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ARE REGIONAL STEREOTYPES ETHNIC?

This essay looks at a phenomenon most of us would probably not classify as „ethnic“ and asks why we would not so classify it, even though in many respects it fits that label. The phenomenon is the widespread attribution of regional stereotypes within a single society – in this example, Romania. The stereotypes define persons coming from different regions as very different from each other: as having different customs, different foods, different personality types, different dialects or patterns of speech. Under many circumstances, differences in custom, in character, and in speech would qualify as ethnic differences. Why do they appear not to, in the case of regional stereotypes? What do regional stereotypes have in common with ethnicity, and what distinguishes them from it? The answer to this question may seem obvious, but I am not certain that it is. I ask it in order to cast light upon the way we analyze ethnicity – what kinds of things go into our classifying a phenomenon as ethnic? Ethnicity is not, after all, a „real“ category but an analytic one. It is we, more than our respondents, who call something „ethnic.“

The regions that appear in Romanian stereotypes are the three major historical regions of contemporary Romania, each of which had some degree of political autonomy in earlier times: Transylvania, Moldavia, and the southern region, mostly referred to now as Oltenia. Each region contains an ethnically mixed population, a majority of Romanians co-residing with Germans, Hungarians, Turks, Bulgarians, Gypsies, Serbs, and others.

The stereotypes of the different regions arise in many settings, such as in casual conversation within families, and at parties including outsiders like myself. My examples come largely from Transylvania, where I have spent most of my time, and this means that my examples focus on the contrast between Transylvania and Oltenia, with little said about Moldavia. Exposure to the other two regions convinces me, however, that reference to these stereotypes is very common there as well, although with different values assigned to the images that are used, as will be clear below.

One of the most common ways in which the stereotypes arise is in the form of jokes, such as the following:

- 1) An Oltenian visitor to Transylvania loses his way and stops a local peasant for

- directions: „Is this the road to Arad?“ The Transylvanian thinks for a long time with great concentration, then replies, „No, it's the road *from* Arad.“
- 2) The same themes of slowness and dullwittedness show up in a joke pairing Transylvanians with Oltenians (and told to me in Moldavia). An Oltenian goes to a doctor to ask for an operation on his brain, complaining that it is too full of ideas and it races too fast; he wants it calmed down a bit. The doctor takes a large chunk out of his brain, sews him up, and when the man regains consciousness, asks him how he feels. The Oltenian replies, in a thick Transylvanian accent, „Just fine.“
 - 3) A Transylvanian and an Oltenian are in prison, awaiting execution. The fateful day comes, and the gibbet is erected next to a river. The Transylvanian is strung up first, but the knot in the rope is tied too loosely, and he slips out, leaps into the river, and swims away. The Oltenian pleads with the executioner, „This time please tie it more tightly, because I can't swim.“ (This is the Transylvanian version; I heard this same joke told in Oltenia, where the Oltenian was the one who got away.)

These kinds of jokes are of basically the same genre as a large set of jokes in which *Romanian* identity is juxtaposed with – and clarified against – the identities of other nationalities. These jokes (and they are not peculiar to Romania) have a standard form: a Romanian, a German and a Frenchman, or a Romanian, an American, and a Russian. Both „regional“ jokes and „national“ jokes put the problem of identity on the stage and rehearse the images appropriate to it. Both kinds of jokes are, I suggest, „ethnic,“ in the sense that they project a world divided up into different kinds of „people“ whose characteristics are thought to be of real significance and who must be clearly set apart.

Jokes present ethnic stereotypes in their most compact form, but such stereotypes often arise in ordinary conversation. For example, some close friends of mine, a couple in a village in which I worked, had a lengthy quarrel in my presence. The wife was complaining to her husband that he never took her side against their married son, while the husband argued that parents should stay out of their children's affairs. After much dispute, the husband turned to me and said, „The problem is really that she doesn't get along with her daughter-in-law,“ the wife interrupting to affirm, „I've always treated her well, never given her a single reason to complain, yet all I have to do is mention the world 'Oltenian' and my son assumes that I hate his wife.“

What struck me in this scene was that the wife's invocation of „Oltenians“ appeared to have no place in the domestic matters being argued, yet it was clearly central. The wife's problems with her daughter-in-law (born in Oltenia) were very often phrased in terms of the defects of Oltenians. The regional contrast seemed to have become the idiom for expressing domestic conflict in this family, and the reason why was clear enough: the wife wanted, in some fundamental way, to exclude or expel her daughter-in-law from the household by identifying her as NOT LIKE US, as DIFFERENT and therefore not *of* us. She wanted her son to herself – and expressed this as wanting more or less to keep the family Transylvanian. In her desire to eliminate this interloper from the family hearth, she found the handiest device to be a regional stereotype that made the daughter-in-law into an Other. This is a very common procedure in *ethnic* encounters, all over the world.

Numerous other persons commented to me about Oltenians and Oltenia in a

stereotypic and judgmental way. For example, I had a number of exchanges in which Transylvanian professors described job opportunities in Bucuresti, which they invariably turned down, saying things like „We Transylvanians don't much like Bucuresti. The people there are introverted, byzantine. We don't feel at ease among them.“ or „The people there have such a rapid tempo, such floods of talk! We're more even-tempered, slower, calmer. Oltenians will quarrel furiously for an hour and then suddenly kiss and go off arm in arm; they're so unpredictable.“ Transylvanians see themselves as deeper, more reserved, and more rational; they see Oltenians as more superficial, impulsive, and emotional. Once, towards the end of a ceremonial dinner in Transylvania, an Oltenian visitor grew misty-eyed and said, „At times like this I am deeply moved“; the others responded with cries of „Balkans! Balkans!“ At a dinner party, an Oltenian married to a Transylvanian kept referring to her husband as „that German of mine“ — even though he too is Romanian — and describing his orderliness, his dedication to learning and culture, and his cautious nature, all of which she contrasted with her own impetuous, unruly, adventuresome style. These are only a few of a large number of encounters in which regional stereotypes were expressed to me or, in my company, to others.

As with the jokes, these spontaneous comments are often inconsistent in the image they present of the different regions. That is, the same joke may be told by Oltenians and Transylvanians, shifting only the role of „hero“ and retaining the stereotypes intact, as with the joke about the quick-witted swimmer who escaped hanging. Again, the woman in the couple whose family quarrel I recounted used an uncharacteristic stereotype of Oltenians as cold, distant, like Germans, unfriendly and inhospitable. It is far more common for Transylvanians to present Oltenians as *hot* rather than *cold*. But what is more important than consistency of the images is the impulse to *draw a boundary* distinguishing between two *kinds of people* — the basic move in all systems of ethnic interaction: a division into „we“ and „they.“

This observation suggests that both regional stereotypes and ethnic identities form subsets of processes in which general *social* identities are negotiated and assigned, through moves that create solidarity and exclusion. What makes analysts view one set of such moves as „ethnic“ and not another?

One answer might be that in the existing literature on ethnicity, ethnic differences are usually associated with differential access to some kind of scarce resource, or with patterned relations of groups to resources that are differentially distributed, sometimes but not always in a discriminatory way. The classic illustration of this is Fredrik Barth's famous paper on ethnic relations in Pakistan (Barth 1956), where each of three ecologically distinct zones has its distinctive ethnic adaptation. It might be argued that regional stereotypes do not seem to conform to such a pattern, and when they do, we get an ethno-regional movement such as the ones in Scotland and Brittany. I would disagree: I suspect that Romanian regional stereotypes are very much tied to systematic differences in how each region is incorporated into the Romanian state, differences that have existed in one form or another since the regions were joined into a single state (1859 and 1918/20). The national division of labor by regions after World War I could be grossly characterized as follows: industrial production — largely Transylvania; intellectual and cultural production — largely Moldavia; political control — largely Oltenia. (Obviously, all these activities were distributed in all three regions; I am talking about modal tendencies, not absolutes.) The difference between Transylvania

and Oltenia is not unlike that between, say, Catalonia and Castile, in Spain (and *those* differences are clearly seen as ethnic).

This regional specialization still obtains, to some extent, the importance of southern predominance in politics having become even greater with highly centralized Party rule than it was under the so-called democratic politics of the 1920s and 30s. Out in the provinces, regional stereotypes are, among other things, intentionally centrifugal: they protest the domination of Bucharest. I have a totally unsupported and untestable hunch that regional stereotypes are generated disproportionately in the provinces, rather than the capital, and that they constitute an insistent reminder that Romania is NOT all just one big Bucharest. Many of the jokes I hear in Transylvania that present Transylvanians as laconic or slow-witted are recounted with pleasure, the sort of pleasure that accompanies setting oneself off from a place one doesn't approve of. It is a source of positive pride to be of few words in a country dominated by an Oltenian politics so *full* of words, words many Transylvanians find meaningless.

All of this is meant to suggest that the ecological differences characteristic of many ethnic systems also exist with distinctive regions, associating each of them with disparities in advantage and differences in socio-economic niche as is often the case with ethnic differences. The regional stereotypes are also associated with and reflect earlier political statuses and allegiance, just as we find with many ethnic identities. Finally, the regional identifications I have been describing are, like ethnic identities, part of an ideological system in which the world is understood as fundamentally divided up into different kinds of „people“ having different sorts of characteristics. So if regional and ethnic identities share all this, why do we distinguish them?

In the case I have been describing, perhaps the obvious answer is that despite recognizable distinctions in lexicon and pronunciation, all Romanians share a speech community. Having the same language, they are therefore all part of one group, perhaps distinguishing among themselves in some harmless way at the regional level but not *as ethnics*. But it seems to me that this answer reveals more than it intends to. In the first place, similarities of language are no grounds for assuming ethnic homogeneity, as the Latin American countries make clear. Chileans and Argentines share a language, but if you try to tell them they are a single ethnic group, you may not live to report their reply. In the US, Blacks and American Indians speak English as do whites, but they clearly are not in the same ethnic group. The point is an obvious one: we cannot assume *a priori* that linguistic homogeneity means ethnic homogeneity.

When we *do* assume this – when we assume that because everyone is speaking Romanian, regional stereotypes are not ethnic – we do so from the point of view of particular political and cultural elites. The important thing about Transylvanians and Oltenians, as compared with Chileans and Argentines or Catalans and Castilians is that within Romania, there exists no regional elite with sufficient power and incentive to insist that the differences are significant – to insist that they are *ethnic* differences. The matter of language is important here not because it is shared but because those persons most likely to have a stake in insisting upon ethno-regional differences include the educated elites, for whom language is a major social resource. These are the kinds of people who need a public oriented to their problems and solutions; for these people, a defense of language is a way of laying claim to tremendous resources, such as the allocation of massive funds for new educational systems and preferential access to jobs. Efforts to establish Black English as a separate language show that one can

claim these resources even without mutual unintelligibility of language. When one is politically intent upon making a separation, linguistic sameness need not pose an obstacle, although if linguistic difference exists, it is a particularly useful vehicle.

What I am suggesting is that regional stereotypes *are* (or can be) ethnic, if we look chiefly at the *social processes* that accompany them – the processes of attributed identity, solidarity, and exclusion; of differential resource endowments; of resistance to centralization; of assuming that „peoplehood“ (rather than age, or gender, or class) is the fundamental definer of the social world. If regional identifications are not seen as ethnic, this is from a particular vantage point that conclusively defines *what constitutes a significant difference*. A definition of this sort – and therefore the definition of ethnicity – is *political*. Who makes those political decisions has a lot to do with whether regional stereotypes are or are not seen to be ethnic. Usually, what prevails is the definition provided by the holders of state power, which will stand as long as regional elites do not challenge that definition. In some instances regional elites may acquire enough of a political base to argue that they are „different enough“ to advance political demands on ethnic grounds. Such instances underscore how ethnicity is part of the politics of culture, not of „objective“ distributions of customs or language or differential ecological endowments. If scholarship is not simply to reaffirm what power-holders have already established, our task should be to outline the parameters of the politics of culture, with analyses of the distribution of power in society and the place allowed (or disallowed) for claims that rest on a cultural base labeled „ethnic“. The point I hope to make here is that science must inspect the relation of its categories to power, in hopes of serving the broadest possible distribution of power rather than narrow interests of a top elite.