



Department of Politics

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Ethnic Groups, Nations, and States

In the fast-paced world that exists today, nuance often takes a back seat. Activists have a greater ability than ever to reach out to like-minded people, but are social networking programs like Twitter, with its 140 character-count, really contributing positively to global debates on complicated topics? Especially when one takes into account the various narratives floating around the Internet in regards to issues in the Middle East. The conversation, whether online or in the classroom or around a dinner table, has devolved into an argument on black and white stances: who is right and who is wrong, who is bad and who is good, who killed whom for what reasons, etc. The discussion rarely ventures into grey territories that, rather than assigning blame, focuses on the underlying questions of the state, nationhood, and ethnicity. However, how can one expect ordinary people to understand the classifications and characterizations of these three terms when even political scientists cannot agree on concise definitions?¹ For instance, Connor Walker complained about the “interutilization” of the words state and nation.² How can ordinary people differentiate between the two, he reasoned, if scholars and politicians continually misuse the terms, sometimes in ways as public as the naming of the “United Nations”?³ Assorted political thinkers interpret the same concepts in various ways. Although ethnicity has a very subjective definition, Richard Schermerhorn’s description of ethnic groups as “a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a

¹ Connor, Walker. "Chapter 4." *Ethnonationalism: the Quest for Understanding*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994. Pp 90

² *ibid.* 92

³ *ibid.* 97

cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood” appears quite similar to many other political classifications.⁴ At a time when society seems more aware than ever about ethnic tensions, national identity and state-building, it is absolutely vital that people comprehend the differences between ethnic groups, nations, and states as well as the interplay between the three.

One might wonder at the necessity of understanding ethnic groups. The Western world is increasingly a “hyphenated” community (ie African-American or British-Asian), one in which people possess multiple identities and associations with a variety of ethnic groups. Yet in some of the world’s most volatile regions, ethnic identity supersedes any other form of classification. In 2009, there were violent ethnic conflicts in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, not to mention all the minor incidents of ethnic unrest that did not always result in violence. Ethnic identities are often extremely personal to an individual as well as to a community. A few political scholars have distinguished a variety of characteristics that contribute to the identity of an ethnic group. Manning Nash wrote about cultural boundary markers that say who is a member of what group and what minimum cultural items are necessary for membership in said group.⁵ According to Nash, the most pervasive ethnic boundary markers are kinship, commensality, and a common or religious cult.⁶ By kinship, Nash meant the presumed biological and descent unity of the group. Anthony Smith called this the myths of origin and descent.⁷ As said

⁴ Schermerhorn, Richard. "Ethnicity and Minority Groups." *Ethnicity*. Ed. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. Pp 17

⁵ Nash, Manning. "The Core Elements of Ethnicity." *Ethnicity*. Ed. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. Pp 24-25

⁶ *ibid.* 25

⁷ Smith, Anthony D. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 1987 Pp 24

by Smith, the myths do not have to be factual or accurate but are in place to attempt to answer questions of similarity and community. He pointed out that the purpose of these myths is to facilitate “emotional and aesthetic coherence to undergrid social solidarity and social self-definition.”⁸ Smith also stressed the importance of a shared history and culture. The history does not need to be true, but it must create multi-generational bonds and invoke a sense of shared identity and destiny.

Scholars do not agree as to whether race should be distinguished from conversations about ethnic groups. Pierre van den believed that race relations is a special case of ethnicity, while people such as Michael Banton stressed that ethnicity focuses on the identification of “us”, while racism is more oriented on the categorization of “them”.⁹ Although ethnic groups oftentimes have an association with a specific homeland, many ethnic groups do not demand any form of command over a state. Eriksen pointed out: “when the political leaders of an ethnic movement make demands to this effect, the ethnic movement therefore by definition becomes a nationalist movement.”¹⁰

Many similarities exist between an ethnic group and a nation, with one distinct difference: political aspirations for a homeland. Connor Walker used an international relations dictionary to define nationalism: “a social group that shares a common ideology, common institutions and customs, and a *sense* of homogeneity. In the nation, however, there is also present a strong group sense of belonging associated with a particular

⁸ *ibid.* 25

⁹ Eriksen, Thomas H. "Ethnicity, Race, Class, and Nation." *Ethnicity*. Ed. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. Pp 29

¹⁰ Eriksen, Thomas H. "Ethnicity, Race, Class, and Nation." *Ethnicity*. Ed. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. Pp 30

territory considered to be particularly its own.”¹¹ A country does not need to possess a state but to be a nation, but they have to want to have one. The varying interpretations of nationalism have been a source of contention among many political thinkers. For instance, Walker firmly contended that a nation needs to be self-defined, unlike ethnic groups who can be defined by others.¹² He declared: “the essence of the nation...is a matter of self-awareness or self-consciousness.”¹³ The concept is that, unlike ethnic groups, it is not the tangible manifestations, such as language, religion, etc, that make up a nation. A nation can lose its language and still remain a nation. For two thousand years, the Jewish people have been considered a nation, despite the loss of language, diminishing of religious orthodoxy, and the scattering of the Jewish people all over the globe. The Jewish people are a nation because *they* choose to be a nation.

The state is generally considered to be a modern concept. As various villages and nations became more centralized, the state became a set of political institutions and infrastructure that also maintained a monopoly on the use of force in a given territory.¹⁴ Concepts of nation are most commonly confused with ideas about the state. The state is supposed to be a solely political model. Walker declared that the “state is the major political subdivision of the globe.”¹⁵ Walker appeared very frustrated with the propensity to equate nation with state. Their only overlap, he claimed, is in the form of the nation-state. In 1971, only 9.1% of states could be classified as a nation-state, or a situation in

¹¹ Connor, Walker. "Chapter 4." *Ethnonationalism: the Quest for Understanding*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994. Pp 93

¹² *ibid.* 103

¹³ *ibid.* 104

¹⁴ Kaufmann, Eric. "Definitions and Theoretical Overview." Lecture

¹⁵ Connor, Walker. "Chapter 4." *Ethnonationalism: the Quest for Understanding*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994. Pp 92

which the borders of a nation are approximately the same as the borders of a state (becoming essentially homogenous).¹⁶ Walker mentioned Hitler and how he successfully appealed to all aspects of his constituency. He could appeal to the German people in the name of the state, nation, and homeland. According to Professor Eric Kaufmann, the nation is the overlap of ethnic groups and state.¹⁷ Interestingly enough, political leaders try to solidify a national identity once a state is created.

Discussing the conflict in the Middle East should lead to profound conversations about ethnic identity, national identity, and statehood. Unfortunately, as Breuilly succinctly pointed out: “the sheer universality and apparent power of nationalism has created a vast range of cases and vested interests that make it difficult to agree upon basic approaches to the subject.”¹⁸ There are many ethno-religious groups that exist in the Middle East, from the Coptics to Arab Christians, the Sunni to the Shia Muslims, Baha’i, Jews, Druze, the list goes on and on. There are national identities that desperately seek a homeland, such as the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran and the Palestinians in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Occupied Territories. The history of statehood is fascinating in the Middle East but that tend to get lost in the arguments. For instance, Zionism is a perfect example of how a national identity can still become a nation-state, despite lacking a common language or common culture. The only thing Zionists share is their desire for a Jewish homeland. The Palestinian identity demonstrates how nationalism can provide identity in a time of rapid change as well as motivate people to work towards further

¹⁶ Connor, Walker. "Chapter 4." *Ethnonationalism: the Quest for Understanding*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994. Pp 40, 96

¹⁷ Kaufmann, Eric. "Definitions and Theoretical Overview." Lecture

¹⁸ Özkırımlı, Umut. *Theories of Nationalism: a Critical Introduction*. New York: St. Martin's, 2000 Pp 59

change.¹⁹ Lebanon remains an example of a multi-ethnic state with no national identity but potentially competing nations. All the nuances present in the Middle East get lost in the 24/7 news cycle and hyper partisan state of activists who tend not to take the time to learn the intricacies of the region. If people choose to ignore the competing ideas of national identity, statehood, and ethnic groups to continue to argue in slogans and sound bites, there will continue to be tensions in the Middle East.

Although ethnic groups, nations, and states have different definitions, they all remain interlinked in the increasingly global world. When ethnic groups change, they become nations. Those nations then attempt to become states. Unfortunately, the potential for conflict intensifies with each transition. For instance, sometimes an ethnic group is already part of a state when they realize they have political aspirations to become a nation. They could try to secede from their original state or they could attempt a coup d'état against the current state government. Oftentimes, such actions create violence, bloodshed, and war. Bosnia is just one example of ethnic groups realizing their nationalist goals. However, sometimes an ethnic group within a state decides unilaterally that they want to create a national identity for the state rather than for their ethnic group. A young man in Kenya once told an aspiring peace activist at a peace-building conference in Kiptere: “We are no longer Kiisi, we are no longer Luo, we are no longer Kalenjin. We are a new tribe – the tribe of the youth of Kenya.” The world changes on a daily basis. Therefore, there is hope that the relationships linking ethnic groups, nations, and states will become more stable with peaceful transitions between the three.

¹⁹ *ibid.* 49