]

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[13]   Tindigarukayo 1989, p. 49.

2) *The principle of power-sharing* in the form of joint decision-making, with constitutional guarantees for each group to be (equally or reasonably) represented in government and central administration, e.g. adoption of proportionality formulae to leadership and employment opportunities in the bureaucracy or the military, and guarantees of decision-making influence in the form of veto-power or a permanent government grand coalition and/or guarantees of judicial review.

The implementation of both these principles is necessary in order to establish a certain level of support for the political community and the political regime[14] in a culturally divided society. On the other hand, there seems to be a tension between the realization of these principles and the long-term stability of the political system:

To the degree that the autonomy of the subunits can be upheld in some policy areas the risk of the introduction or continuation of discriminatory practices will be reduced in those areas. In the cultural policy field, e.g. language instruction and religious practices, this seems to be a stabilizing solution and in a way the rationale of the subunit autonomy. On the other hand, even cultural practices have an economic base and, as in other, more economic policy areas, the cultural segment autonomy may not positively change the material or economic poverty of the group population and the subsequent feeling of discrimination and injustice, when the position of one's own group or region is compared with other groups or regions within the same system. Thus, in order to function properly from a political stability point of view, the decision-making autonomy of the sub-units must in many cases be supplemented by a forceful redistributive capacity at the central political (i.e. federal or confederal) level. And at this level the constitutional guarantees for power-sharing create an opposite tendency, i.e. of weak decision-making capacity because of the 'joint decision-trap'[15]: In the case of hostility and tensions between the participating ethnic/cultural groups, strengthened by the political world- view, which has been generated and sustained through the processes of cultural discrimination, the central level will be more or less blocked as a result of the veto-powers distributed to the groups. This might renew the demands for other constitutional solutions or for outright secession. The question is whether there are countervailing motives making for cooperation in spite of a culturally divided political system. Such motives could be the economic advantages of cooperation within a political system or elite interests in the continuation of the traditional elite cooperation in order to fend off challenges from alternative elites. The will

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[14]   In the terminology used by David Easton. Cf. his *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, 1965, passim.

[15]   Fritz W.Scharpf, 'The joint decision trap: Lessons from German Federalism and European Integration', Public Administration, Vol. 66, Autumn 1988, pp. 239-278

to cooperate will also in many cases be stronger in the face of a common enemy. There are numerous examples of multicultural political systems, being able to contain their tensions while fighting for independence or for the toppling of a non-democratic oppressive government, only to dissolve in intergroup fighting afterwards. In spite of such integrating factors, the disruptive force of the plural political world-view seems very strong. 'There may be a certain danger in a situation in which the only permissible political pluralism is the ethnoterritorial one. Any grievance against the whole system may tend to be presented or disguised as basically ethnic rather than ideological, economic, social, or functional'[16].

The probability of longer term political stability will depend upon the changes in the definition of political reality, but the paradox or dilemma seems to be that the constitutional mechanisms, which are necessary in order to avoid open political conflict and the threat to the continuation and stability of the political system, at the same time contribute to cement the segmentation of political life along cultural cleavage lines and thus to conserve the political world-view of the plural society by defining the units as cultural groups and not individuals and thus reducing the possibilities for crosscutting identities and loyalties to emanate as political dimensions. By strengthening the cultural identity as political identity, constitutional 'appeasement' may not contribute to the long-term stability of the political system. As long as the political world-view remains the same, and has the characteristics described above, the prognosis of the culturally plural political system seems very uncertain.

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[16]   Ivo Duchacek, *Comparative Federalism: An Agenda for Additional Research*, p.35

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