ETHNIC IDENTITIES AND NATIONALISM. BELGIAN CASE STUDY

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Abstract: *Starting with the XIXth century the academia saw an increase interest in the field of knowledge related to the issues of ethnicities, minorities studies, nation building. What started as a purely academic project soon became of out most relevance especially after the end of World War II and the beginning of the decolonisation process which saw the emergence of a series of new nations. This process of nation building and of redefinition of the states didn't spare the European continent, often with tragic results (see the interwar period or the conflicts after the fall of communism in 1989). Added to this already complex situation we need also to take into consideration the emergence of a new political actor – the European Union as a supranational organization. This is important given the fact that the current analysis, starts with a literature review of the theories on ethnicity, nationalism etc. in order to focus as a case study on Belgium, a multi-ethnic state, with a specific local situation where he have a strong presence of the European Union institutions.*

Keywords*: ethnicity; nationalism; Belgium; linguistic division*

1. INTRODUCTION

The XXIst century is being characterized by numerous manifestations of the cultural diversity and the heterogeneity of the society. Speaking about ethnical identity we will have to make a recourse to memory and remember that Europe has a long history of multi-ethnical living together. This generated a series of Europe wide models of multi-ethnic organisation, one of which would be latter one examined here.

2. ETHICAL IDENTITY AND ITS DIMENSIONS

The social and cultural differences between the citizens of different ethnicities represent serious challenges for the persons from political sphere, their solving leading to the proclamation of multiculturalism and multilingualism,

> ideologies that are raised to the rank of state policies and which are based upon an essential premise: all citizens are equal, therefore each has the right to preserve its own identity, practice and identify with its own culture, be proud of its cultural heritage, be different of others (Vlăsceanu, 2011:112).

The majority of definitions for the concept of '*ethnicity*' refer more to cultural elements than the biological ones.

Max Weber sees the ethnic group was a group of individuals reunited by their faith in belonging to a common ascendance and a specific psychology (Weber, 1978). On the other side, other researchers have considered the ethnicity as the results of a way of life, based on a own language, psychology and culture, cumulated with the spatial determination that creates cohesion (Poutignat*et al.*, 1995: 35).

Richard Molard appreciates that an ethnic group is characterised by a community of beliefs, values, language, and juxtaposed to the spatial criteria (Vulcănescu, 1979:104). In exchange, the South African anthropologist Meyer Fortes, beliefs that the ethnicity represents a spatial determined group, inside of which exists very strong bonds (*Encyclopedia Universalis*, 971:972).

The ethnic identity is based upon the basis of differences and conditions the connection between the members of the community through the conscience of having common origins and is practically, a way of life based on an own language, a psychology and culture, cumulated with the spatial determination that creates solidarity, cohesion. The sociologist Rodolfo Stavenhagen, believes a similar thing as he stipulates that the ethnic groups are social and cultural groups, and not biological ones (Stavenhagen, 1992:135-151). The terms 'ethnicity', 'ethnic group' or 'ethnic minority' are

immanent related to the cultural traits of the individuals taken into consideration, thereof on their cultural identity and of the group they form. The cultural organisation has a precedence over the ethnic considerations and is not necessary a confirmation of the realisation of a distinct ethnic component (Koubi, 269).

The ethnical identity represents a pluridimensional construction characterised by the existence of feelings of belonging to an ethnicity, pride, a positive attitude toward the own ethnical group. The feeling of self is defined in ethnical terms which presuppose common origins and sends a series of elements in close connection with the language, culture or origins. The ethnical identity changes as the time goes by, the age being the result of some personal experiences and explorations which have a dynamic character (Phinney, 1992:156-176).

We can speak about a series of common components of the ethnic identity such as et*hnical self-identification, affective components, cognitive components* and *values*. These change as we have said above, as the time goes by. Speaking about *ethnical self-identification*, we think about the self-labelling of the individual as a component of the ethnic group. The *affective components* encompass all the feelings related to the cohesion of the ethnic group and the manifestations related to ethnicity. In accordance with the *social identity theory* previously described, there is a connection between the belonging to the ethnic group of the individual and the self-perception. The defining elements for the ethnic identity, such as positive perceptions toward the ethnic group, the pride of belonging to that group, and also the use of a common language, offer to the individual a feeling of unicity. *The cognitive components* are information about the ethnic group – such as traditions and history, combined with the understanding of the term of ethnicity, and also of all the obligations that derive from them for each individual. All the ethnic classes coexist when all the individual composing them have in common the same attributes, but without a high cohesion. The individuals are aware of their belonging to the ethnic group when, alongside the social or cultural traits, they find also a series of peculiar signs such as: nationality or ethnic origins, without granting any importance to profession or gender.

3. THE EMERGENCE OF NATIONALISM

The concept of '*nation*' is constantly changing. From the point of view of historians or sociologists, the nation has managed to maintain a multitude of meanings. One refers to unchanged and primary approaches that highlight the fact that nations represent ethno-cultural groups that have existed in the past. On the other hand, ethno-symbolists claim that the nation represents those ethnic groups with a common history and culture that occupy a well-determined space, united by feelings of brotherhood, cohesion, similarity, and unification in conscious groups did not take place until the modern age. Another approach is the modernist one in which some sociologists believe that the nation is an imaginary, subjective construction (Anderson, 2000). Others believe that the nation is a multi-ethnic or ethnic social group that wants to establish a state, priority having the political dimension, the civic consciousness, but also the ethnic component. Other opinions suggest that the nation has emerged on the basis of ideologies, such as nationalism, and a process of human evolution. As a result, the nation would be a voluntary construction, an imagined and edified entity.

Nationalism has contributed to forming a perception of the state as the political unity of an ethnic group with the role of defending and promoting language, traditions and identity. Significant contributions to the scientific structuring of the phenomenon of nationalism have brought researchers Raoul Girardet and Ernest Gellner. The first researcher, of French origin, in his book 'Nationalism and the Nation', notes that

> no word reveals to a greater extent the equivoque and ambiguity. Moral considerations, the meanings of polemics, the preoccupation to justify or to condemn appear to stubbornly change the meaning of its usefulness (Girardet, 2003:13).

Equally,

> although it is recognized by all as a phenomenon of history and as a decisive factor in the general evolution of the societies of our time, nationalism continues, nevertheless, to emerge as an extremely mobile reality. The ubiquitous, but inexpressible, having many forms, it is most often elevated in glory, but not defined, analysed, described, inventoried (Girardet, 2003:13).

In trying to interpret the multiple manifestations of nationalism, the author identifies four types of nationalism: nationalism of liberal and democratic inspiration, authoritarian nationalism, plebiscite nationalism, or Marxist or fascist nationalism.

On the other hand, the philosopher and anthropologist Ernest Gellner has a vision of a historical-philosophical trend originating from the deepening of modern history. His conception of contemporary nationalism is based on two basic premises: *culture* and *organization*, which for the author represents the *source* of nationalism. Culture, as the predominant attribute of individuals, is a pattern of ethical conduct and unity of the ethnic group, with genetic origins, innate inclinations, and also the characteristic of the result of social cohesion inherited from father to son. In conclusion, anthropologist Gellner considers culture to be radically different from one ethnic group to another and may undergo substantial changes over time. The similarity of culture is the basic link of the political principle with nationalism.

Starting from the premise that organization and culture are the source of nationalism, Gellner promotes a series of theses to characterize the phenomenon:

- Nationalism is a fundamental political element that supports the idea that cultural resemblance is the primordial social bond.

Whatever the basic elements of power among individuals, to be legitimate, they are closely related to the fact that individuals of the same ethnic group have the same culture (Gellner, 1994:11).

- The relationship between state-nationalism and culture-organization systems is straightforward.

Culture and organization generate nationalism and the nation-state, the former being stable and long-lasting, and the other being the products of the above-mentioned basic ideas on a scale of the development of society in the present times (Belli, 2005:8).

- Nationalism is neither universal nor stable in the ethnic groups, and not all individuals are rationalizing and acting nationalistically. Gellner points out that nationalism is not universal and essential, and not essential and Western, being

the necessary consequence or the correlation of certain social conditions, and they happen to be the conditions of our age, widespread, profound and all-encompassing (Gellner, 1994:17).

Gellner concludes on the one hand that the problem of nationalism emerges in a civilization in which states have been recognized and accepted as indispensable, and in another order, if the state has not acquired a universal character, neither nationalism can be characterized alike (Gellner, 1994:13).

For some researchers, nationalism facilitates the possibility of reaching a unitary culture, respectively, of a communication community, the theory of communication being defined as a theory of modernism that proves the functionality of nationalism. The nation is promoted through a functional communication scheme for conventions, and its modernism can be quantified through the efficiency of conventions concluded, since modernization is closely linked to effective communication. The nation thus turns into a multitude of individualities closely linked to the group and place of origin through social-emotional communication ways. At the same time, nationalism revolves between politics and social transformation, being conceived by leaders and implemented from top to bottom. Through it, quality culture is formed in societies where previously the culture was below average, modernization being closely linked to the education process. Ernest Gellner said that

nations heading towards nationalism are characterized by an average education of society, a term based on a multitude of academic systems, coding the rules for a systematized bureaucracy and technological communication.

According to Ernest Gellner's first theory, nations and nationalism

are logically contingent but sociologically necessary in modern industrial societies (Gellner, 1987:21),

are based on a study of the transformation of agrarian societies into modern societies. He identified three significant historical periods: pre-agrarian, agrarian and industrial. In the first stage, the emergence of nations and nationalism was not possible due to the lack of some form of state organization, in the second period there was the possibility of the two terms, because the social structures took the form of layered layers horizontally isolated, the specific being that both the ruling class, and its substrates rather emphasize cultural differentiation than homogeneity, and in the third period the state influence emerged, with nationalism becoming a universal goal.

4. CASE STUDY: THE BELGIAN MODEL

The European Union has its share of multilingual states and one of the most famous as

well as studied examples is Belgium, a country characterized by the proximity of people with different ethnic backgrounds with strong linguistic ties that tend to promote their specificities actively. With three major linguistic communities of Flemish-speaking, French-speaking and German-speaking Belgian, the country has long been a model, either for good or for worse as regards the way various ethnic groups coexist in the same territory.

What characterise the Belgian model is the *creation of ethnic identity in opposition with the dominant group*, meaning the French speaking Belgian. If starting with its creation in early XIXth century the French speaking population was a predominant one the Flemish minority started to create and promote its own identity in stark contrast with the French. We have then the ingroup whose composing individuals are defining themselves in opposition with the outgroup. The characteristics of the ethnic group that define the individual as belonging to it even from birth are given by the objective dimension and have as a purpose to establish individual links with the ethnical group. These characteristics are represented by language, religion, belonging to a define territory, culture, common mentality, specific institutional system, characteristic way of life, physical differences (Rotariu, Iluţ, 1996:416).

The language represents for the ethnic identity a significant point of reference as seen in the Belgian case. A nation is built on the basis of language, and the efforts to maintain the characteristic language for each ethnic group are major, being protected by legal provisions in various documents. For instance in the Belgian case the Constitution in the Article 4 divides the country into linguistic areas, which form the basis of the federal structure:

> Belgium has four linguistic areas: The French-speaking area, the Dutch-speaking area, the bilingual area of Brussels Capital and the German-speaking area. (The Belgian Constitution, 2009 translation).

The diversity of language of a nation represents a cultural richness and is protected by a series of laws and norms. The Flemish have created a distinct survival strategy by forcing the creation in Flanders of a unilingual Flemish speaking area and thus offering them access to administrative positions (Van der Wee, 2018). In the Belgian case we are dealing with what Ernst Gellner defined as a nationalism seen as a fundamental political element that supports the idea that cultural resemblance is the primordial social bond:

> Whatever the basic elements of power among individuals, to be legitimate, they are closely related to the fact that individuals of the same ethnic group have the same culture (Gellner, 1994:11).

4.1 Why Belgium matters? First of all in European terms it a relatively "new" state that was 'engineered' in the XIXth century almost from scratch.

> Even though the Belgian elite tried to construct a Belgian identity by creating different national symbols such as a flag, a constitution and a national hymn, these symbols were not as successful because they were novel and created for the purpose of nation-building (Aggarwal, 2016).

We are dealing here with what the scientist Anthony D. Smith called *lateral ethno-symbolism* where "in lateral (aristocratic) ethnies, national identity is dispersed by the elites from the top-down" (Aggarwal, 2016). Another reason is that the Flemish group has *transformed itself from a language to an identity*. However this a risky system as it affects the chances of understanding between various ethnic communities:

> […] there is a concept of *Language Communities* in the Belgian governmental systems. By formalizing linguistic divide in the government and creating official segregation for different language groups, the Belgian political system essentially encourages regional and linguistic conflict (Aggarwal, 2016).

We are dealing here, in my opinion, with a clear application of the social identity theory, as mentioned above in the paper. The *social identity theory*, emphasises some behaviour aspects of the individual, member of the *ingroup*, that sacrifices himself in order to protect the *ingroup* toward the *outgroup* in case of some menaces and to maintain the differences between them. Also, the theory predicts certain intergroup behaviours on the basis of the differences of group status perceived, the perceived legitimacy and the stability of these differences, and also the perceived stability of the individual to pass from a group to another, based on Henry Tajfel theory from 1979 (Hajfel, 1979/2018). Also, some of the theorists have shown that motivated to emphasise the homogeneity of the *ingroup* more than the *outgroup* members or of the majority group, are the members of the ethnic minorities, on the

consideration of a continuous danger facing the minority.

This is more that obvious if we take into consideration the above mentioned linguistic issue.

> The issue of political identity based on language has become so entrenched in Belgian politics that it threatens the break-up of the state. Linguistic communalism is the principal, though not the exclusive, cleavage in contemporary Belgian politics. The critical problem is how to accommodate two language communities, each dominant in its own region, to the shared endeavour of a nation state (O'Neill, 2000:114-134).

The question arose more prominent after the end of the World War II and generated in 1962 the cultural autonomy and the unilingual status of Flanders in 1962, while Brussels kept a bilingual status. This in exchange, fuelled by economic growth lead in the 1970's to an increase of tensions:

> Centrifugal tensions are apparent on all sides, but the more insistent threat to a Belgium state comes from Flanders where cultural identity has been transformed into a politicised ethnicity bolstered in recent years by economic well-being and demographic supremacy. Important differences of historical conditioning and sociological experience account for the relative absence in Wallonia of an ethnic as opposed to a merely an abiding sense of cultural identity (O'Neill, 2000:114-134).

The Flemish nationalism, although based on the idea of a common mother tongue, a theory explained in the paper, hasn't become strong until the economic. Slow economic development and the will to overcome this lender have occurred development of the region. We are dealing with an economic evolution of nationalism internally orientated where the effort of the Flemish to overcome a number of economic underdevelopment give nationalism a particular character sufficient to be in opposition to other more developed French speaking community. Yet there is hope! Keeping Belgium as a single state, even though not a unitary one is a sign that national identities, even though on the rise can find the resources to unite around a common political project, albeit on a federal basis. Also it reinforces the *role of political elites as the central figures in keeping a single state project* on the people's list while also they are a guarantee of the ongoing intercultural bargaining. Moreover *the role of the Parliament is increased as the main arena of dispute settlement.*

What also is of out most importance is the emergence of a new political actor that transcends these cleavages – meaning *the role of the European Union.* If in the particular case of Belgium being the host of the main EU institutions puts an extra-pressure on the peaceful solution of divergences there is also valid at the EU level the idea of subsidiarity as a way to calm ethnic disputes:

> The very logic of EU governance—the encouragement of subsidiarity, but not at the expense of administrative coherence and efficiency—is another positive influence binding the communal parties to mutual endeavour, here as elsewhere on a shrinking continent (O'Neill, 2000:133).

Belgium continues thus to be at the EU level a model of cultural diversity and a policy approach based on 'intercultural' topics. Living together while being different continues to function in Belgium as the linguistic communities continue to have a common stance on the larger issues as well on, what may be the most important, on day to day administrative issues that impact the good governance of local communities.

4.2 Similar developments in the European Union Member States. The Catalan case. The Belgian model that be extrapolated also to other situations in the European Union more precisely the Catalan case. We are having here a region with its own language who has known in the last decades a tremendous economic development due to outside investments. This instead fuelled an increase sense of self that lead to the recent independentist movements.

However, we are dealing with a different scenario here as Spain, unlike Belgium, is not a federal state. This made the push toward independence to be a drastic one, without having exhausted all the methods of internal negotiations and change. This also led to an increase pressure on behalf of the European structure who do not recognize separatist movements.

The Catalans where therefore forced to take a step back as their demands were deemed not reasonable by all the parties involved.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The nation is above all a social construct, an ingenious creation, a cultural construct combined with the traditions found on the territory National historical continuity is closely related to the

relationship between ethnicity and nationalism. The terms 'ethnic' and 'national' are interchangeable, not clearly identifying the ethnic groups of the nations. Ethnicity is a phenomenon of division within the nation, such as regionalism. Some theorists assimilate the 'ethnic' adjective with the 'national' adjective when it comes to border issues or is used interchangeably with the term 'culture'. The lack of precision or attention in terms of ethnic phenomena is consistent with the ambivalent debate of the relationship between nationalism and the past.

The existence of the nations is closely linked to the worldwide affirmation of nationalism, which has proved to be of great importance in the crystallization of a problem of individual consciousness, namely the ethnic identity that gave it political legitimacy and social audience.

However, the rise of nationalism in various states gives birth to different results due to the local specificities. Nationalism and the linguistic issued prove to be a powerful tool for change yet they cannot guarantee by themselves the future of a nation. The economic factor is also of outmost importance and their combination must be used wisely. Moreover we are dealing with the rise of a supranational identity, in slow motion, that of a European one, whose impact is not sufficiently studied on the question of national movements inside the European Union.

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