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THE POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF ETHNICITY OR THE EMERGENCE OF POLITICAL ETHNICITY? CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Abstract

The article emphasizes that the process of the politicization of ethnicity is inherently contradictory, a characteristic it shares with other ethnic and, more specifically, ethnopolitical phenomena. Ethnicity and religion constitute the fundamental parameters through which the "us–them" dichotomy is constructed, with the concept of ethnicity centrally concerned with the dynamics of intergroup relations. The article further advances the argument that national identity is a socially constructed and contingent phenomenon, and that the role of the national factor in ethnopolitical processes is often episodic and incidental rather than structurally deterministic. Acknowledging that scholarly inquiry into ethnopolitical issues has traditionally been grounded in the historical experiences of particular societies, the article underscores the epistemological subjectivity inherent in constructivist approaches. The opposition between self and other, frequently employed as an analytical instrument in the study of ethnopolitical processes, simultaneously signifies both the differentiation and the potential unification of individuals on the basis of shared ethnocultural belonging. In conclusion, the author asserts that the politicization of ethnicity is possible only within the context of multi-ethnic societies – settings characterized by interethnic interaction and the emergence of even minimal forms of inequality or discrimination. Conversely, in mono-ethnic states or among ethnically homogeneous or isolated communities, such politicization is unlikely or altogether absent.

Keywords: Ethnicity; political ethnicity; interethnic distance; institutionalisation; ethnic political actors; political mobilization.

Introduction

Ethnicity and religion constitute fundamental parameters in the construction of the "us-versus-them" dichotomy. Within this framework, ethnicity primarily concerns the issue of intergroup relations, as it provides

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a potent rationale for adhering to specific beliefs, norms, objectives, and lifestyles – merely on the grounds that these elements are considered inherently "ours"[1]. Ethnic identity has long been acknowledged as a potent form of individual self-determination and continues to exert a significant influence on political processes. This requires an analytical approach to political phenomena through an ethnic lens, particularly in examining the emergence of ethnic political actors and their efforts to safeguard collective rights. The transition from the 19th to the 20th century marked a paradigmatic shift in the ethno-national politics of Central and Eastern European states[2] . Understanding the institutionalisation and historical activity of ethnic political actors is crucial for comprehending the complexities of interethnic relations in multi-ethnic societies. From the 19th century onward, ethnonational communities – alongside social classes – became central actors in political processes; by the late 1860s, they had evolved into primary agents of political interaction[3].

Sociocultural and interethnic distance can be likened to the repulsion between unipolar magnets: the inherent separation between ethnic groups functions as a deterrent to close cultural contact[4]. Consequently, social space is not spontaneously generated; rather, it emerges through the reflection of individual or group identity vis-à-vis the "other" – the stranger[5]. In this context, religious affiliation served not as the sole marker of differentiation, but was accompanied by other cultural attributes and social determinants. These distinctions operated as demarcation lines that, despite ongoing professional or social interactions, compelled individuals to continually return to their ethnocultural environment, thereby reinforcing spatial and symbolic ethnic boundaries.

Theoretical Paradigms of Ethnicity and National Identity

Efforts to define the concepts of ethnicity and ethnic identity – particularly in relation to ethnic political actors and their role in the political processes of the late 19th and 20th centuries – inevitably confront numer-

[1] P. Savidan, *Wielokulturowość,* Warszawa 2012, pp. 4–22.

[2] Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives,* New York 1997, pp. 25–135.

[3] I. Monolatii, *Metropolia versus Peripheria. Studia nad etno- i geopolityką dawnych Kresów Wschodnich I Rzeczypospolitej na przełomie XIX i XX wieku,* Piotrków Trybunalski 2015, pp. 9–13.

[4] A. Appaduraj, *Strach przed mniejszościami. Esej o geografii gniewu,* Warszawa 2009, pp. 23–28.

[5] A. Mbembe, *Polityka wrogości. Nekropolityka,* Kraków 2018, pp. 11–17.

ous theoretical and methodological challenges[6]. Various academic schools of thought have produced divergent interpretations of key concepts such as ethnos, nation, and nationalism[7]. These differences extend to the determination of the timing, causality, and conditions surrounding ethnogenesis, the interplay between ethnicity and politics, and the role of ethnic actors in socio-political and geopolitical contexts.

In the analysis of the institutionalization and activity of ethnic political actors, three principal theoretical frameworks – primordialism, modernism (including constructivism), and instrumentalism – offer valuable insights into the nature of ethnic identity[8]. Each of these schools embodies distinct assumptions regarding the essence of ethnic communities and nations[9].

Primordialist scholars (e.g., E. J. Sieyès, J. J. Rousseau, J. G. Fichte, and more contemporary figures such as G. Gambino, V. Connor, P. Van den Berghe, E. Shils, and C. Geertz) generally argue that ethnicity emerges from enduring familial and kinship ties passed down through generations. According to Smith, primordialism can be classified into three variants: (1) an organic nationalist tradition influenced by German Romanticism and Rousseauian legacies in France; (2) a sociobiological strand, associated with theorists like Wilson and Trivers; and (3) a conception of ethnicity as a fundamental, often indissoluble social bond, rooted not in difference per se, but in human social activity. From this perspective, the central concern in ethno-political relations is the problem of power[10].

The first variant of primordialism is marked by relative tolerance – minority groups, though economically marginalised, retain cultural autonomy. The second, focusing on acculturation (as outlined by P. Van den Berghe), allows for social mobility within the dominant culture but can lead either to integration or the erasure of minority identities, depending on the mode of acculturation[11].

Modernist interpretations associate the emergence of nations and nationalism with broad socio-economic and cultural transformations. Different theorists emphasise varying factors: economic (T. Nairn, M. Hechter), sociocultural (E. Gellner), political (J. Breuilly, A. Giddens, M. Mann),

[6] K. Wójcicki, *Nostalgia i polityka. Esej o powrocie do Europy Środkowej,* Warszawa 2015, pp. 33–38.

[7] R. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe,* Los Angeles 1996, pp. 11–25.

[8] A. Gat, *Nations: The Long History and Deep Roots of Political Ethnicity and Nationalism,* Cambridge 2013, pp. 125–143.

[9] S. Fenton, *Etniczność,* Warszawa 2007, pp. 9–16.

[10] A.D. Smith, *Nacjonalizm. Teoria, historia, ideologia,* Warszawa 2007, pp. 23–38.

[11] P.L. Van den Berghe, *The Ethnic Phenomenon,* New York 1981, pp. 239–251.

ideological (E. Kedourie) and constructivist (E. Hobsbawm, B. Anderson) perspectives abound. Some modernists (F. Barth, V. Sollors, J. Rothschild) argue that ethnic identity arose from the industrial revolution and economic modernization and posit that such communities are "imagined"[12]. Constructivist models, which regard nations as modern social constructs, highlight that nationalism, although contemporary, is shaped and reproduced through societal mechanisms[13].

A. D. Smith critiques the limitations of structural modernism, arguing that its emphasis on universalist and mobile intelligentsia overlooks the localized and culturally specific dynamics of national identity[14]. While modernist paradigms see industrial capitalism as a catalyst for nation formation, the resulting state nationalism often weakened pre-existing cultural ties. In this context, language emerged as the primary mechanism for sustaining identity[15], and, in reaction to urbanization and secularization, ethnic allegiances were revived, intensifying intergroup competition[16].

Ethno-symbolism, a synthesis of primordialist and modernist elements, emphasises the importance of cultural symbols and collective memory in shaping national consciousness. It contends that ethnic groups pursue diverse goals based on distinct social structures and symbolic repertoires[17].

Instrumentalist theorists complement modernist views by focusing on identity as situational and context dependent. A. D. Smith observes that instrumentalists conceptualize identity as a property of individuals rather than collectives[18]. Instrumentalists (M. Hechter, J. Wilson, A. Roys, P. Brass, F. Robinson, J. Breuilly) regard ethnic groups as interest-based coalitions, with nationalism functioning as a tool for mobilization, power acquisition, and resource protection[19].

In Western theoretical frameworks, there is often a minimization of linguistic and cultural factors in favor of socio-political variables[20] . This is

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[12] B. Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of Nationalism*, London-New York 1991.

[13] E. Hobsbawm, *Narody i nacjonalizm po 1780 roku*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 19–25.

[14] A.D Smith, *Kulturowe podstawy narodów. Hierarchia, przymierze i republika,* Kraków 2009, pp. 11–15.

[15] *Idem*, *Etniczne źródła narodów*, Kraków 2009, pp. 34–51.

[16] *Idem*, *Nacjonalizm…*, p. 67.

[17] D.L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict,* Berkeley; Los Angeles; London 2001, pp. 21–37.

[18] A.D. Smith, *Nacjonalizm…*, pp. 133–146.

[19] D. Morley, *Przestrzenie domu. Media, mobilność i tożsamość,* Warszawa 2011, pp. 11–25.

[20] E. Gellner, *Narody i nacjonalizm*, Warszawa 2009.

particularly evident in British, French, and American scholarly traditions, which have popularized the statist notion of the nation (e.g., A. Giddens)[21], equating it with statehood. Many contemporary modernist and postmodernist models – such as Anderson's imagined community, Deutsch's communication theory, or Hobsbawm's theory of nationalism as a product of nation-building – dismiss the objective underpinnings of national identity. A. D. Smith criticizes this stance, emphasizing the neglect of local particularities and autonomous cultural worlds. A sociological classification of nationalisms – majority vs. minority, particularist vs. marginal – emerges from such theoretical diversity. A. D. Smith distinguishes between territorial and ethnic nationalisms, both pre- and post-independence[22]. These include anti-colonial, integrative, separatist, and irredentist movements. E. Gellner likewise interprets nationalism as rooted in the aspirations of social and ethnic communities for statehood[23].

Based on group behavior, nationalism can also be categorized as moderate or radical[24]. Moderate nationalism seeks reform and limited autonomy, while radical nationalism rejects the legitimacy of the existing political order altogether. A. Jalata, for instance, distinguishes between the aspirations of oppressed nations – often focused on self-determination and equitable access to resources – and those of more dominant or integrated communities[25].

Western scholars tend to emphasise the constructed nature of national identity and the episodic role of the nation in ethno-political processes. However, most contemporary nation-states are post-imperial formations, shaped by policies of forced assimilation. D. Schnapper rightly critiques the imposition of American-derived concepts, instead defining ethnic groups as historical and cultural descendants of specific communities[26].

The anthropological work of Fredrik Barth provides a holistic framework consonant with the theory of ethnocultural relations. Barth's model of ethnic identity posits that ethnic groups do not possess immutable

[21] A. Giddens, *Nowoczesność i tożsamość. „Ja" i społeczeństwo w epoce późnej nowoczesności*, Warszawa 2001.

[22] Ma Shu Yun, *Ethnonationalism, ethnic nationalism, and mini-nationalism: A comparison of Connor, Smith and Snyder*, "Ethnic and Racial Studies", 1990, Volume 13, Issue 4, pp. 527–541.

[23] E. Gellner, *op.cit.*, p. 121–137.

[24] M.K. Flynn, *Nationalism: Theory and its Discontents*, "The Global Review of Ethnopolitics", 2020, Vol. 1, Issue 2, pp. 67–75.

[25] A. Jalata, *Etno-nationalism and the global 'modernising' project*, "Nations and Nationalism", 2003, Vol. 7, Issue 3, pp. 385–405.

[26] D. Schnapper, *Community of Citizens. On the Modern Idea of Nationality,* New Brunswick 1998, pp. 21–47.

essential characteristics. Instead, identity is constructed through social interactions and is defined relationally, in contrast to "the other." Ethnic boundaries are therefore formed and maintained not by internal cultural traits, but by the mechanisms of differentiation and exclusion. According to Fr. Barth, cultural differences persist within a social system as long as they are standardised within the group and function as organising principles of social roles and statuses. Interethnic relations can flourish when based on shared cultural frameworks; conversely, in areas lacking such cultural compatibility, the preconditions for ethnic interaction are absent. In such cases, any interaction that occurs is likely to disregard national identity altogether[27].

A key feature of ethno-national group behaviour is the desire to preserve a certain cultural and spatial distance from others. This leads to the development of integration strategies in multi-ethnic states, which, according to Western scholars, increasingly rely on political consensus, acculturation, and the equalization of socioeconomic opportunities[28] (Gat, 2013). Considering that a political nation is constituted by shared will and not by ethnicity, religion, or class, integration requires that the legitimacy of the state's political system be accepted by all constituent ethnic groups.

In modern and transitional societies, where politicised ethnicity becomes a key determinant in political decision-making, Rothschild notes that ethnic groups become effective instruments in the competition for power, status, and resources. The relationship between ethnic politicisation and uneven modernisation is therefore central to understanding contemporary ethnopolitical dynamics. Modernisation increases social mobility, but often exacerbates group inequalities, thus intensifying interethnic competition and undermining existing justifications for inequality.

Models of Ethnopolitical Structure and Power Relations

Given that ethnic political science studies the relationships between ethnic groups and state structures – especially within artificial or externally imposed political systems – scholarship has focused on strategies of power distribution in ethno-national politics. Joseph Rothschild outlines three models of power stratification in multi-ethnic societies:

[27] F. Barth, *Grupy i granice etniczne*, [w:] *Badania kultury. Kontynuacje*, red. M. Kempny, E. Nowicka, Warszawa 2004, pp. 348–377.

[28] A. Gat, *Nations: The Long History and Deep Roots of Political Ethnicity and Nationalism,* Cambridge 2013.

1. Vertical-Hierarchical Model: This model is characterised by the subordination of one or more ethnic groups in all spheres of social life. The dominant group, in its attempt to preserve its position, may resort to coercion or sanctions. Such a structure mirrors caste-based systems and reflects a repressive social order.

2. Parallel Segmentation Model: Here, ethnic groups are internally stratified but engage with one another in a quasi-equal manner. Disputes can be resolved through negotiation and compromise, with elites acting as ethnic representatives in external relations. Solidarity within groups and clear boundaries between them define this model.

3. Cross-Cut Grid Model: This model captures the overlap of ethnic and class-based identities. Classes here transcend ethnic boundaries and foster interethnic alliances, thus facilitating more integrative social and political relations. Rothschild views this model as the most appropriate for analyzing interethnic dynamics in developed societies[29].

Although stratification models illustrate the distances between political actors and their divergent values, isolation itself does not necessarily entail conflict. Rothschild suggests that a significant distance between groups may lead ethnic communities to pursue separate paths without direct confrontation. Nevertheless, dominant ethnic groups can engage in coercive strategies such as genocide, forced assimilation, or displacement. Rothschild also identified more constructive approaches, including the facilitation of acculturation, the decentralisation of state authority (e.g., federalism), the provision of regional autonomy, or, conversely, the marginalisation of minority groups.

Rogers Brubaker, in turn, introduces the concepts of binational or multinational states as distinct from nationally homogeneous states[30]. His framework, widely adopted in studies of Central and Eastern Europe during the interwar and post-communist periods, includes three models: (1) liberal civil society, where ethnicity is recognised as an individual right but excluded from state policy; (2) bi- or multi-ethnic states, where ethnicity is a factor in governance; and (3) nationally orientated states, where ethnicity becomes a central axis of national identity. In such contexts, Brubaker identifies a "triadic nexus" composed of the national minority, the nationalising state, and an external national homeland. These entities should not be viewed as static units but rather as fields of contested positions and shifting relations.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of these general frameworks. Rothschild himself concedes that none of his models exist in pure

[29] J. Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics. A Conceptual Framework*, New York 1981, pp. 81–84.

[30] R. Brubaker, *op.cit*.

form. The Brubaker concept also presents challenges. Most democratic states privilege a single national language and promote cultural resources that favour the dominant ethnos. In addition, some elements of Brubaker's typology depend on external geopolitical factors beyond state control. When dominant elites suppress social forces, pressure groups, such as political parties and social movements, emerge to represent ethnic interests and potentially shape national ethnic policy through political mobilisation.

Conclusions

In summary, contemporary political science prioritises the refinement of the conceptual and methodological apparatus used to examine the politicisation of ethnicity, the ethno-national sphere, and interethnic relations. Increasing attention is being paid to the evolving relationships among ethnicity, nation, and nationalism, as well as to the expanding scope of ethnic-political relations. In this context, the use of the terms "ethnic nation" (to denote ethnocultural communities) and "political nation" (to denote territorial and socio-political communities) has significantly broadened.

When an ethnos becomes aware of its collective interests and seeks to protect them through political means and state institutions, it enters a new stage of development – that of becoming a nation. This understanding does not exclude the coexistence of political factors within ethnic nations or the presence of ethnic elements within political nations. The political factor plays a formative role in shaping the configuration of the ethno-national sphere, particularly in instances of subjective differentiation, cultural group integration, the establishment of national and socio-cultural institutions, and the deepening of communicative ties within the nation.

The effectiveness of integrating various groups into the ethno-political organism depends, on the one hand, on the strategic policies of the state and, on the other, on the agency of ethnic minorities. The state is often confronted with the imperative to realise the principles of social equality, especially by equalising standards of living and ensuring equitable access to opportunities. For ethnic minorities, integration can take the form of acculturation, which can include assimilation. Such integration, as shaped by state policy and/or the position of the dominant nation, may provide minorities with relatively stable and secure conditions within a broader ethnically diverse society.

Integration occurs through the process of accommodation, which involves adherence to social norms grounded in the role-based expec-

tations of macro-social groups. As a form of interethnic interaction, accommodation reflects the adaptation of ethnic groups to the prevailing social environments. This process becomes inevitable once a group enters – or exists within – an established ethno-political structure. Under conditions of polyethnicity, accommodation by individuals or groups outside the dominant cultural environment must be distinguished from cultural mimicry. The latter is characterised by superficial conformity and emotional concealment, while adaptation – whether active, passive, or progressive – entails reconciling one's cultural identity with the expectations of the host society, without abandoning the core cultural resources. The meaning and trajectory of this process are shaped by the social status assigned to a particular ethno-national community within the broader system.

An important conceptual tool within Western social science is the notion of political style, which applies not only to political actors but also to the state as a whole. At the state level, the political style embodies a dual structure: the standardised procedures by which decisions are made, reflecting both strategic objectives and the mechanisms through which government programmes are implemented. When applied to the sphere of interethnic relations, the political style captures the modalities through which a state conducts its ethnic policy.

State behaviour in this regard may reflect an overarching orientation toward consensus-building or toward the pursuit of objectives that may disregard or disadvantage certain groups. In the former case, inclusive negotiation and consultation with ethnic minorities align with a conciliatory and consensus-orientated model of governance rooted in the principles of ethnic pluralism. Such approaches foster the potential for interethnic compromise and cooperation. Conversely, the use of coercive measures – whether by the state or by ethno-political actors – signifies a reliance on a conflict-orientated political culture.

However, as scholars note, the integration model exhibits key vulnerabilities, mainly due to its situational nature. First, its success is often contingent upon the timing of its implementation, ideally before a conflict escalates to an irrational or intractable stage. Second, the compromise model is inherently limited by its temporaryity. Group dissatisfaction can emerge over time if the achieved goals are perceived as insufficient or unjustified. Disillusionment may stem either from a reassessment of the strategy as irrational or from the perception that the group has sacrificed more than it has gained – particularly when losses are experienced as more consequential than benefits.

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**Polityczne wymiary etniczności czy etniczność polityczna?
Uwagi pojęciowe i konsekwencje teoretyczne**

Streszczenie

Artykuł podkreśla, że proces upolitycznienia etniczności ma charakter wewnętrznie sprzeczny, co stanowi cechę wspólną także dla innych zjawisk etnicznych, a w szczególności etnopolitycznych. Etniczność i religia stanowią podstawowe parametry, za pomocą których konstruowana jest dychotomia „my-oni", przy czym koncepcja etniczności kon-

centruje się przede wszystkim na dynamice relacji międzygrupowych. Autor artykułu rozwija również tezę, zgodnie z którą tożsamość narodowa ma charakter społecznie skonstruowany i kontyngentny, a znaczenie czynnika narodowego w procesach etnopolitycznych jest często epizodyczne i incydentalne, a nie strukturalnie determinowane. Uznając, że badania nad zagadnieniami etnopolitycznymi były tradycyjnie zakorzenione w historycznych doświadczeniach poszczególnych społeczeństw, artykuł uwypukla epistemologiczną subiektywność wpisaną w podejścia konstruktywistyczne. Opozycja między „ja" a „innym", często wykorzystywana jako narzędzie analityczne w badaniach nad procesami etnopolitycznymi, wyraża zarazem różnicowanie, jak i potencjalne jednoczenie jednostek na podstawie wspólnoty etnokulturowej. W konkluzjach autor stwierdza, że proces upolitycznienia etniczności może zachodzić wyłącznie w kontekście społeczeństw wieloetnicznych – środowisk charakteryzujących się interakcjami międzyetnicznymi oraz pojawianiem się nawet minimalnych przejawów nierówności lub dyskryminacji. Natomiast w państwach monoetnicznych lub w społecznościach jednorodnych etnicznie bądź izolowanych proces ten jest mało prawdopodobny lub całkowicie nieobecny.

Słowa kluczowe: etniczność, etniczność polityczna, dystans międzyetniczny, instytucjonalizacja, aktorzy polityczni grup etnicznych, mobilizacja polityczna.