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THE MANAGEMENT OF OTHERNESS: »ETHNICITY« IN THE UNITED STATES AND ISRAEL

I want to argue in this paper *against* the simple acceptance of ethnicity as „the fact of“ cultural or social differences among sections of the human population, and *for* an understanding of ethnicity as a particular attitude towards cultural or social difference. I shall take ethnicity to be a constructed objectification carrying assumptions about people's rights to Self-determination and about relative degrees of Otherness. I shall argue that it is something that says as much about the mainstream population of a country as it does about its „ethnic group“ members, because it reveals the extent to which Otherness is not just constructed but also actively managed. I shall develop my argument by examining a particular „ethnic“ political development taking place in the United States today, drawing from it an analysis of „ethnicity“ in the U.S., and using those insights to look at Israeli society – thereby, suggesting how this argument might have analytic utility and value in a comparative framework.

In May of this year, when many people were not really looking, the State legislature of Louisiana passed a bill declaring Cajuns an official minority, and adding them to the list of the state's official and legal minority populations, which already included more than a million „Blacks,“ and much smaller numbers of „skimos,“ „American Indians,“ „Hispanics,“ and „Orientals.“ Adding Cajuns to that list meant that at least half the state's population of 4 million would be labelled *minority*. Much could be made of that emergent oxymoron. Yet the press found it a news story not so much because still another section of the population was being singled out as minority and, thereby, made eligible to receive special government funds but, rather, because something about declaring Cajuns a minority sounded wrong, in fact, fabricated.

Consider the terms of discussion. Mary Schmich of the *Chicago Tribune*, writing from the state's capital, reported it in a tone that made it hard to know whether she was reporting the disbelief or actively partaking in it. „When Raymond 'La La' Lalonde,“ she began, „started lobbying for his pet proposal a few weeks ago, a lot of legislators dismissed it as a 'ha-ha' bill. Declare Cajuns an official minority, just like blacks? Ha, ha. Grant Cajuns affirmative actions status, just like blacks? Ha, ha. Allow Cajuns to compete for the 10 percent of state government contracts that are

reserved for minority contractors? Ha, ha, ha“ (*The Hartford Courant*, May 29, 1988). How could Cajuns, she went on to explain the „joke” and the reported outrage, „descendants of French colonists expelled from Canada more than 200 years ago – be called a minority . . . when Edwin W. Edwards, the most popular governor in the past 50 years, was a Cajun? When John B. Breaux, one of Louisiana’s U.S. senators, is a Cajun? When Cajuns run many of the state’s southwestern parishes? When blackened redfish, a Cajun dish dear to the yuppie palate, has become so trendy that the state has to restrict the harvesting of redfish? “ If all of these things are true – one could hear people saying – don’t they indicate that Cajuns are mainstream, rather than socially and politically peripheralized? How then – was the implicit question – could they be a minority population?

Reportedly, many blacks, including at least one vocal state senator, have charged that this is „a very schrewd, diplomatic, vicious way of trying to water down affirmative action“ policies primarily aimed at correcting long-standing injustices and inequalities suffered by black Americans. Reportedly, too, Lalonde, has seemed puzzled by the disbelief, and is quoted as saying: „I want to do something for my people. I don’t want to take anything away from the blacks. I simply want to give the Acadians the same opportunities.“ He has often added that Cajuns have frequently been mocked in school for their Cajun accent in English, have suffered the indignity of being called names in bars, schools, and military camps, and have especially in the past been very poor and socially discriminated against by the „Anglos and the French Creoles“ of the State.^{aa}

Some of the details of this case are worth pointing out here. (1) The discussion is not about whether Cajuns are an identifiable unit – a people – within the larger society. (2) The debate is about who should be eligible to receive, directly and indirectly, resources set aside by the government to counteract the consequences of racist ideologies and practices that have plagued American society. „Minority“ in the U.S. has long been short for racial minority – i. e. seen as different from the way the majority population of the country sees itself racially, that is, seen as non-white. (3) In black opposition, at least to this bill, the assumption is clearly that Cajuns are white and, therefore, not a *racial* minority. (4) The sense of fabrication comes from the fact that it is the state’s legislature, and not a team of scientists, that is making these pronouncements – deciding not just that Cajuns indeed exist as an identifiable and separable group but also what kind of group it is. Most people, at least in the United States, assume that peoplehood – other than citizenship in a contemporary nationstate – is inherited, determined by the „facts“ of one’s ancestry, and not man-made. Legal intervention in the definition of what people are smells of fabrication and hidden agendas. (5) Culture is not the reason for Lalonde’s actions, public disbelief or opposition, or the legislature’s vote; belief in a history of unequal opportunities and a perception of the need to compete for scarce resources loom much larger as explanations.

Whereas, until about twenty years ago, assimilation into the mainstream was pushed ideologically as necessary for social and economic success, since the American Civil Rights movement and the creation of Affirmative Action policies assimilation is neither the sole goal nor the sole legitimated strategy. Knowingly claiming distinctive and longstanding Otherness has emerged as a legitimate, or at least alternative and potentially advantageous, way to relate to others in society and to present one’s

individual or collective Self in dealing with government agencies. This Cajun case is but one example, a very recent example, of what I take to be an integral component of all so-called ethnic processes – what I am here calling „the management of one’s own Otherness.“

Ethnicity – in all of the forms of which we frequently speak today, ethnic identities, ethnic group membership, ethnic pride, ethnic culture, ethnic food, ethnic politics, or ethnic stratification – presupposes a belief in the separable and identifiable „peoplehood“ of a sector of the human population. That in itself is a human construction worthy of analytic consideration. How and why do people group themselves and/or are grouped by others as constituting *a people*? In the discursive and nondiscursive practices that create and validate that belief in a sense of peoplehood, Otherness is simultaneously being established and validated.

But ethnicity is not just about the presupposition of peoplehood or the construction of Otherness. We have long had other popular and analytic concepts to refer to collectivities – race, nation, class, caste, community, tribe, people, culture, religious community, language group – and they have all had their social and political histories as well as philological derivations. Conceptualizing these collectivities as ethnicity signals a change in our individual and social attitudes towards a certain kind of Otherness – themselves signalling changes in how our societies manage Otherness, changes in who has enough power to enter the game of management, and in whether or not there are enough available resources to make the work of management feel worthwhile.

In this recent Cajun case, it is significant and noteworthy that a self-identified Cajun himself introduced and lobbied for the bill declaring Cajuns a minority in Louisiana, and that much of the opposition focused on the fact that two major political figures in the state today are also self-identified Cajuns. The latter promotes the image of actual power in the hands of at least individual Cajuns. The former shows that at least one Cajun has the skill, opportunity, and power to use governmental institutions to his „people’s“ advantage. The resulting image is that of a successful struggle for Self-determination and the employment of the institutional system to back it up.

This stands in marked contrast to what we are probably used to most – what I am here calling *Other-determination* of a collectivity – where the collective identity of some people is in some fundamental way determined by other people who see them as Other and have the power to employ the institutional system to back them up. In the U.S. context, the people most frequently subjected to Other-determination of Self have been Americans of varying degrees of African descent, since blackness was a EuroAmerican construction arising in a particular socioeconomic context where it signalled that the person was, had been, or could be enslaved, after the abolition of slavery, would come to signal descent from people who had once held the lowest place in society. Throughout part of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, at least a third of the states of the United States defined by law the boundaries of categories described as racial. Most statutes concerned the majority population’s apparent need/wish/interest in separating „white“ from „black,“ though in some states, especially states with Asian workers and immigrants and some surviving Native American (American Indian) populations concern was extended to them as well (2).

Lalonde’s use of the Louisiana legislature felt strange because it appeared on the

surface to treat Cajuns like those whose Otherness has long been defined and managed by the State – while Cajuns have until now been considered an ethnic group, rather than a minority. And yet what made it strange – once we look beneath the surface – was that behaviors currently considered legitimate for ethnic groups in the U. S. and associated with being white in the U.S., such as Self-determination, were used by Cajuns *acting as an ethnic group* to manage the jural-political system to make them a legal minority. The result – a contradiction in terms.

Despite the sometimes loose use of the term ethnic to refer to racial minority groups, I want to argue here that ethnicity implies – in the U.S. context at least – that a group of people have socially-sanctioned power to go quite far toward Self-determination. Thus, (1) that is more a euphemism, than an accurate depiction, when applied to groups of people that the American majority regards and treats as a racial minority; and (2) that to a very large extent it did not exist prior to the late 1960's in the U.S. I submit that ethnicity is an objectification of a *Particular* attitude and policy towards collective Selfhood and collective Otherness and that it is not synonymous with „peoplehood,“ culture, or Otherness itself.

Take Israel as an alternative scenario with some superficial similarities to the U.S. The State of Israel was created with the goal of bringing together Jewish people then dispersed throughout much of the world and without an independent, autonomous country they could call their own. Importantly, the movement rested on the belief that there is such a thing as „the Jewish people,“ and not just that there are Jewish people (like blond people, left-handed people, or well-educated people). Thus, Zionism rested on something long taken for granted – a sense of peoplehood – which in itself, by definition, implies a sense of collective Selfhood and a sense of other people's individual and collective Otherness.

Many different aspects of the experience of Diaspora Jewry and the history of the relationship of Jewishness to the State of Israel seem to revolve around issues concerning the *management of Otherness*. Jews have long believed and felt that their collective identity stems from a particular history and a particular historical relationship with the Biblical God, and not from others' perceptions, stereotypes, and representations of them. But for centuries – especially since the Diaspora – they have also felt themselves vulnerable and always at least potentially subject to the non-Jewish majority's attitudes, policies, and institutions. Throughout much of the past 2000 years in quite a few regions of the world, Jews have definitely been treated as Other and managed in a manner very much like that of „racial minorities“ in the U.S. today. In fact, for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was not uncommon to find even legal references to Jews in the United States as „the Jewish race.“

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe saw a movement for Jewish *emancipation* whose fundamental goal was to seek a way (or ways) to end their Otherness and to minimize, if not quite end, the power of non-Jews to manage the nature and status of their collectivity. Over the years, assimilation, Marxism, and Zionism have all been seen by different groups of Jews as approaches worth trying towards furthering that goal. I believe „ethnicity“ is the newest of these that must be added to that list – not meaning that only now is there recognition of Jews as an identifiable collective identity but, rather, that in the U.S. context a half- (and, not full-) assimilationist attitude is now considered legitimate by the society at large,

leaving substantial room for group Self-determination. Talking about Jews as a separate race has certainly disappeared from the mainstream. In fact, in the last twenty years, most of the discussion about Jews by Jews and non-Jews alike concerns the extent to which Jews are a religious group versus an *ethnic group*.

A different scenario plays itself out in Israel – a country founded on the belief that there is a collective Self, a collectivity, known as the Jewish people and that they deserved to manage themselves rather than always be subjected to management by others. The achievement of independence allowed for that goal of Self-management but now put Israeli Jews in the role of managing Otherness as well. What were to be the boundaries of the Self and who or what would be Other? And, not secondarily, what kinds of collectivities were these and are they parallel? In the last 40 years, a sizeable amount of time and energy has gone into deciding which groups of people who claim to be Jewish are to be accepted as Jews. The Ethiopians – Falashas – have captured the world's attention in the past few years, but they are only the most recent of a list that includes Benei Israel (from India), Karaites, Russians, Black Hebrews, Samaritans, and American converts to Reform and Conservative Judaism. The peoplehood of the Jews may have been simply assumed by the leaders of the Zionist movement, but the establishment of a state for Jews made it clear that the assumption of peoplehood – no matter how long it may have existed – did not exempt them from the perceived need to manage both Self and Otherness.

What could „ethnicity“ be in such a country? To have allowed for ethnicity in Israel from the outset would have undermined the emerging Jewish state in two ways: (1) To have done anything other than push for total (often even forced) assimilation of the Jewish immigrants into the more veteran Jewish society already in place would have undermined the sense of one peoplehood, one significant Self, on which Zionism rested. Social, cultural, and linguistic Differences were deliberately seen as *passing* phenomena imposed on the Jewish people by the necessity of life in the Diaspora. (2) To have viewed Arabs in Israel as an *ethnic* group would have meant granting them much more equality in a State intended for „the Jewish people,“ and acknowledging much more of a right to Self-determination than the Jewish State, long used to Jewish-Arab violence, could comfortably grant.

It is in this analytic framework as well that we can understand the public and common denial of Palestinian peoplehood on the part of many (most?) Israeli Jews. The majority, mainstream North American population peripheralizes certain sectors of the population by *making* them *racial* minorities with little or no regard for Self-determination; the majority, mainstream Israeli population dismisses any Palestinian claims or demands for Self-determination by *making* them non-Jewish *minorities* (*miutim*), stressing the existence of religious differences among them, and denying their claim that they, too, are one people.

Government discourse and practice towards cultural differences among Israeli Jews have definitely changed since the early 1970's – signalling a change in the management of Otherness – but they still differ significantly from what we have in the U.S. Not trivially, the term *kvutsot ethniot* (a sociological phrase taken literally from the English for ethnic groups) is not comfortably used to refer to anything in Israel – even today 40 years after the founding of the State and some 15 years of growing assertiveness on the part of Jews of non-European origin. The term *edot* is used instead to refer to communities of long-standing regional ties and social bonds

primarily, though not exclusively, among Jews. The fact that it is rarely used to refer to non-Jews contributes to the feeling that it is a Jewish thing, that it is unlike ethnicity – as we observe it elsewhere – and that it, therefore, does not challenge the sense of peoplehood of the Jews.

The Israeli situation, then, differs from the U.S. situation in that, while they both exclude certain sectors of society from the perceived mainstream – indexed by calling them minorities – Israeli society even today does not really allow for „ethnicity“ even within the Jewish majority. *Adatut* (the phenomenon of edot within the Jewish people) is now publicly recognized and partially legitimated, but I doubt it is simply a matter of semantics that *ethnicity* (even in its Hebrew equivalent) is considered foreign in Israel. In this sense, then, „ethnicity“ does not exist in Israel today, though Otherness is very much a factor to be managed and the boundaries of the collective Self very much always in need of definition. It is as if the public somehow knows, along with government officials and academics, that ethnicity is not just reference to cultural or regional differences or even to the existence and management of Otherness but, rather, an attitude and a policy regarding those differences (and the clustering of people with those differences) that accepts, to a substantial degree, the worth and value of Self-determination.

„Ethnicity,“ I am therefore arguing, is the product of specific sociohistorical circumstances that may or may not exist in different societies. Where „national“ unity is at a premium and fragmentation is feared, ethnicity cannot emerge and may even be suppressed. Where sections of the population are systematically excluded from the mainstream, labelled minorities, and even definitionally controlled, the result is Otherness imposed by the mainstream, not ethnicity. Distinctions between collective Selves and collective Others exist, and have existed, everywhere. The same is true of power differentials. What makes ethnicity a particular form of management of Otherness is that it exists in a climate that expects, legitimates, and validates a great deal of Self-determination. Local, grassroots leadership and initiatives matter, but only in a climate that recognizes their worth and grants them legitimacy.

NOTES

1. This essay is based on extensive long-term fieldwork in both Louisiana and Israel during the past 13 years. I have so far published separately about both, though increasingly I see the utility of explicitly comparing them with each other.
2. To give but three short examples, consider the following three legal definitions adopted by the legislatures of Virginia, Missouri, and Florida well into the twentieth century but before the thrust of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s:

Virginia statute # 1-14, repealed only in 1975 – Every person in whom there is ascertainable any Negro blood shall be deemed and taken to be a colored person, and every person not a colored person having one-fourth or more of American Indian blood shall be deemed an American Indian; except that members of Indian tribes, existing in this Commonwealth having one-fourth or more of Indian blood and less than one-sixteenth of Negro blood shall be deemed tribal Indians.

Missouri statute # 563.240, adopted in 1953 and finally repealed in 1969, phrased it differently – No person having one-eighth part or more of negro blood shall be permitted to marry any white person, nor shall any white person be permitted to marry any negro or person having one-eighth part or more of negro blood; and . . . the jury trying any such case may determine the proportion of negro blood in any party to such marriage from the appearance of such a person.

Florida statute # 741.11, adopted in 1957 and like Missouri's repealed only in 1969, was straightforward and simple – The word „negro,“ „colored,“ „colored persons,“ „mulatto“ or „persons of color,“ when applied to persons, include every person having one-eighth or more of African or negro blood.

Neither the Civil Rights movement nor its aftermath in the 1970s eliminated Other-determination of collective identities altogether or the institutional creation, perpetuation, and management of them. There continues to be a sense of Otherness – Otherness from the self-proclaimed white majority – that, I believe, is the fundamental meaning of the concept of minority. The United States Supreme Court has thus far refused to declare racial classification itself unconstitutional, although it is very clear that it considers discrimination on the grounds of race unconstitutional.

True, it is no longer considered acceptable to perceive members of these collectivities as merely passive, but Other-determination still dominates in cases of sections of the populations regarded as racial minorities. The state legislature in Louisiana, for example, recently changed its law defining blackness and whiteness, largely due to political and social activism within the legally non-white population of the state. Whereas the statute in 1970 – then considered a liberalization of the state's laws – had effectively defined as legally black/colored anyone with more than one-thirty-second (1/32) „Negro blood,“ the 1983 statute now allows parents to designate the race of their children. Note, however, that the new law adds that parents may designate the race of their children only as long as it does not go against what the legislators called „the preponderance of evidence.“ Presumably someone other than the parents would have the right, power, and authority to decide what is „the preponderance of the evidence.“

Likewise, it was government bureaucrats and the institutions they work for that between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s created the racial category known today in the U.S. as Hispanic. Few people realize that. The creation of a Hispanic racial category was coupled with the establishment of a number of Affirmative Action policies aimed specifically at that category, and it led to a search for identifiable local organizations through which resources could be channeled and identifiable local leaders who could serve as lobbyists for the newly-created minority group. The result is that few, including some of those lobbyists themselves, understand that the creation of this new minority group came about because government agencies were uncomfortable accepting many Puerto Ricans' and Mexican-Americans' self-portrayal as white. In the 1960 census, most Puerto Ricans appeared as white. No „Puerto Rican“ racial category appeared on the forms they were asked to fill out – just white, black, or Oriental/Asian. By 1970, the U.S. Census included „Puerto Rican“ as a racial option. While that severely limited Puerto Ricans' choices of self-determination – given that they were among other things from Puerto Rico – it gave the appearance of Self-labelling. The country may no longer be willing to just arbitrarily and blatantly manage those sectors of the population regarded as Other, but being labelled a racial minority remains synonymous with quintessential Otherness and very limited, if any, Self-determination.