

# Ethnic Difference and Scale: Locating the City

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## Abstract:

Many of the burgeoning mega-cities are located in relatively young multi-ethnic nation-states where ethnic boundaries are hotly contested. A crucial question will be to what extent these cities will be able to insulate themselves against the ethnic logic of their nation-states.

Although the consequences of ethnic boundaries are most acutely felt in urban areas the processes that shape these boundaries and determine their political salience are located in the city. I argue that ethnic categorization and conflict are products of processes at a different institutional scale the nation-state. Questions about national identity, about who belongs and who not, about who owns the state and the resources it provides are central to the understanding ethnic boundaries and they are firmly located at the national level.

Summarizing several case studies and theories of national and urban identity, this essay tries to gauge the extent to which cities can interpret or transcend the ethnic logic of the nation state. An approach that is conscious of the possibilities and limits of relative autonomy of cities in this regard will be crucial to our understanding of urban identities.

## **Limits of the city: Two examples**

Two brief examples shall help illustrate my point; one from places where diversity is the product of immigration (Germany) and one from a multiethnic/religious nation-state (India). In Germany the boundary between the immigrant population (for example of Turkish decent) and native Germans is most visible in the larger cities such as Berlin or the Ruhr metropolitan-agglomeration. This is where the largest concentrations of Turks are to be found. It is in the large cities that ethnic, where ethnic enclaves become symbols of ethnic difference. There may be pronounced differences in the concrete ways in which these boundaries are treated. Some cities might be

more tolerant than others, some places may foster participation in political decisions while others are openly discriminating. Yet the underlying categorization, the very boundary that differentiates between native, ethnic Germans and those of Turkish decent is not a matter that is constructed at the level of the city. We can imagine Berlin becoming a city that is very inclusive of its Turkish population but it would be hard to imagine that Berlin *on its own* could create a context where the very distinction between Turks and Germans becomes meaningless to the extent the distinction between the Irish or Italians and the Anglo population in the US has faded into the background since WWII.

A more dramatic case is India. While the majority of Indians still lives in rural areas, 96.4% of violent deaths of ethnic conflicts happen in cities. The ethno-religious tensions of the country is most visible and most directly felt in its large cities. Yet the very categories and identities that mark the fault lines of the tensions are neither created in Bombay nor Ahmamadabad nor in Calcutta. Each of these cities can display a different pattern of relations between Hindus and Muslims and in fact there are substantial differences in the degree to which religious divides become the cause for violent conflict (Varshney, 2001). But this does not change the fact that no city on its own can escape the reality that the distinction between the two main religions is a meaningful and consequential one in India and its political salience is a *national* matter.

### **Nation-States and ethnic diversity**

Over the last century the nation-state became *the* dominant institutional form to organize politics across the globe. And the dynamics of ethnic categories and conflict, as they often play out in cities, are crucially bound up with the institutional logic of nation-state. Counter to early theories about the universalizing promise of modernization there is a growing recognition that instead of transcending tribal and ethnic dynamics, in fact the modern nation state is central to the creation of ethnic categories and the politicizing of these categories.

Numerous accounts show of how the genesis of nation states is intertwined with the making of minorities, ethnic and racial classification schemes (Miles, 1993; Patterson, 2005). On the one hand the political legitimacy of the nation-state is rooted in the fact that its political apparatus represents a nation, a construct often defined in ethnic terms - the rule of likes over likes. At the same time the modern state has an interest and the capacity to both homogenize and classify its subjects (Scott, 1998) . Powerful

elites can impose categorization schemes using the resources of the state (i.e. census, systematic discrimination). At the same time emphasis on ethnic membership is a strategy that minority groups use to legitimize political claims or economic benefits against the state (Glazer et al., 1975). In short, the institution of the nation-state creates an “ethnic logic[that] shapes the boundary making strategies of many actors and comes to permeate many different social fields” (Wimmer, 2008).

It is this ethnic logic that creates incentives for elites and non-elites, for minority as well as majority actors to use appeals to ethnic identities. Several case studies and theoretical approaches show how it is control over the public resources and political powers of the state that drives ethnic mobilization and conflict (Congelton, 1995; Hechter & Levi, 2000). The question to whom the state rightfully belongs and who thus has a right to enjoy its resources is central to xenophobic discourse and the framing of conflict between ethnic groups (Wimmer, 1997).

The nation-state and its definition of belonging, citizenship are institutions which are based on principles of social closure. Rights and resources are expansively accessible to members but closed to those who don't belong (Brubaker, 1992). It is at the national level where distinctions between who belongs and who not are drawn and contested.

### **Urban identities and ethnic boundaries**

Cities are quite different institutions from nation-states. They are not built around the logic of closure but they are open and porous. People vote with their feet, joining or leaving is a matter of moving. The drastic growth of mega-cities in the developing world is testament to that as is the dramatic shrinking of the rustbelt cities in industrialized countries. In their character cities are closer to corporations than to nations, they are not built on an logic of political legitimacy through ethnic membership but on the economic logic of synergy through proximity. While nations are built around the powerful notion of the imagined community, one could characterize cities as pragmatic collections of coexistence. Their ideological load is much thinner.

But of course cities are embedded in their respective nation states and thus subject to the logics of national categorizations and boundary making processes. Often they are the places where ethnic distinctions are most acutely felt and become the location for these conflicts over and across these boundaries.

It is necessary to develop an analytic vision of diversity in cities that is sensitive to the situation of cities in the larger national and regional context.

Doing so will help understand the tension between diversity and common identity; both in the large cities of multi-national states where diversity in cities generally is the product of internal rural urban migration, and in cities of the industrialized nations where diversity is due to the influx of international migrants.

As a first step this requires us to realize the inherently political nature of ethnic boundaries. The very formation of these categories and even more so the processes that determine their saliency not reflective of some underlying cultural differences but outcomes of a complex set of political and social processes. Yet in the study of diversity on the scale of the city the image that ethnic categories in some meaningful way represent cultural difference is still pervasive. Beginning with the Chicago School of urban sociology boundaries and categories were perceived as being a natural result of the cultural differences between immigrants and the mainstream (Wimmer, 2007). Consequently assimilation is conceived as the step-by-step process by which these cultural differences are overcome and finally the newcomers or minorities merge into the nation. The process might happen at the city level but the logic it follows is strictly national; it is about the melting of a diverse population into the national culture. In the face of the realization that ethnic boundaries are not logical delineations of cultural difference but rather constructs that delineate membership this conception misses the most important part of the story.

It was Fredrick Barth's seminal book "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries" (Barth, 1969), that successfully challenged the assumption that ethnic boundaries in some way capture cultural differences. Since then the processes of how ethnic categories are constructed and deconstructed have been extensively discussed mostly at the level of national or regional development. And indeed newer concepts see assimilation as a process of boundary shifting rather than cultural convergence (Alba & Nee, 2003).

If we take into consideration that, as I argued above, ethnic categories are first and foremost a product of national-level politics, the tendency to take ethnic boundaries at the city level for granted is not surprising. After all from the vantage point of those studying the city, the existence of ethnic boundaries is a given.

But if these processes of boundary making and shifting are intimately connected with national level processes, the critical question is how much room cities have to interpret these categories. To what extent can cities develop autonomous politics that ignore and contradict the nation state context? To what extent is there a place for an urban logic within the ethnic logic of the nation state?

Ulf Hannerz's retrospective of Sophiatown gives a striking example of how much independence is possible. In the midst of apartheid South Africa this small township outside Johannesburg developed a powerfully independent trans-ethnic local culture where Africans, Jews and immigrants created an inclusive cosmopolitan identity in defiance of the national apartheid movement (Hannerz, 1994). The analysis of lived ethnicity without group formation in the Romanian City Cluj, that Brubaker (2006) provides is another example of an urban culture that largely ignores the nationalist frames provided and strictly limits the influence of ethnic categories on urban life. In Cluj Hungarians and Romanians live next to each other in a highly nationalist environment and yet in the day-to-day life of the city Hungarian-Romanian categories are largely not politicized.

There are also arguments that a tolerant culture of large immigrant receiving cities might provide the space for post-national membership and identities: Yasemin Soysal argues that the multicultural identity that Berlin provides for its diverse immigrant population is an example of how urban identity can substitute for traditional citizenship (Soysal, 1994). Certainly the most prominent example of urban multiculturalism is New York City. The long history of immigration has created broad acceptance of diversity, institutionalized tolerance and created an exceptional degree of relations between different ethnic and racial groups (Foner, 2007). This local identity proves to be so much more inclusive to many children of immigrants that they choose to construct their identity in a local context rather than a national one. They choose to become New Yorkers instead of Americans (Kasinitz et al., 2004).

Yet the relative autonomy in the interpretation of these national categories that cities have is a tenuous one. The powerful national frames of categorization are always looms in the background. Accounts from diverse neighborhoods in London show that multiculturalism and hybridization, as they happen in many highly diverse urban settings, are no guarantee against the evocation of ethnic frames (Amin, 2002).

The politicization of diversity at the city level is heavily shaped by national discourses. Evidence from the US shows that national frames in many ways condition local reactions to changes in a city's ethnic composition. For example the reaction to influx of migrants to US cities are systematically more adverse in times when national discourses about immigration or racial equality are high on the agenda. Whereas changes in local demographics are problematized to a much lesser degree when these topics are low on the national agenda (Hopkins, 2007).

In cases where cities counter national trends in politicization of ethnic or

religious differences, the resistance seems always fragile. Ashutosh Varshneys analysis of ethnic violence in Indian cities shows how urban social networks in certain 'civic' cities could resist the agitations of religious/nationalist agitators to start riots. In cities with low levels of civic connections single violent acts would quickly cascade into large scale violence. In contrast, where networks of trade and business were dense, the actors in those networks were able to diffuse tensions following acts of terror quickly enough in order to prevent further violence (Varshney, 2001). Yet, even Varshneys optimistic account of the potential of urban social networks to stem the tide of ethno-nationalist violence makes clear that the level of ethnic mobilization activated on a national level could easily swell to a degree where it would overwhelm the de-escalatory capacity of these social networks.

### **Between nation and city: ethnic divisions and identity in the megacity**

To the extent that cities manage to create an own civic identity that bolsters against the ethnic logic of the nation state this civic sphere is always a fragile construct.

This balance is especially fragile in the dramatically urbanizing cities of the 'global south' where in young nation-states ethnic claims are still hotly contested. And some of these cities grow to dimensions that dwarf many nation states in population and economic power. In this context the question of the relative autonomy of the city vis-a-vis the national ethnic boundary making processes and divisions will be crucial. As in some states mega-cities become demographically and economically dominant, will they take on some of the characteristics of nation states? If political control over the city of a state becomes equated with power over the definition of the nation, then one could imagine a new stage of urban politics where ethnic appeals to ownership of the state qua ownership of the city, combined with economic stratification and density form a truly explosive configuration – the volcanoes waiting to erupt.

And then there is the question whether as in the face of unprecedented growth, the civic institutions such as the entrepreneurial social networks that for example Varshney describes in India be able to keep up and adapt? Or will these cities enter an era of fragmentation that will thwart any attempt at creating an urban identity?

On the other hand demographic and economic dominance could also generate more of a relative autonomy for the city. More insulated against national dynamics and ethnic appeals, these cities might be able to offer

alternatives to the ethnic logic of the nation state. Megacities could provide the basis for a new politics that provide a more pragmatic form of identity formation centered on the urban virtue of openness, one that allows the realization of a variety of pursuits in a peaceful coexistence.

Whatever the dominant process will be, the fate of the growing megacities around the world and especially in the global south will be critically dependent on the relations with the nation-states and their principles of national/ethnic identity and social closure – even as these cities dominate the economic and demographic developments of these regions.

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