

Tolerance and Integration – A Comparative View¹

As a social scientist, I have the privilege to reflect on matters like these, without having to bear political responsibility. I believe, however, that the social sciences should not be normative, since by the nature of research, we cannot provide ultimate truths. The best social scientists can hope for, is to say something about the possible consequences of alternative strategies.

I will mainly address the social psychological dimension of our topic, i.e. what mechanisms are of importance when discussing tolerance and integration.

Let us take the *contact hypothesis*, i.e. the idea that contacts between different cultural or ethnic groups would lead to increasing understanding and tolerance. There is a large body of research, which both contradicts and supports this view. The results show a distinct pattern, however. On a social-psychological level, studies of interaction between individuals tend to support the contact hypothesis. On a macro- or sociological level, however, it turns out that highly multiethnic areas in the world are often characterized by conflict.²

How is this to be explained? An important factor, according to available data, seems to be the status of the groups concerned. If there are obvious discrepancies between groups in terms of status, or if you wish, power, there are both obstacles to social interaction, and a risk for serious conflicts.

This does not mean, however, that conflict is necessarily associated with oppression. It is rather the case that conflicts arise when a situation is improving. The explanation, according to theories of *ethnic competition*, is that ethnicity becomes salient in a context where groups compete for economic and political goods.³ The paradox is thus, that even when a government or international organisation tries to resolve inequalities between groups, unforeseen conflicts may arise. One example is the issue of affirmative action in the US and other countries. Another would be a post-war situation: Relief organisations will help refugees to return, but those who did not leave will receive no help, which might lead to animosities that threaten the intended goal of furthering positive ethnic relations. My point is that the dynamics of social change, will, by necessity, have unintended consequences, and that no institutional solutions are fool-proof.

Yet, it is puzzling that culture or identity should be such a powerful force in social life. Why is it that ethnic affiliation so often leads to conflict? A common answer is that nationalist ideologies have been consciously promoted by political leaders. This explanation has, of course, been very frequent during the recent wars in South Eastern Europe. I think, however, that the idea of false consciousness, as it were, which ultimately has to be rectified by international intervention, is not wholly accurate.

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² For a discussion of the contact hypothesis, see H.D. Forbes, *Ethnic Conflict. Commerce, Culture, and the Contact Hypothesis*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997).

³ On theories of ethnic competition: Susan Olzak, "Contemporary Ethnic Mobilization," *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983): 335-74 and Susan Olzak, *The Dynamics of Ethnic Competition and Conflict*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

We must also look for explanations in the social psychological mechanisms which are a driving force of social life, and I would like to draw the attention to what is being referred to as the *Social Identity Theory*, developed by Henri Tajfel. According to Tajfel, for social life to be at all possible, man has to categorize his environment. But categorization by necessity involves evaluation. Individuals strive to develop a distinct and positive identity by comparing their own group with others, and will, therefore, in order to maintain their identity, tend to view their own group in a positive light. If not, they might leave the group, or try to change social reality. This is a general mechanism, regardless of which type of group we are talking about, from a simple peer group to an ethnic group⁴.

Categorization is, in a sense, a simplification of social reality, and, according to both laboratory experiments and other research, there is a tendency to maximise differences between one's own group and other groups, and minimise differences within the group one belongs to. According to this theory, therefore, both positive and negative stereotyping is a part of ordinary social life. In other words, the very mechanisms which maintain social identity, will, at the same time, produce social distance.

These ideas might explain the paradox I was referring to earlier, namely, that social interaction between members of different groups might lead to greater understanding, but that on the aggregate level, the coexistence of groups often leads to conflict.

Interaction between individuals, which presupposes a certain degree of identification with the other, will in time lead to social and cultural change on a societal level, which might be perceived by sections of a society or cultural group as a threat to the reality they are used to, which, in accordance with the theory, might result in social and political movements trying to maintain or restore that reality. In a historical context, this is why the process of European modernization during the 18th century led to national movements in Central Europe and the Balkans. Or, why westernization in the Middle East resulted in Islamic movements.

If cultural change of this type is related to social and economic grievances, the impact will be stronger, since ideas about justice and righteousness both in the new and old tradition will be made salient and have political effects. However, it is important to remember that, due to the character of identity formation, cultural differences as such do give rise to social distance. Thus, the issue of ethnicity might lead to conflicts which are hard to resolve exactly because they are intimately related to identity maintenance.

We take for granted that ideas are important, and are, therefore, fighting against xenophobia and nationalism. One should, however, not simply identify ethnocentrism or intolerance with nationalist ideologies, which was often done in Western and Northern Europe during the post-Yugoslav wars, sometimes referring in a pejorative way to a "Balkan Culture".

The history of South-Eastern Europe is as much a history of tolerance as it is of intolerance. The century-long Ottoman domination, which is usually understood as a period of oppression,

⁴ For an introduction to Tajfel's theory, see e.g. Henri Tajfel, "The Cognitive Aspect of Prejudice," *Journal of Social Issues* 25 (1969): 79-97; Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Henri Tajfel, "Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour," *Social Science Information* 13, no. 2 (1974): 65-93; Henri Tajfel, "Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations," *Annual Review of Psychology* 33 (1982): 1-39. The theory has been further developed by: J.C. Turner, *Rediscovering the Social Group. A Self-Categorization Theory*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987). For an extensive discussion of Tajfel's theory, see Jaques-Philippe Leyens, Vincent Yzerbyt, and George Schadron, *Stereotypes and Social Cognition* (London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994).

was also characterized by a basic tolerance. In the Ottoman *millet* system socio-religious groups had a fairly large autonomy and were able to live side by side. An obvious proof of this is that the Spanish Jews at a time when Jews were severely persecuted in Christian Europe were able to develop a rich culture in cities like Thessalonica, Skopje, Sarajevo, or Belgrade.

In contrast to Catholic or Protestant Europe, the Ottoman Empire did not, at least not systematically, try to assimilate its numerous ethnic and linguistic groups, which could therefore constitute the basis for modern nations. On the other hand, in a modern context, when cultural identity, during the era of nationalism, became the major foundation of political identity, such a situation gave rise to competing national ideologies, which due to the ethnic mosaic of the area, often claimed the same territories. This was an extremely difficult situation to resolve and recent conflicts are to a large extent explained by a very complex process of nation-building, rather than being the result of nationalist propaganda as such, or a peculiar Balkan culture, encouraging ethnocentrism.

After all, whatever might be said of socialist Yugoslavia, when it comes to legal provisions and practical solutions, that state compared very favourably, as far as minority or national policy is concerned, with most countries in Eastern or Western Europe. Nevertheless, it failed. The point being, that even if you consciously try to establish a workable system, it will not hold in all circumstances, or may even make things worse.

The situation in Northern Europe is different. If I restrict myself to Sweden or Denmark, these countries, due to historical circumstances, on a comparatively early stage formed powerful political units, which during centuries were able to integrate their populations both in a cultural and political sense. They were thus spared the problems which affected this part of Europe. Minorities were comparatively small, and the major feature of Scandinavian society was its unified religious and linguistic character, promoted by a centralized state. When Sweden, during the 1960s started to become a country of immigrants, today forming between 12 or 15 percent of the population, or even more, depending on the definition used, this meant a very dramatic change, which in my opinion has not yet been realised by the majority population.

It is true that Swedish politicians are very much aware of these issues and that there is an extensive legal and institutional framework which tries to address problems related to this demographic change. There is a comprehensive system of social benefits, the government is concerned about segregated areas which have grown in the three major cities, and special resources are provided for schools, as well as for occupational and language training for adults in these areas. The associations of immigrants are also supported.

In addition, there is an awareness of discrimination of immigrants, in employment and elsewhere, which has led to the establishment of an ombudsman institution, and a specific government authority, The Board of Integration, concerned with such issues.

However, there is a fundamental uncertainty about the goals of these policies. And the Swedes have not really faced the difficult problem of what exactly is meant by integration. In particular, there is no clear distinction between integration and assimilation. During the large scale immigration of the sixties and early seventies a system of mother tongue teaching was introduced in Swedish schools, where pupils were given the opportunity of participating in what was referred to as home language instruction. Later, public attention focused on other

matters, and today there is a general worry about insufficient integration. Politicians and journalists tend to be concerned not only that immigrants and their children should learn Swedish well enough to be able to work or study. There is a clear tendency to speak about the inherent dangers of a situation where a substantial part of the population does not identify as Swedes, or does not share values which are part of the Swedish tradition.

This is based on the assumption that Swedes do have a common set of values, and that a functioning society is really dependent on a shared value system, which is very doubtful in a modern context. Anyway, in recent years there has been an increase in animosities, e.g. irritation when mosques are being built, or a reluctance to allow Muslim dress, on TV, or at school.

It should be pointed out that when these issues are discussed, they are usually not presented as a clash between Swedish and foreign culture, but as a conflict between what is modern and progressive, and what is not. That is, the Swedes themselves do not understand this as an ethnic conflict, which however many immigrants do.

This problem would perhaps not be grave if the economic situation was not problematic. What might happen, according to some specialists, is the formation of a class of jobless immigrants who feel neglected by the majority. Very few, however, are aware of an economic competition which will very soon be an important characteristic of Swedish society, the one between bright immigrant children with a university degree, and not so bright Swedish children, who earlier did not have to worry about the future. That might lead to political currents we have not yet seen in Sweden.

This is an example of the social psychological process I was referring to earlier. It is natural for the Swedes to understand their views as normal, correct, and democratic. And it is, indeed, very difficult for a majority population to understand, that the very fact that it takes its view of reality for granted, which is every day manifest on our TV news programs, might be perceived by others as discrimination of sorts.

The interesting point is, therefore, that one might speak of an unarticulated ethnocentrism, of an unconscious nationalism, or nationalism without national rhetoric. The social psychological dynamics is the same, as for example in a South East European context, where the existence of different national groups is a fact of life, but the conflict is not defined in terms of national values, since the historical context is different. For example, when Slovenia was faced with a similar situation in the 1970s, a national rhetoric was very much evident, which it was not in Sweden, although the structural conditions were the same.

I believe it is important to be aware of the fact that ordinary mechanisms of identity maintenance, in a specific situation might develop into a negative political force. The challenge facing all of us is a society where individuals and groups are treated with respect, and are able to live both within and outside their cultures.

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