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Introduction to Nationalism and Ethnic Politics Special Issue on

Political transformation and change in ethno-national identity: comparative perspectives¹

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The rapid socio-political changes of the past two decades have produced a new intensive phase of research on ethnicity and nationality. Globalization, European integration, transitions to democracy, the relatively successful settlement of long-standing conflicts in South Africa and Northern Ireland, the failed settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and, more recently, the highlighting of ethno-religious distinction and conflict following 9/11, form the context of this research. One of the most striking aspects of the new literature is a convergence of the concerns of political scientists, sociologists and social psychologists around questions of the changing content and salience of nationality, and the role of national identifications in the new forms of politics.² This volume arises directly out of these concerns, and focuses upon the fact of change in national identity. How and when does national identity change? How is such change to be conceived and investigated?

These are questions that urgently require study. Identity does not by itself “cause” action – people act in pursuit of their interests, within institutionally and organizationally given paths, in a context of power relations which define their perceived and real chances of success. However it opens or closes the individual to different political discourses, makes them more or less predisposed to opposition and

exclusion, more or less likely to seek to pursue their interests aggressively or to anticipate the possibility of compromise. Identity change among significant sections of the population is therefore of immediate political significance: the success or failure of settlements of communal conflict, and of new forms of devolution, federation or democracy, depend on it. All such transitions, even if largely engineered by elites, also require changes at the mass level, in collective modes of action and interaction, in willingness to participate in new institutions or at the very least to support the political representatives who so participate. They involve breaches of old binaries in terms of which political self and other were defined. If such shifts do not occur, the conditions for renewed conflict remain. Thus the questions of when, how and in what relations to political changes does identity change occur become all the more pressing. So too do the urgent policy questions whether and how institutionally to recognize existing national identities and group interests and rights.

The articles in this special double issue of *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* are varied in their theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. However they converge in questions, assumptions and aims. First, these papers work with the assumption that national identities can and do change, and are most likely to change in the context of major changes in social structure and state forms. Second, they accept that change may occur not primarily or solely in the bare categories of nationality but also in their content and their interrelations with other categories.³ From different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, the authors explore changes in the content of national identity, the shifting relations of nationality to ethnicity and religion, and the relations of these changes in the symbolic boundaries of the nation to changing social boundaries, and to wider processes of socio-political change. Third,

the authors share the aim of exploring further the processes of change in ethnic and national identity. There have been extensive debates in the literature on the character of national identity, the nature of ethnicity, and the conditions under which ethno-national identity change is likely to occur.⁴ There has been relatively little analysis of the process of national identity change, what motivates it, how it is experienced and legitimated, and almost no work on this in comparative perspective.⁵ The articles do not attempt exhaustive analyses of the causes, sequences and results of changing national identities. We are still at a stage in research where the processes and mechanisms involved in national identity change have to be identified, described and contextualised, prior to more thorough explanatory hypotheses and comparative assessment of these hypotheses. The purpose of this special issue of *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* is to identify some of the social mechanisms by which change occurs and some of the factors and conditions which favor or disfavor it in very different socio-political contexts, and to consider the effects on identification of different state policies. Most of the studies are of situations of political transformation or conflict. This volume does not attempt to provide an explanatory theory of national identity change. However we hope that it provides some of the material necessary for the development of explanatory theory.

We begin with four articles which, in different ways, set an agenda for research on national identity change. Todd et al engage with the contemporary theoretical literature on ethnicity and identity, arguing that national identity is at once embedded and changeable, albeit at an individual and social cost. Using new interview material with respondents in Northern Ireland, they show some of the mechanisms of identity change, arguing that change in oppositional directions is at once more frequent and

more immediate than change away from opposition. This goes some way to explaining the embeddedness of ethno-national identity and the persistence of the tendency towards conflict. It shows the need for strong rights and equality legislation to prevent such 'essentialising' change.

What are the constraints on identity change? John Bone develops an analysis of the psycho-biological roots of human categorical frames, and points to generalized human dispositions of thought rooted in brain structures. He argues that these tendencies to routinize our categorical frames underpin the tendency for nationalisms and national identities to persist, although he also suggests that a "need for difference" underlies conflict and change. It is significant that his psycho-biological frame of analysis produces tendencies to conservation and conflict, rather than determining outcomes: there is, in principle at least, room both for the contingencies of situation and even for choice to make a difference.

The interrelation of theories of identity and politics is the subject of the next two articles. Roland Robertson argues that the recent theoretical emphasis on the fluidity and changeability of identity is correlated with an increasing manipulation of identity by the state. Focusing on trends in the United Kingdom and the United States, he points to a bureaucratization of identity, an emergent complicity between theorisations of identity and state intrusion, and increasing state control of the personal. This occurs in a context of the global 'squeezing' of states, and their need to construct a national variant of global history, while ensuring control of an increasingly mobile population.

Richard Jenkins in an article which analyses the interrelation of identity and group belonging, argues that the ways in which and the times at which identity ‘matters’ in socio-political life are not abstract but rather empirical questions. He develops this analysis in the context of a critical overview of the present state of the Northern Ireland settlement, arguing that despite the current critique of group-oriented approaches to nationality, strong effective and egalitarian ‘group rights’ remain the most positive policy avenue in the current politics of Northern Ireland, even, or perhaps especially, if this itself helps change what it means to be a group member.

The next set of articles focuses on the crucial role of the state not just in its policies which may limit and constrain the acceptable forms and expressions of national identity, but also in the role of its institutions and policy in constituting national identity. The contributors look at the contests over the meanings and values understood to be embodied in state institutions, practices and policies. Stefan Auer shows the competing ways of construing the Czech Republic, the very different national repertoires associated with the “two Vaclavs” and the relation of their different symbolism and rhetoric to policies and identifications with the wider European arena. Jordi Argelaguet centers his attention on elite consensus rather than elite debate, showing that it was precisely such consensus in Catalonia that allowed an effective policy of national reconstruction in the autonomous community. Using quantitative analysis he shows the “Catalanisation” of the population and analyses the pattern of change and its social basis.

Guy Ben Porat looks at the failure of a comparable attempt at elite consensus – the failure to create a consensus for peace in Israel - and asks why the business elite were

unable either to achieve consensus or to maintain their own motivation to pursue the peace process. He focuses directly on the changing content of identity, showing that it was provoked by the changing global context and focused upon global economic concerns, and that it made recessive, rather than directly changed, key oppositional aspects of Israeli identity. Thus it was easily deflected when globalization could be pursued without peace.

States have to be looked at in their geo-political contexts. Auer places the Czech Republic in the European context, Argelaguet places Catalonia in the Spanish context and Ben Porat places Israel in the global economic context. Joseph Klesner shows clearly the crucial role of the US context in the making and developing of Mexican national identity. In particular he shows the variation of attitudes in those geographical areas and among those social groups most exposed to direct contact with the US. Joseph Ruane deals with different social cleavages – religious divisions - showing how these are ‘locked in’ in path dependent patterns and how this is conditioned by state institutions and norms conditioned the attitudes, identities and possibilities of integration of Protestant minorities in France, the island of Ireland and the Irish state. He focuses on the crucial changes in the form of the state in the French case, which allowed the Protestant minority to identify their self-understanding with the national one, indeed to present themselves as exemplars of republican values.

If states define the parameters, possibilities and opportunities of national identity change, what is the actual process of change? The final section of this special issue explores the ways in which particular social groups understand and negotiate their national identification. Zoe Bray shows how alienation from the French state by the

1960s generation of French Basques led to their forming a dense network of Basque educational and linguistic institutions which came crucially to affect the national understandings, identifications and interrelations of their own children. Gladys Ganiel shows the role of different sorts of civil society networks and institutions – this time evangelical ones – in fostering change away from oppositional identities in South Africa. Day et al show a different type of identity change, a making salient of a “banal” national identification, the making “English” of the English incomers to North Wales through others’ reactions to them and their gradual and uneven coming to terms with their “national” difference in a context in which they had assumed that they would belong.

Finally we return to the Irish case. Lorenzo Cañas Bottos and Nathalie Rougier show generational change in the different vocabularies and tropes used by different age-groups on the Southern side of the Irish border. They show a gradual relaxation of national narratives and primordialist themes in the generation born after the second world war, at the same time as an unease about the evolving conflict in Northern Ireland which affects in turn the third generation of their study, those who reached maturity during the Northern violence, for whom the salience of national identification appears to have decreased. The final article, by McLaughlin et al, looks at the youngest generation (the 14 year olds whom they studied on the Irish border) and suggests that they may be significantly more oppositional and group-conscious than their immediate elders. This article shows, too, the permeability of religious and ethno-national identification, with easy shifts from one to another, supporting the conclusion of Cañas Bottos and Rougier that there is no necessary linear path of development over the generations.

Where does this leave the discussion of ethno-national identity change? What agenda for research arises from this volume? The articles collectively show a set of diverse mechanisms of change, ranging from changing state forms and policies in the United Kingdom and the United States, to the informal level of networks and institutions in the French Basque Country to the explicit consensual political project institutionalised by the autonomous government of Catalonia, to the interactional dynamics in North Wales. The articles look at processes of change over different time-frames: in the immediate intensity of conflict in Israel-Palestine and of economic development in Mexico, over generations on the Irish border, and over longer periods of more radical state transformations in France, Britain and Ireland. Mechanisms of change at the individual and local levels are shown, as are the wider state forms which may initiate, help or hinder processes of change. The agenda for research must include the interrelation of these levels of analysis, showing the sorts of sequences which develop between state-initiated change and popular and local patterns of interaction, and the sequences which allow actors to begin to reinterpret and change the effects of institutions. If we are not yet at a stage of developing theory, this volume identifies some of its building blocks.

¹ The idea for this volume, and most of the articles in it, grew out of a conference held in the Geary Institute, University College Dublin in January 2006, organized by the Intergenerational Transmission and Ethno National Identity in the (Irish) Border Area research project and funded by the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, through the Irish government Higher Education Authority North South Programme Strand 2.

²For example, Michael Keating, *Plurinational Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Steven D. Reicher and Nicholas Hopkins, *Self and Nation* (London: Sage, 2001)

³ Several independently converging approaches from different disciplines emphasise the content of national identity. See Richard D. Ashmore, Kay Deaux and Tracy McLaughlin-Volpe, 'An Organizing framework for collective identity: articulation and significance of multidimensionality', *Psychological Bulletin*, 130/1 (2004), pp. 80-114. Rawi Abdelal, Y. M. Herrera, A. I. Johnston, R. McDermott, 'Identity as a Variable' (May 10th 2003 version), Weatherhead Initiative in International Affairs, Harvard University, www.wcfia.harvard.edu/misc/initiative/identity/papers/index.htm; J. Todd, 'Social transformations, collective categories and identity change', *Theory and Society*, vol. 34, no. 4 (2005).

⁴ W. Connor, *Ethno-nationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Conversi, Daniele (ed.), *Ethno-nationalism in the Contemporary World: Walker Connor and the study of Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2002); Rogers Brubaker, 'Ethnicity without groups', *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, xlii.2 (2002), pp. 163-189; Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, vol. II of *The Information Age* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); M. Keating, *Plurinational Democracy: Stateless Nations in a Post-Sovereignty Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); R. Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations* (London: Sage, 1997).

⁵ For a call for such analysis of comparative processes and sequences of change, see Doug McAdam, Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Dynamics of Contention*. *Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).