

# AUTONOMY: PRESENT AND PAST

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GYÖRGY SCHÖPFLIN

## Autonomy, Demos and Ethnos<sup>\*</sup>

There are various perspectives from which one can argue a claim for ethnic autonomy. These include regionalism, local government, community and communitarianism, subsidiarity and human rights. In this paper, however, the starting point will be the polarity of demos and ethnos, demos being the foundation of citizenship in modern democratic systems. At first sight, this may sound paradoxical, given that current theory strongly stigmatises ethnos and argues that it has nothing whatever to do with democracy. In sociological reality, however, ethnos exists but is screened out – the consent to be governed is culturally coded and that cultural coding maps onto ethnicity.

Citizenship theory begins from the proposition that all members of a political community or polity have equal rights and equal access to political power. Hence the rulers are under an obligation to promote such access, without which the continuous inputs of consent needed for democratic government do not take place. In practice, much of this consent is assumed or attributed, but neither the assumption nor the attribution is necessarily robust. The attribution owes its origins to one of the most deeply held beliefs of our time, namely the sacrosanct nature of the state. Those who are citizens of a state are automatically assumed to have consented to this status, whether that consent is there or not. There is the deepest possible reluctance to question this proposition. The consequence is that the state, which is a product of history and power like any other political formation, is invested with transcendental, supra-temporal qualities which allow it to evade questions about state legitimacy. States as they exist are assumed to have reached their final form. Yet from the perspective of citizenship, the questioning is valid; it is

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equally valid, incidentally, from the perspective of the Enlightenment legacy, which denies the existence of privileged knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

*Interrogating the modern state*

Thus questioning – interrogating – the modern democratic state should be the proper starting point for all analyses of minority regulation and the nature of autonomy. In effect, the purpose of minority regulation is to ensure that the members of a minority enjoy the same civic rights as members of the majority; above all that they are secure in their cultural reproduction on terms that are equal to those of majority and, at the same time, that they have equal access to the material and symbolic goods of the state. This applies only to the modern democratic state; non-democratic states are something else.

The core of the problem is that observing minority rights on these terms necessarily means that the minority will demand certain cultural goods that the majority will regard as undesirable or offensive or deviant or excessive, but under the norms of self-limitation it must accede to those demands, meaning that majority-minority relations become a matter of both democratic theory and of state design. While minority demands cannot go beyond the limits of citizenship, those limits must be designed with inputs from both majority and minority. In other words the very definition of citizenship must be reached in such a way as to satisfy the minority as well as the majority. That is a minimum requirement of democratic consent. However, very few majorities see it that way and consciously and even more unconsciously they will impose their own majority perspectives and declare them to be those of citizenship.

At the heart of this problematic, therefore, is the difficulty that the discourses of ethnos and demos are in conflict. For most, the discourse of demos has been sacralised around the state and the state is perceived as the repository of values that are morally superior to those of ethnos. What is heavily screened out in this process, on the other hand, is that these discourses are every bit as contingent as any other and that far from demos, as defined by the majority, being the sole possible repository of civic norms, it readily defaults into ethnic hegemony veiled as civic discourse. From this point of view, the minority loses on both the swings and the roundabouts. Indeed, given that the definitions of civic norms have become the preserve of the majority, it finds that its very discourses of self and identity come to be de-

<sup>1</sup> Gellner, Ernest: *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983. Israel, Jonathan I.: *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

fined by the majority in the name of a non-existent civic neutrality. The outcome is a homogenisation that presses heavily on minorities.

The matter is further exacerbated by the continued role of class, albeit it is much less salient now than before 1989. This tacitly assumes a single, transcendental concept of equality in terms of class and expects minorities to conform to this vision, though without having made a significant input itself. In this context, the European left logically finds itself unable to accept any serious ethnic division within the demos, when that cleavage has political power attached to it. It argues in favour of equality, hides that this equality is solely to do with class and prefers to eliminate ethnic inequality by a civic integration that is hard to distinguish from assimilation.

### *Multi-culturalism*

The multi-culturalism favoured by the Anglo-Saxon mainsteam is very largely folkloric and decorative; it does not tolerate genuine cultural diversity if that means living with differences of language and culture. The French Jacobin tradition ends up in the same position, but does so more openly. In effect it argues that in exchange for access to the full civic rights provided by the French state, all must accept the normativity of French cultural discourses, because these are in no way ethnic but civic, civic by the definitions given it by the French majority that has constructed its identity into a self-attributed citizenship. In sociological reality it is as ethnic as any other ethnic collectivity. It is an ethnicity with an army, a navy and a state.

Inter-ethnic relations are generally characterised by far-reaching mutual ignorance – at best, there are recognisable instruments for dealing with the ethnic other, but there is no depth of knowledge of the complex cultural norms of the other group. This has all sorts of consequences. We spend a good deal of our time trying to understand the motivations of others within our group, and these change anyway over time. It is immeasurably more difficult to read these motivations when we are dealing with groups that we know only superficially. The outcome is that majorities will impose a reading on the motivations of the minority and anchor it, because there are always limits to fluidity.<sup>2</sup> At worst, the majority will create its own cognitive model of the minority and constrain it to live by it, regardless of its own aspirations. Further, members of a majority who celebrate the “richness” of multi-cultural

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<sup>2</sup> Augoustinos, Martha and Iain Walker: *Social Cognitions: an Integrated Introduction*. London: Sage, 1995.

life, tend to do so without understanding the damage they may be doing, through ignorance, to the cultural norms of the minority.

Those who preach the virtues of multi-culturalism have probably never actually had to live with the daily complexity of being in a multi-cultural situation, with the sheer stress of constant negotiation, especially when they are the minority, of having forever to adjust to the implicit demands of the majority.

### *Deconstructing demos*

Demos, therefore, must be fully deconstructed if we are to make sense of minority regulation and claims for autonomy. In its essence, demos is a mythic narrative, the master narrative of the democratic state. The demos, then, is the agent and bearer of the democratic values that define democracy – the narrative of popular sovereignty is about this – and, by and large, the current, contingent definitions of demos may not be questioned. In sociological reality this narrative assumes a strong correspondence of state, society and culture, one that is homogeneous and divided primarily by “interests” that are preferably economic – preferably because these are much easier to negotiate and satisfy.

The definitions of demos are firmly structured by the proposition that it automatically and necessarily excludes anything to do with ethnos. Indeed, the two are seen as mutually exclusive, if anything, as two wholly antagonistic concepts, one of them invested with virtue and the other with vice. It constitutes a classic polarity of good and evil, and it is mythicised so that the polarity is understood as self-evident. Why this antagonism to ethnicity, which after all is seen as positive in certain circumstances, like the ethnicity of immigrant groups?

Basically, ethnicity and ethnos are demonised because they accept the legitimacy of particularism and thereby fly in the face of the universalism that the hegemonic cultural powers project to the rest of the world. While ethnos as the constitutive web of meanings of the “civic” majority is screened out as long as it is confined to one state, an ethnic minority with its own claim to political power and cultural reproduction makes this screening out evident and thereby erodes the mythic narrative.

What these narratives ignore, however, are the real-time and real-world ethnic divisions within demos-driven definitions of democracy in the West. The ethnicity of immigrant groups is marginal, because the hegemonic majority seeks to define and redefine these identities on its own terms, make them folkloric, temporary and thereby open to being absorbed. Once the

proposition of the autonomy of cultural reproduction is accepted, however, these ethnoi must be dealt with as collective political actors and producers of moral worth.

Another approach favoured by the protagonists of civic discursivity is to begin from the stability of the modern state as the sole or overriding condition for democracy, as the guarantee of civil society. This approach cannot conceive of cultural, let alone territorial, autonomy at all. Citizenship is again equated with cultural homogeneity and the idea that some citizens may seek to underpin their cultural difference by demanding the political power that is attributed to autonomy is deemed unacceptable. The mythic narrative of the civic contract effectively excludes cultural autonomy.

### *The civic contract*

Let it be added here that the civic contract, for all its virtues, is nothing more, nothing less than a mythic narrative. It is the ruling metaphor of the relationship between the individual and the state and implies a reciprocal relationship, one in which the individual is free within the law to acquire and practise agency. The reality is quite different, as anyone who looks at a modern society knows full well. The modern state has created and sustains a wide range of dependencies, excludes much of the population from access to discourse creation, relies on the impersonal and authoritative language of the modern bureaucracy for example, and bases its stability on the passivity of public opinion. Thus the civic contract is a convenient metaphor, but it is not a contract between two equal negotiating partners as defined by jurisprudence.

The pure demos model, which does not of course exist in the real world and exists only as a theoretical proposition, regards ethnicity as something akin to religion, a matter of individual conscience and the practice of the private sphere, with very few or no consequences for the public sphere and thus political power. The existence of provision for minority languages (if there must be such provision), in this purist view, is of no consequence for the theory and cannot have a wider significance. Not least, it is tacitly understood as of passing value, a concession that may be withdrawn by the majority, although we know that this is politically an impossibility. In this one respect, the pure demos model resembles Lenin's "national in form, socialist in content", basically implying that all cultures are alike, that some passing provision may be made for them, but are a transient phenomenon, because there exists a superior transcendental rationality that will eventually bring about a single universal world.

The pure demos model, then, assumes a world where all individual members of the demos are politically, and thus in all other respects equal and are without different cultural norms. This is the classic liberal and for that matter Marxist position, represented by both Mill and Marx. What this classic position could never cope with intellectually is what happens when a group of individual citizens combines voluntarily and insists that their association be recognised by the majority membership of the demos as having political consequences. The combination of individuals in trade unions was originally dealt with as a restraint in trade and punished, but where economic association is concerned, this is accepted, though such combinations are extensively regulated. The rights attaching to gender identity notionally contradict liberal individualism, but the contradiction is screened out and gender identity, together with the perpetual collective association that this generates, is thereby integrated into liberal democracy.

In this context, however, there is an argument to be made that members of ethnic minorities are in a real sociological sense making a voluntary choice in maintaining their ethnic identities. Historic minorities in Europe, with only one or two exceptions like the Roma, have very little difficulty in opting for assimilation – indeed, this is generally what the majority would prefer. In the event that they do not, they are for all practical purposes participating in a daily plebiscite, a la Renan, by effectively affirming their continued membership of the minority. From this perspective, ethnic minority membership has all the qualities attributed to voluntary associations and should logically be treated in the same fashion for citizenship purposes. This possibility of assimilation is what makes historic minorities different in quality from Third World immigrants, who – set apart as they generally are by phenotypical difference – lack the option to assimilate.

### *Ethnos and state design*

If we look again at this set of interlocking problems of demos and ethnos, of equality and citizenship, of majority and minority from a different perspective, we can see that the dominant demos-driven Western position is contingent, is as much the product of historical conditions as any other and can then be properly contextualised. The supporters of the Western position naturally include those in the post-communist world who accept the currently fashionable discourses of the West without further questioning. The new perspective suggested here is that of sociological reality, a category that is readily taken from Durkheim's social fact, viz. a set of propositions that a particular

group accepts as real, lives as its everyday experience and makes it its lifeworld.<sup>3</sup>

The significance of this starting point is that it accepts cultural coding, and therefore, also accepts cultural differentiation as a normal part of human existence and does not impel one towards the major social engineering projects needed to make people conform to universalistic ideals. The second significance of accepting cultural coding is that it allows one to make a methodological leap, one that will certainly be regarded as scandalous by universalists, namely to approach the entire problematic from the opposite polarity, that of ethnos.

Hence if we make ethnos and the imperative of cultural reproduction, the base-line, the entire question of state design and minority rights looks different. If ethnos has equality with demos, let alone primacy over demos, the state must function in such a way as to secure equal access by all individuals to power and recognise simultaneously that individuals are not culturally naked, but belong to collectivities that they wish to preserve, maintain and foster. Hence, further, such groups will make demands on the democratic state as its citizens to provide sufficient access to the material and symbolic goods of the state to ensure that cultural equality is recognised and promoted.

The implications for state design are that the state must encode a cultural neutrality in its working and, second, that there must a redistribution, almost certainly a continuous redistribution, of cultural goods by the majority to the minority and, presumably, from the minority to the majority where appropriate. The proposition of neutrality means that the state must accept that all cultural coding of the various ethnic groups in the state has equal status and parity of esteem. This obviously means equality of all languages, at the symbolic as well as the practical level.

However, the importance of self-limitation on the part of all groups is vital here and it is possible to envisage practices by a minority that the majority finds intolerable – polygamy or polyandry would be an example. The negotiation of difference, however, is best attained through political representation, implying that a minority has to have a political, as well as a cultural, profile and institutions. Without institutions, the minority will basically be in a permanent downstream position and reliant on majority goodwill. This can never be guaranteed; hence the pursuit of minority objectives is necessarily the outcome of a political contest. The abstract rules of citizenship are not

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<sup>3</sup> Durkheim, Emile: *The Rules of Sociological Method*. London: Macmillan, 1982.

a substitute, for they are – as we have seen – permeated by the cultural norms of the majority.

So, let us suppose that in designing the state and citizenship, we make ethnos the starting point. Logically, then, the state must function in such a way as to secure the cultural reproduction of all the ethnoi who have citizenship, rather than try to homogenise them into a majority-driven set of civic norms that claim (falsely) that these norms are the universal norms of humanity etc. The universalists, who deny that their norms are contingent, basically insist that a design of this kind undermines civic equality.

What they cannot deal with, however, is the problem – already mentioned – of groups of individuals who claim metaphorically that their ethnic identity is the result of a voluntary association. This proposition is simply denied or shouted down by the liberal universalists, who cannot believe, and this is a matter of faith not of reasoning, that individuals could associate voluntarily in this way. They counter-argue that minority ethnic identity is some kind of a cage that denies individual choice, refusing to accept that it may actually be the basis of agency.

There is, all the same, a further complication in all this, one that erodes the claims of the universalists even further – the dilemma of what to do with the identities of Third World migrants in Europe. Whereas the classical model was more or less overtly assimilationist, Third World migrants would not be or should not be or could not be put into this category. This is where the current model of multi-culturalism had its origins, in answer to the question, why not? The conventional answer is something along the lines of respect for the human rights of the immigrants and the need to promote superior routes to integration by allowing them to retain their cultures of origin. That, in pure form, is rubbish, indeed specious and hypocritical rubbish. The countries receiving Third World migrants would under no circumstances let them retain and reproduce their original cultures in toto (i.e. including their languages and ways of life), but only selected, politically not very sensitive parts of their cultures. But, and this has been the hypocrisy, it would be the majority that would choose what parts of the original cultures could be retained, not the immigrants themselves. Equally, they had to retain some of it; they did not have the choice over whether they might assimilate or not.

The escape hatch used by multi-culturalists, therefore, has been to muddy the pure ethnos model when dealing with Third World immigrants and to permit some derogation from homogeneity, while pretending that citi-

zanship remained unaffected. On the other hand, this has left them open to a charge of inconsistency, which they have simply shrugged off as immaterial. So what we are left with is an uneasy compromise, with some recognition of cultural difference for some, but not others and a firm rejection of political power derived from and based on cultural difference, i.e. collective rights, as that would threaten the privileged cultural primacy of those whose norms dominate the civic state.

### *Two models of autonomy*

Against this background, we can identify two models of autonomy, though only one is regarded as suitable for export to the post-communist world (are we seeing a kind of cultural Cocom list here?). The hegemonic model emphasises civic homogeneity dressed up as civic equality, based on the idea of a single demos (one state, one demos), with individual rights enjoying primacy, but no collective political rights. In this model, ethnic minority rights are left to the goodwill, democratic conscience and commitment to self-limitation on the part of the majority, unless, that is, violence erupts. In essence, the West has taken the view as far as ethnic minorities in the post-communist world are concerned, that the full implementation of civic norms will provide any minority with the resources that it needs. Multi-ethnic, multi-lingual solutions with political power attached are frowned on. If they are linked to territory, they are prohibited.

In effect, the proposition is that there must be no linkage between culture and political power. Finally, in this context, where there solutions to ethnic question based on the granting of political autonomy, like Catalonia, Wales, the Aalands or South Tyrol, these are absolutely not for export and may not even be used as a basis of demands for autonomy. They are veiled as ad hoc solutions and not a part of the universal norms that the West is exporting to post-communist Europe. A final piece in the mosaic is the assumption that post-communist states, above all those of Central Europe which are accepted as potential members of the EU, already fulfil the necessary civic duty of making provision for their ethnic minorities. This assumption may not be probed; attempts to do so are dismissed as ethnic agitation and thus as illegitimate. It is worth noting the static quality of this assumption-set. Ethnic rights, where granted, are tacitly interpreted as a single event, that once established, minorities should be satisfied with what they gained. There is no sense of a dynamic here, of change or that the modern democratic state requires growing inputs of consent by minorities.

Hence in looking for strategies to found demands for autonomy for ethnic minorities, we can identify two models – one that begins from demos and the other from ethnos. *Prima facie*, starting from demos appears to deny any claim to ethnic minority rights, given that it seeks to deny and minimise ethnic difference and that it insists on equal access by all to the goods of the state. But one can take the logic of demos a stage further and argue that if all citizens should enjoy access to the goods of the state, then that state must accede to the demands of all those who constitute themselves into a voluntary association.

The implication of this is that civic multi-culturalism requires a multi-cultural presence throughout the territory of the state, seeing that territorially separate sub-state units are prohibited. The consequences of this would be wholly unacceptable to post-communist ethnic majorities, implying as it does that ethnic minority rights could be exercised everywhere within the boundaries of the state. This is politically inconceivable currently, but is the logical consequence of the demos route. Once the logic of the demos position is made clear, however, it becomes possible to transform it into a political programme.

The second option, the ethnos model with different demoi, is completely off the agenda at this time. No state will introduce this model voluntarily and there will be no Western pressure in that direction. The best use that can be made of it in the post-communist world is to use it as a point of reference, to demonstrate that there are in reality two broad Western models, each with its own legitimacy and validity. The Anglo-Saxon argument that the recognition of ethnic difference results in “divisiveness” is, therefore, shown to be motivated by an attempt to entrench the privileged position of English narratives. An ethnos-driven state design is perfectly viable if the conditions of consociationalism are present and respected.

### *Hungarian dilemmas*

Clarification of these models does, however, have a direct political consequence. By demonstrating the only options open to a democratic state that has assumed the full set of civic obligations, it can be used as the starting for a new strategy towards kin groups, obviously with Hungary as a principal actor. The strategy embodied in the Status Law has been effectively declared a failure. By incorporating a measure of extraterritoriality into its foreign policy strategy and basing this on ethnic rights, the Hungarian state forced the West to confront

its own ethnic quality, but rather than do so, it preferred to hide behind a civic veil and supported a far-reaching dilution of the Status law.

The strategy need not end there, however. In effect, the Hungarian state should take the obligations of citizenship and civic norms at face value and should hold the states where Hungarian minority societies live responsible for the fulfilment of these obligations. Complete civic rights in which all individuals enjoy full equality regardless of their ethnicity necessarily requires the states in question both to make full and equal provision for the ethnic Hungarian minorities, living as Hungarians of their own free will, that is, they must be able to live on exactly the same terms as members of ethnic majorities and at the same time to enjoy the material and symbolic goods of the state in exactly the same way as the majority. This means providing full language and cultural rights wherever the state is active, which is pretty much everywhere within the state territory. Only in this way can members of the minority have the capacity to participate as fully equal members of the demos. In effect, demos no longer has to mean homogenisation, but can be argued in such a way as to provide for co-equality.

There is a further dimension to the kin state-kin minority relationship of which the former tends to be unaware. In a very real sense the kin majority tends to be quite unaware of the real-time sociological and cultural problems faced by the kin minority. At the heart of this is that kin minorities, unlike minorities without a kin state, are in a twofold minority status. They are treated as a minority by the home state majority and in parallel though with different repercussions by the home state majority. The home state majority has interests and perspectives of its own, often at considerable variance from those of the minority. Crucially, for the minority its cultural reproduction must be its primary, overriding concern, something that kin state majorities seldom face. Because kin states possess considerable cultural and political prestige, they are inclined to see kin state minorities as an extension of themselves, as having similar or identical interests, though maybe in microcosm.

Majorities, it cannot be stressed too often, can never fully read the entire range of minority issues and inadvertently, not consciously will treat the kin minority as just that, as a minority. Note too that in English the word “minority” and the French “minorité” have two meanings – a group of people smaller in number in relation to another and, simultaneously, a child, someone who has not yet attained to adult status. The danger is that kin majorities unwittingly reproduce this adult-child relationship when dealing with kin minorities and infantilise them.

If the kin majority's involvement with a kin minority has any legitimacy, it is to do with the proposition that the majority acts to make provision for the agency that the kin minority would not otherwise have. Furthermore, the kin state should assume some of the burdens that result from minority status, above all that because the first priority of the minority must be self-reproduction, it finds that articulating its complexity, its own diversity is doubly if not actually triply hampered. It is impeded by its dependence on the will of the ethnic majority the narratives of which leave little room for minority interests; by the interests of the kin state majority; and by the consequent narrow spectrum of options that the political representation of the minority finds itself with. All three cases can be understood as forms of dependence and if autonomy is about anything, it is about finding the institutional and cultural framework that allows those affected the optimum choice and agency.