



REVIEW ESSAYS

Ethnic Politics and Multicultural Societies

REVIEW BY VEJAI BALASUBRAMANIAM

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

The Foundations of Ethnic Politics: Separatism of States and Nations in Eurasia and the World. By Henry E. Hale. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 278 pp., \$27.99 paperback (ISBN: 978-0-521-71920-9).

The Politics of Extremism in South Asia. By Deepa M. Ollapally. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 239 pp., \$31.99, paperback (ISBN-13: 978-0-521-69912-9).

Democracy and Human Rights in Multicultural Societies. Edited by Matthias Koenig and Paul de Guchteneire. UNESCO Publishing/Ashgate Publishing, 2007. 308 pp., \$49.95 paperback (ISBN: 978-0-7546-7030-8)/UNESCO (ISBN: 978-92-3104050-4).

Multiculturalism's primary concern is with ending discrimination based on ethnic and cultural differences, and in this respect is similar to movements for greater gender equality, recognizing gay rights, and the campaign to endorse same sex marriages/union. Immigration policies that facilitated the migration of peoples from Asia, Africa, and other non-European countries into the West had posed a political and social challenge to their liberal societies. That is, how are these new citizens, with distinct cultural features which are quite divergent from those of the native inhabitants, to be fully integrated into the polity? The solution, it was felt, lay in a policy of promoting and celebrating the different cultures such that they become an integral part of the national identity. Augmented into the economy, this policy of nondiscrimination of cultures and ethnicity ensured that overtime the class structure too came to reflect the nature of society. Some sort of proportional representation in the class structure that roughly reflected the ethnic demographic makeup of society emerged or at least was the ultimate aim. Once achieved, multiculturalism can drop from the scene, and multiculturalists pat themselves on the back for a job well done.

To be sure, it can be argued that multiculturalists have been successful in promoting and protecting the liberal image of the respective states, though it maybe wise to leave the champagne uncorked just yet. Recent political science literature such as Alain Gagnon and James Tully's (2001) *Multinational Democracies* is among other things absorbed with examining how strong ethnic identity consciousness can be coupled with strong identification with the nation-state. Neoliberalism's posture of ethnic and cultural nondiscrimination has, while strengthening ethnic and culture based identity, also seen such identification among migrant communities spilling over into support for violent and extremist political movements. The emergence of jihadist cells and support groups in Great Britain, Spain, the United States and Australia has to have jolted neoliberals from the quiet comfort that they may have contributed to a better life in their shores.

Of particular concern is the possibility that multiculturalism can lead to the emergence of ethnic politics and throw into the consternation of state affairs issues which could place society on an ethnic axis and even contribute to polarization. There is no suggestion that ethnic politics will lead to political instability, but a sense of alarm can certainly be discerned on how to deal with a phenomenon commonly identified as specific to the states of Asia and Africa. Thus, understanding or learning about the factors that can lead to ethnic politics has gained some saliency. The three books reviewed here are situated within the politics of neoliberalism from which multiculturalism draws its *raison d'être*. To achieve the multicultural aim without undermining commitment and identification with the nation-state, it is therefore necessary to highlight how, why, where and when the failure to promote multiculturalism's neoliberalism led to ethnic violence, irredentism and fissionary tendencies. All three books provide excellent insights into some of the challenges facing the nation-state in the world and the issues that would have to be grappled with if existing states are to achieve political stability and political conflict between states is to be prevented.

The Foundation of Ethnic Politics, Separatism of States, and Nations in Eurasia and the World by Henry Hale is concerned with describing ethnicity and ethnic politics. Ethnic politics is the political manifestation or form of ethnicity, and it would only emerge after ethnicity has become a factor. This book is an example of how hypotheses emerging from a solid theoretical argument can be successfully employed in the study and understanding of politics, which will benefit students of politics, sociology, and current affairs. Written in a clear and accessible manner, the socio-psychological theory of ethnicity that is the foundation of this work rests on the argument that ethnicity is a product of the drive to reduce uncertainty; uncertainty being when it is not possible to attach any probabilities to the various outcomes. And he suggests that when one is faced with uncertainty, one must find a way of reducing this uncertainty before any kind of purposive action is possible. Ethnicity is a mechanism by which people reduce uncertainty in their lives. With shared perceptions of common descent and culture lying at the heart of ethnicity, it can also serve as a means of dealing with and coping with uncertainty that is reduce its effect within predictable limits. Becoming ethnically conscious is therefore the result of a fear that is derived from uncertainty about the future, and since the nation-state is the political state form of the present world, ethnic politics is the means by which individuals seek to reduce uncertainty, making it more calculable.

It is possible to see globalization as a force that, among other things, contributes to economic and cultural uncertainty, as technology and communications contribute to perceptions that livelihoods and traditions are being threatened both from without by global capital and within by national governments seeking to make their economies more market friendly. As a product of the drive to reduce uncertainty, globalization in multiethnic and multinational states can lead to ethnic politics. Much depends of course on the manner by which the ruling elements in the state respond to mitigating the uncertainty felt by this or that section of the polity; but as the examples studied in this book show, the inability of ruling elites to correctly perceive ethnic politics for what it is has led to fissionary tendencies, irredentism, and political instability. The aim was no more than to address discrimination felt by minorities arising from the control of power by the majority ethnic group or feelings of threat among the majority upon observing how well placed certain minorities are to harness those themes of meritocracy, efficiency, and innovativeness drumbeated by globalization. Hence, just as globalization and modernization provide opportunities for the nation-state to increase its economic capacity and wealth, it is believed that by ensuring that ethnic groups in multicultural states are well represented in the different classes and levels of society, no group will feel it is left behind to

proliferate in the bottom rungs. In this way, the feelings of marginalization, the potential for violence, and the polarization inherent to ethnic politics can be handled.

Deepa Ollapally in *The Politics of Extremism in South Asia* approaches the subject of ethnic violence from the theme of international relations. All the chapters in this very well-written book also have the merit of being able to stand alone as a valuable contribution to the literature in international studies and political science. Hugging tightly to the thesis that the pursuance of a geopolitical identity can contribute to ethnic violence in multiethnic states, Ollapally also successfully shows that violence is not inherent to the societies she studies and more often are the handiwork of politicians. The bloody partition of British India along communal lines bore all the hallmarks of the colonial which, once realized with the creation of the state of Pakistan, also set the stage for mutual suspicion between it and India. The ensuing goal of asserting national independence by both countries led the states into war, which following India's victory was continued by proxy in Kashmir and also Afghanistan.

Pakistan's aim to destabilize India through the sponsorship of Kashmiri liberation to end Indian rule in the state, as well as to exert an influential role in Afghanistan, has led citizens in these two regions to be victims of violence following attempts by the Indian and present Afghan government to exert its political control in their respective territories. In Sri Lanka, the aim of the governing authorities to assert the state's geopolitical identity in particular vis-a-vis India in turn has heightened its approach toward the Tamil Tigers' political aspirations—for an independent homeland—for the country's ethnic Tamil citizens. Similarly, India's attempt to mediate between the Sri Lankan state and the Tamil community has also been opposed and rejected by the LTTE, leading to the assassination of Indian's then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi. Uncertainty on the part of state elites of each other's intentions—Pakistan with regard to India's ambitions in the region, Sri Lanka bent on securing its own particular geopolitical identity, India with regard to its original secular identity, and the concern in Afghanistan and Bangladesh with the geopolitical aims of its neighbors (Pakistan with regards to Afghanistan and India with regards to the latter)—have contributed to more political violence in the region resulting from the struggle between different and diverging identities within the respective countries. Thus Bangladesh, which once viewed India with admiration, has over time come to see it with aversion as a result of its concern over India's intentions in border regions such as Assam.

The point here is that this uncertainty gives rise to different forms of identity politics, with the potential for violence never very far away. One typical example is with how this uncertainty in Bangladesh can lead to the strengthening of religious identity and a politics founded on it. This in turn can promote a similar strengthening of Hindu identity in India, which can contribute to political violence in both countries as non-Muslims, for example, become targets of political organizations in Bangladesh when communal violence or tensions are heightened in India. Again the analysis shows how in multiethnic states uncertainty can lead to political instability as ethnic and communal groups seeking to cope with that uncertainty can be construed as intending to undermine the state and its geopolitical identity. It is therefore possible to understand (if not accept) how the Sri Lankan state could see the demands of the Tamil Tigers as undermining the geopolitical identity of the state and thereby legitimizing military action of the kind which subjected its own citizens to violence. The interesting theme that emerges from the argument is that ethnic politics is a means to an end and a phenomenon that can be expected to become more important as an aspect of politics within globalization, yet, the reverse can also be the case.

Matthias Koenig and Paul de Guchteneire in *Democracy and Human Rights in Multicultural Societies* successfully brought together an international body of

scholars studying the dynamics of politics in those parts of the world with large ethnic minorities who also have a clearly identifiable homeland. The contributors' main concern is to show how the governing authorities in selected multiethnic states have dealt with the challenges from a particular ethnic community and also to make suggestions on how to best meet ethnically derived demands. All the chapters are excellent, very informative in content, and illuminate how discrimination in Northern Ireland, Spain in the Basque region, and Turkey with respect to the Kurds have contributed to violent nationalism and threatened the state. It will therefore be useful for all students of politics and current affairs as well as to the nonspecialist interested in making sense on the turbulent politics of the present-day world.

Operating within the context of the nation-state, ethnicity and ethnic politics are the consequence of nationalism. It therefore does not automatically follow that strong ethnic identity consciousness and ethnic politics imply weak commitment to the nation-state or toward nationalism. Instead, where is that sense of nationalism directed toward—the existing nation-state or for an aspired one? But the relational effect between ethnicity, ethnic politics and the nation-state does not tell us anything about ethnicity and ethnic politics. Like Hale and Ollapally, the suggestion is that the key to political stability in multicultural societies lies in ending discrimination, ensuring that the different ethnic and communal groups are well if not quite equally represented. This neoliberal contention that ending discrimination (in this case, discrimination based on ethnic and cultural differences) will promote political stability and strong identification with the nation-state may indeed be insufficient.

The recent military offensive by government forces in the north of Sri Lanka—a region known as Eelam—demonstrates the extent to which violence can be perpetrated by the ruling authorities in a democratic state against its citizens. How can such state-sanctioned violence in the twenty-first century be understood? If the idea of citizenship entitles the citizen to protection from violence from whence does such state-sponsored violence derive its legitimacy? Ostensibly, the Sri Lanka military offensive had been to rid the country of the Tamil Tigers—an armed political movement whose goal had been to end discrimination against ethnic Tamils. Over time the LTTE became a politico-military organization whose goal of establishing an independent homeland at Eelam, where the majority of inhabitants are ethnic Tamils, gained prominence. To understand the military violence resulting from the war, it is necessary to understand the meaning and significance that ethnic identity and ethnic politics can have in the present-day world, particularly in view of the fact that most nation-states are multiethnic and multinational. Ethnic identity to be sure is one of the ways by which an individual perceives herself or himself, and this in itself does not lead to violence. But the fact that it is a resource that can be tapped by politicians does suggest that it has much deeper roots in the human psyche to function as a mechanism to check uncertainty. Ethnicity, much like the gamut of themes that constitute human values, has to have had a painful and bloody past in order for it to become embedded in the psyche such that it can be readily tapped and mobilized. Nietzsche (1967) best captured the process by which morals become part of society in three essays that constitute his *Genealogy of Morals*. And it is arguable a similar process that must have come to prevail in the case of ethnicity.

The experience of ethnic politics in Malaysia demonstrates that ethnic politics does not necessarily lead to violence, political or economic instability. But understanding why it arises and is strengthening is also the recipe to having it properly managed so that it does not undermine commitment to the nation-state. Simply having greater representation of minorities in the different levels of society will not address some of the more fundamental contradictions of capitalist development and globalization. It will certainly increase the proportion of individuals of

different cultural groups in the different class, but greater proportional representation is not synonymous with equality. The BN or National Front, which is a coalition of ethnic-based political parties, has been in power in Malaysia since its formation in 1971. However, as modernization picked up momentum and the country experienced strong growth, the market-friendly nature of the economy successfully integrated it into global networks of capital and trade, leading to the increasing unpopularity of ethnic politics. Thus, the BN has overtime begun to lose popular support and in its stead a broad-based coalition of nonethnic parties grouped under the banner of *Pakatan* a more popular. This suggests that politics in a multicultural polity does not lead to ethnic politics, nor is it the only means by which individuals seek to reduce uncertainty.

The challenge for multicultural states is therefore not in the implementation of multiculturalism whose aim is centered on finding ways to celebrate and promote cultural diversity. The neoliberal political discourse to end discrimination of different cultures and discrimination based on ethnic and cultural differences, which forms the basis of its ideology, assumes that by ending discrimination it is possible to strengthen identification with the nation-state and avoid the divisiveness of ethnic politics. The neoliberal ideology as is well known is not about seeking greater material equality between peoples and accordingly is not concerned with inequality, equal representation being its main concern. Globalization has also seen the Gini coefficient in many states rising, signaling greater inequality between the rich-haves while the poor have-nots find it harder to make ends meet. In a multicultural state, this cannot be expected to strengthen commitment and identification with the nation-state. Equal representation resulting from ending ethnic and cultural discrimination can help to transform the ethnic profile of the class structure but it will not address inequality. It is all too easy for politicians to mobilize ethnicity among either the majority or minority communities for their own political agendas and through it contribute to social instability.

The example of Malaysia shows that ensuring the cabinet is well represented by individuals from the different communities, that ethnic and cultural practices are equally protected, respected and even promoted, and that endeavoring to ensure through public policy that the occupational structure is not ethnically defined is *not* a recipe which when adopted will allow state elites to hold up their hands and say that they have done their job. To the contrary, as greater proportional representation does not suggest equality, which is essentially a class issue now brought to stark relief by globalization, it is managing and promoting equality while reducing inequality that is urgent in most countries. Taking care of the cultural dimension of the ramification of globalization will not suffice; rather it is finding ways to address inequality which will strengthen the commitment to the nation-state and contribute to political stability.

But this is outside the neoliberal ideology, which is to end discrimination. In this regard, the politics of ending discrimination based on cultural and ethnic differences is not progressive; and in so far as it does not address inequality—leaving it to the market—a more progressively grounded one is urgently necessary. When multiculturalism is able to make this leap, the gorgeous Tatlinger can be taken out of the chiller and popped.

References

- GAGNON, ALAIN G., AND JAMES TULLY, Eds. (2001) *Multinational Democracies*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- NIETZSCHE, FRIEDRICH, (1967) *Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. New York, NY: Random House, Inc.