Carsten Wieland

DEMOLISHING THE MYTH OF HOMOGENEOUS “ETHNIC” BLOCKS – BOSNIA IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

More than a decade has passed since the war in Bosnia, and still people talk of a problem of ethnicity when trying to explain what happened between 1992 and 1995. The conflict was too difficult for many outsiders to understand, including Western politicians who had to deal with the situation. For simplicity’s sake and because of the main protagonists’ propaganda, this bloodshed has usually been termed an “ethnic war”. But there was no ethnic conflict – because there are no ethnic groups. In order to underline this provocative conclusion, this chapter sheds light on the tools and different levels of contrast as well as on the influence of external ideas and powers on the Bosnian conflict. The arguments will be reinforced by means of a short cross-check with similar developments on the Indian subcontinent.

When it comes to defining “Ethnien”, “ethnies” or “ethnic groups” in the Balkans, the confusion is perfect. Sundhaussen concludes:

Stovesen and Croats belong to the same (Roman catholic) confession, however, they differ in their scripts. Croats and Serbs use the same (Croat-Serbian or Serbo-Croatian) script, however, they belong to different confessions. The Bosnian Muslims differ from their contemporaries (Serbs and Croats) in confession only, whereas they differ from other Muslims in Yugoslavia (e.g. from the Albanians) in language and origin.

The Macedonians share the same Orthodox confession, however, they own an own script since the end of World War II. And insofar as the Montenegrins want to define themselves as a nation, they need in addition to language and faith (which they share with the Serbs) at least a further mark of distinction in order to underpin their autonomy (e.g. different historic traditions and social forms of organization).

A similar mess applies to India, except that the terminology is different. It is about “communities” and “communal conflict”. They equally represent a whirlpool of different cross-cutting cleavages like religion, language, customs, caste or race. Manor dismantles the confusion: ethnicity in India means 1) religion: above all, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs; 2) language: at least nine main tongues and countless others; 3) so-called outcasts and scheduled tribes outside Hindu society; 4) racially distinct tribes: in the Himalayas and in the north-eastern mountains; 5) “Arians” and “Dravidians”, dividing the subcontinent in north and south along the regional cleavage of the antique Indo-European and Dravidian languages.

In other words, the phenomenon of so-called ethnicity, displayed in such a complex variety and cross-cutting cleavages, is not fit for political conflict and nation-building. Already Max Weber discerned in 1921: “For every really exact study [the term ‘ethnicity’] is a totally useless collective name”. The present scientific debate has not come to grips with this term either. There is no widely respected definition, neither in the field of ethnology, nor in that of politics, history or international law. The same problem exists with the term “nation”.

The traditionally competing concepts of ethnicity and nation lie far apart:

1. **Primordial or tribalist approaches take an ethnic group – however it may be defined – as a social fact a priori, something which was revealed by science after its existence. Primordial factors like origin, language, religion, skin color, tradition (from clothes to cooking recipes) and/or the belonging to a diffusely (not yet territorially) defined land determine human beings by and since birth. Those who share these factors are supposed to be bound to each other affectively. Nobody can escape his ethnic ascription; it is objective. Ethnic groups in this sense are rather solid unities. In comparative politics they can thus be used as independent variables which influence political outcomes.**

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2 With situative, constructivist or instrumentalist approaches, a common origin of people recedes into the background or is dismissed from the beginning. In the extreme case, an ethnic group is just that as what it sees itself or as what it is seen from the outside. This is why Kaschuba calls it a “fictional reality” or a powerful “ideal”. Others refer to it as a “world of senses” or a “structure of relevance” which competes with other symbolic systems. When and if people appeal to common characteristics, it depends on the social, political or economic situation. It is by no means inevitable. According to needs, certain characteristics are emphasized in order to compete with other associations. The ascription is subjective. As Cohen coined it: “People can think themselves into difference.”

Ethnic groups in this sense are flexible and can almost be compared to interest groups. They are primarily a product of exterior influences and therefore can be seen as a dependant variable.

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example, has shifted from a purely instrumentalist view in his earlier works to a mixed approach, which he resumes as follows: “[E]lites and counter-elites within ethnic groups select aspects of the group’s culture, attach new value and meaning to them, and use them as symbols to mobilize the group, to defend its interests, and to compete with other groups”19. Whereas Brass still tends more to the instrumentalist side, Anthony Smith is an eminent scholar who emphasizes more the primordialist aspect10.

Most representatives of the mixed approach hold that ethnicity has not been there forever but that it must be invented and formed. During this process, however, “old material” is used selectively. This is particularly clear when past events are interpreted and appropriated selectively and finally sold as “common history”.

The situative-primordialist approach allows to treat ethnicity as an independent as well as a dependent variable. The question of whether ethnic groups are something old or new appears in a new light if one applies societal modernization as an independent variable to ethnicity as a dependent variable. There are two strings of argumentation:

1. Liberals, functionalists and Marxists alike – in a rare sense of harmony – hold that ethnic groups wear out in the process of modernization21. It does not matter whether these groups are viewed as primordial or as artificial realities. Primordialists and constructivists are in the same boat here, too22.

2. Pluralists, for example, say that ethnicity has not been weakened but strength-


15 The term “Bosnian Muslims” has been kept here, although, after the Bosnian war in the 1990s, the term “Bosnian” has prevailed. In this context, however, the new name would complicate the terminology. For Bosnian Muslims are referred to in a more general time frame, not only after 1993, when the General Bosnjak Assembly opted for the name “Bosnjak”.


19 Brass, Paul R., Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison, cit., p. 75 (original emphasis).


21 Gellner, Ernest, ENCOUNTERS WITH NATIONALISM, Oxford-Cambridge (Mass.), 1994, p. 341f points to the fact that Marxists and Liberals are subject to the same error; they have underestimated the force of ethno-nationalism.

en by modernization. Under these circumstances only could this principle of social organization thrive and evolve as a political factor. This implies that ethnic groups change consistently through modern influences. Consequently, the constructivist view prevails here. As a special case – if not entirely deviating but supplementary – Gellner argues that nation-building, as a highly developed form of social organization, helps primordial factors (above all language) to gain new importance.

This short summary of common approaches shows how difficult it has become to boil them down to a single and respected definition of ethnicity. It becomes even more complicated if one adds another factor: ascription. Subjective and objective ethnic ascription crosscuts the theories and splits them once again. There are unsolvable tensions between the characteristics subjective/objective, dependent/independent variable and the common classification of primordial/constructivist. The following table gives an idea about the ideal types of the different versions:

**Table 1.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approaches</th>
<th>Ascription subjective</th>
<th>Ascription objective</th>
<th>Ethnic group as independent variable</th>
<th>Ethnic group strengthened or formed by modernization</th>
<th>Ethnic group weakened by modernization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primordial</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructivist</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primordial-Constructivist</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+= typical/frequent; = atypical/rare
* = exception: Elwert; ** = exception: Marxists, functionalists, Hobson; *** = exception: Gellner


24 Gellner, Ernest, *Nationalism and Nationalism*, cit. Gellner does make clear that he does not defend the view of an “awakening” of nations but the constructivist approach of a new form of social organization. However, he starts from primordial elements (language, literature) as indepen-

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In addition to this variety of interpretations, yet another incongruity occurs: to what extent does an ethnic group consist of politics? This question is far from solved. A. Smith, for example, already links ethnicity to a fixed and clear-cut territory. He defines ethnic community (or “ethnie”) as “a named human population of alleged common ancestry, shared memories and elements of common culture with a link to a specific territory and a measure of solidarity”25. Dipankar goes even further. She links ethnicity to an entitlement of sovereignty. By contrast, Reiter holds that territory has nothing to do systematically with the ethnic concept. Territory gains importance only when other factors of nation-building have set in26. Deutsch also argues that the idea of territory is a political projection: “No person can be born at more than one spot on the map. The actual place of his birth has the size of a bed or a room, not the size of a country”27.

The more political entitlements are added to the notion of ethnicity, the less it can be distinguished from what is called a “nation”. In order to distinguish an ethnic group it should be seen as a pre-political association of people who settle on a certain soil which is not subject to political philosophy. At the other extreme, the notion of a “holy land” is, by contrast, a monstrous product of a rather advanced stage of political nation-building.

The confusion about the term ethnicity has become too great as to be useful for scientific research. The variety of case studies also makes ethnicity useless. If one takes a wide angle, it is too spongy to explain things. If one narrows the definition in order to avoid contradictions, the description will serve for a single case only and will lose explanatory power. Above all, a pre-political definition – as it should be for clarity’s sake – bars the way to a seamless transition towards the process of so-called nation-building, which is, first of all, a political endeavor.

Having in mind Manor’s description of the Indian ethnic map, it is not surprising that doubts about the usefulness of the term “ethnic group” come primarily from the subcontinent. Urmila Phadnis, for example, calls the term “unscientific”. Its use is only justified by the fact that it covers the complexity of cases and that there is no alternative28. Similarly, Romila Thapar says that “tribe” in the ethnic sense has become too politicized and too broad. As an alternative she suggests variables which are used in the process of nation building. From this point of view she criticizes the philosopher Immanuel Kant who, as Gellner says, defends a “bloodless” approach detached from any tradition. Gellner holds that with Kant’s concept there could never be any nation-building (pp. 130-2).


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offers the term "lineage", which covers origin, social and economic factors. It is clear, however, that by family bonds in the real sense it is hard to build nations with clear political ambition, notion of a wider territory, and an increasing degree of political mobilization.

We therefore have a dilemma: on the one hand, ethnic characteristics in their traditional sense are operationable only by the cost of their deformation. On the other hand, the whole world talks of "ethnic conflicts". How does this go together?

Political protagonists who refer to "ethnic conflicts" do not refer to the diffuse expressions of various primordial factors. They claim that, indeed, ethnic groups as clear-cut and solid wholes fight each other. This is nonsense, of course, in the Balkans, in India and anywhere else. Since the term "ethnic group" is used by the protagonists of "ethnic conflicts", it makes sense to stick to the term, as bad as it may be. Otherwise scholars will drift away from political reality. The task must be rather to fill the term with a different meaning and to reveal the protagonists' eyebash.

1. Patterns of Contrast

The new term of "ethnic group" – in quotation marks only – is of systematic rather than historic nature. It is a concept of action, grounded on the definition that one primordial characteristic is taken out as the main means of contrast against "the others". It is too weak, however, to mobilize the people who share this characteristic against those with a different one. Cross-cutting cleavages prevent a strong group-feeling from having political potential, as mentioned above. In order to mobilize the people anyway, other primordial components are settled around the central element. These secondary characteristics are bent accordingly, overemphasized or constructed ex-post.

So this concentric concept of "ethnicity" has an epicenter around which other contrasts are brewed by means of subsequent and additional attributes. Determining such an "ethnic center" is not only a selection in order to strengthen a group, but it is also a pre-selection for a unilateral adjustment of the group which serves as its indispensable self-definition. Only in this way can a political constituency be created – and this is necessary for the project of "ethnic nation-building".

In the Balkans and in India's communal struggle, the primary characteristic is religion, which is taken up by political activists to contrast the "opposing camps". This is why churches and religious leaders play such an important role. Those who believed in Islam were defined – against many contradictions – as an "ethnic group" in contrast to other "ethnic groups" like Catholics, Orthodox, or Hindus.

The newly-defined term "ethnicity" solves the problem of diverging terminology in the Bosnian and in the Indian cases. An "ethnic group" thus defined is the same as a "community" in the Indian context. The statements of Sandhausen on the Balkan case and Manor on India show that ethnic groups – without quotation marks – are fuzzy and more difficult to determine. A Muslim Bosnian shares a lot with his Orthodox and Catholic Bosnian neighbors, including their dialect. Likewise an Indian Hindu from Punjab has more in common (language, customs, etc.) with his Muslim and Sikh neighbors than with his fellow believers in Tamil Nadu. In Pakistan, ethnic sentiments (e.g. of region or language) run counter to the "ethnic" notion of a Muslim homeland.

Although the concept of "ethnicity" – with quotation marks – is flexible and strategic, it does not dismiss primordial resources which other social categories, like interest groups, cannot offer. For it appeals to resources which we are present a priori and in person. They don’t have to be put together painstakingly by political discourse and consensus-building. A long process of opinion-making is not necessary. This explains why the "ethnic" paradigm helps create a mobilizing advantage in times of a poor democratic discourse, like during the first free elections in post-communist Yugoslavia or under the colonial cover in India. Primordial characteristics are hooks onto which political projects can easily latch.

The late member of the Bosnian presidency, Alija Izetbegović, must have had this phenomenon in mind when he said: "When you call for a public debate on democracy, a few hundred intellectuals will come. When it's about nationalism, you will get tens of thousands of all social layers into the streets".

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30 Thapar, Ramila, Interpreting Early India, cit., p. 117.
31 In rare cases it can be also more than one element. For example, in Sri Lanka, religion and language mostly overlap with Sinhalese and Tamils. Both factors serve as primary contrasts. But this does not change the structure of "ethnicity" as described.

34 Quoted from: Beyme, Klaus von, Systemwechsel in Osteuropa, Frankfurt/M, 1994, p. 127.
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The dual character of nationalism, ideal types:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>According to function</th>
<th>Emancipatory</th>
<th>Integral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>civic-democratic</td>
<td>Indian independence movement (Nehru/Gandhi)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(in India: nationalism)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ethno-national</td>
<td>Pakistan-movement (Jinnah)</td>
<td>Balkan nationalisms*, today's Pakistani and Hindu-nationalisms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(in India: communalism)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Above all, after the Second World War. Earlier Balkan nationalisms in the Ottoman and Habsburg empires also had some emancipatory traits, if no particular aims of reform or modernisation.

In the Balkans and in India, spokesmen of "ethnic groups" have engaged in a race to strengthen religion with other primordial elements in order to avoid an appropriation by "the others". The following section will look at the components of ethno-nationalism in Bosnia and in India with respect to Pakistan.

3. The Construction of the "Ethnic" Idea

3.1. History

In the Balkans and on the Indian subcontinent, myths have been created in order to establish the notion that a group of people who share the same belief are more than a religious community, but an "ethnic" one. The hijacking of history serves to create a "common descent" for those with the same faith.

For this purpose, spokesmen of Bosnian Muslims air the Bogumil myth whenever they intend to contrast themselves to the further-advanced nation projects of Serbia and Croatia. The idea is that today's Bosnian Muslims derive their descent directly from the medieval Bosnian nobility. Allegedly, this nobility had established its own identity through the Bogumil church, which resisted Orthodox and Catholic appropriations. After the Ottoman conquests in 1463 and 1482,
the Bosnian and Herzegovinan nobles readily and altogether converted to Islam, so the myth goes. With them the mostly Bogumil Bosnian peasants converted en masse, too, and became the social pillars of Ottoman rule. In this view, the "ethnicity" of Muslims in Bosnia is older than their religion.

The Yugoslav communist historian Atif Purivata propagated this version in his early writings to underpin that the Bogumils represented "the nucleus of Muslim nation-building". Not coincidentally, he raised his voice at a time when in 1968 the Bosnian Muslims in Yugoslavia were granted the suffix "in the national sense" and in 1971 their status of a "nation" was written into the constitution.

The Bogumil myth has been convincingly refuted by recent research. Shortly before his death, also Purivata has softened his stand on this issue. According to the new findings, the Bogumil church as well as the Bosnian state had been in decay before the Ottoman invasion. Bosnian nobles were of various origins, members of all religions converted to Islam, conversions took place step-by-step rather than en masse. Some scholars even doubt if the Bosnian church was Bogumil at all.

In India, similar myths try to attach "ethnicity" to religion by historic twists. Hindu ethno-nationalists claim that the Brahmans descend from the Aryan tribe which allegedly migrated from central Asia to northern India around 1500 before the common era and conquered the high civilizations of the Indus valley. This is intended to make of every non-Hindu an "ethnically" or even racially distinct person. Accordingly, India is the "holy land" of Hindus. It is clear, however, that Muslims in India are almost all converted locals of Hindu belief. The Muslim side also uses myths to distinguish itself "ethnically" from the rest. Pakistani ideologues try to explain the foundation of the proclaimed Muslim homeland as a

logical consequence of history. Various official history books localize the roots of Pakistan in the stone age, in the civilizations of Moenjodaro and Harappa, in the time of the birth of Islam on the Arabian peninsula, in the invasion of the first Muslim soldiers into Sind in the 8th century, etc.

Looking at history through a rear-view mirror – in suitable sections – is an effective means to create a common identity and a instrumentalized self-image. The imagined past is subject to selective appropriation in favor of new aims, as K.N. Panikkar puts it. The rear-view mirror is adjusted accordingly. Serbian and Croatian writers describe the time of the Ottoman Empire as the "dark age", whereas some Muslim historians tend to glorify it. The function of myths is to homogenize the constituency. This can become necessary through ideological challenges (socialism, nationalism, etc.) or through the struggle for political resources against an ethno-national competitors. Wrong history is a constitutive component of nation-building, as Renan has stated:

L'oubli et je dirai même l'erreur historique, sont un facteur essentiel de la formation d'une nation et c'est ainsi que le progrès des études historiques est souvent pour la nationalité un danger.

38 Purivata in an interview with the author in Sarajevo (27.06.2000). Purivata said that he acknowledges the recent research by Đaja and Balbi. Today, he said, no scientist supports the Bogumil thesis in its pure version. "We could say: Most Bogumils accepted Islam." Also Orthodox and Croats did. Purivata said that in the 1960s he only had available findings from the Yugoslav author Aleksandar Solovac.
39 More about this view in Malcolm, Noel, Bosnia: A Short History, cit., p. 27ff.
40 See: Sardarkar, V.D., Hindutva: Who is Hindu?, written and distributed in Delhi 1922, published in Delhi 1969; Gelwalkar, M.S., We or Our Nationality Defined, Bombay, 1938.

42 Thapar, Romila, Interpreting Early India, cit., p. 140.
43 Panikkar, K.N., Communal Threat and Challenge, cit., p. 73.
Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) and his ideas of "languages make nations" had a great impact on intellectuals in the Balkans and in colonial India. It would be a long story to outline the ethno-national separation of languages in both cases. A few hints should suffice here.

In the second half of the 19th century there was a real opportunity to come to a common standard language in the Balkans. The Serb linguist Vuk Karadžić had picked an east Herzegovinian sub-dialect (Ijekavian-Stokavian) as the "purest" Serbian which he intended to standardise. At the same time, the pan-Slavic Illyrian intellectuals of Croatia opted for the Stokavian dialect, too.

Ideological antagonisms, however, destroyed this illusory harmony. The Croatian spokesmen didn't want to be called "actual" Serbs, as Karadžić considered anyone who spoke his selected dialect. Neither did the Serb spokesmen like to be pocketed by Illyrian ideas. They suspected that the Catholic church would use pan-Slavism to convert the lost sons in the East. Hence, the Serbo-Croatian, Croato-Serbian - or whatever - language was split into "Serbian" with Cyrillic script and "Croatian" with Latin script.

Ironically, Karadžić's version did not prevail with the Serbs (who continued to speak Ekaivan-Stokavian) but with the Croats. It is mostly the Muslims (and Serbs and Croats) of Bosnia-Herzegovina who speak Karadžić's favored Ijekavian. After the collapse of Yugoslavia, language has gained importance again. Bosnian Muslims are once more in the middle of the contrasting poles. Croatian nationalists appropriate them as "actual Croats" because they speak their dialect. Serb nationalists see them as "actual Serbs" because they speak Karadžić's "pure Serbian". Nationalist Muslims, for their part, have tried to enrich "their Bosnian" language with Turkish and Persian elements for contrast.

The Indian case follows the same pattern. Hindi and Urdu (Hindi-Urdu) belong to the eastern branch of the Indo-European language family. Brahmins standardized the idiom as classical Sanskrit in the fourth century before the common era. In the 18th century, Hindu writers mostly used the Devanagari script and tended to Sanskritize the vocabulary. Muslim writers tended to write in Persian-Arabic. But there were many cross-cutting examples, too. It was the British who engaged in the formal separation of the languages by promoting academic purity in literature: Hindi free of Persian, Urdu with as much Persian as possible. So Hindi became identified with Hindu and Urdu with Muslim.

3.3. Customs

A last example of shaping contrast is by means of re-interpreted and reinforced customs. In the 19th century in Bosnia and India, religion and custom went more and more together. At least, this was the proclaimed idea, which was not always practiced in strong consequence.

Conversions to Islam in Bosnia and India, as a rule, had been gradual. Missionaries and violence were rare. Old customs changed slowly in spite of changes of faith. In turn, religion did not create a new ethnicity in the traditional sense. Mutual acceptance of different customs was common in both cases. To what extent even syncretism could be observed in Bosnia is not entirely clear. In India it is more obvious. Ex-Muslim Indians still visited temples, avoided beef or sometimes shunned certain places if they had previously been Hindu "untouchables".

Cultural cleavages in Bosnia and India have been as cross-cutting as the linguistic ones described above. It was again political activists who sharpened the contrasts of customs. Conversions became political matters. Changing one's faith became equal to treason. It meant deserting one's "ethnic group". Believers became valuable assets for political spokesmen because they were their inalienable constituency in the "ethnic" paradigm. Small conflicts were blown up into the larger conflict in the United Provinces as described in: Brass, Paul R., Language, Religion and Politics in North India, cit., p. 130ff.

30 Except the forced conversion of young boys in Bosnia under Ottoman rule.

31 Algar, Hamid, "The Hamzeviye: A Deviant Movement in Bosnian Sufism", in Islamic Studies-Special Issue: Islam in the Balkans (Islamabow), Vol. 36, Nos. 2-3, 1997, p. 243, says that syncretists did not occur in Bosnia; Steindorff, Ludwig, "Von der Konfession zur Nation: Die Muslime in Bosnien-Herzegowina", cit., p. 288 observes the opposite. Steindorff's definition of syncretism is very wide and suggests that he rather means benevolent acceptance of other peoples' religious customs.


For example, in Bosnia, the alleged conversion of a girl mobilised Bosnian Muslim resistance movements against the Habsburgs: Babuna, Aydin, Die nationale Entwicklung der bosnischen Muslime: Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der österreichisch-ungarischen Periode, Frankfurt M., 1996, p. 105ff; also: Drzač (1994), p. 61; Pinto, Mark, "The Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina".

49 See the language conflict in the United Provinces as described in: Brass, Paul R., Language, Religion and Politics in North India, cit., p. 130ff.

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into epic proportions. Simple love dramas and family disputes got a religious-political colour. This happened to the 16-year-old Muslim girl Fata Omanovic from Mostar in 1899. After a quarrel with her parents she ran away to her Christian girl friend where she became a convert. Muslim activists sold it as a case of abduction and forceful conversion. They complained about a lack of religious education of the Muslim population and the overall "difficult position" of Muslims in the country. Finally, the Fata case united two rival Muslim opposition groups and forged a common movement for autonomy out of originally Herzegovinian separatist protests.

In the Indian case, Gandhi managed to (temporarily) merge the Hindu counter- protection movement and the Muslim Khilafat Movement which was a Sunni protest against the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924 by the Turkish revolutionary Kemal Atatürk.

This shows very well how volatile and manipulable the issue of customs is. Customs and symbols were used to strengthen the religious contrast – and thus to create a constituency – for political reasons. This helped in paving the way to an "ethnic" notion of the nation.

4. External Powers and Clientelism

Bosnia and India have long been under "alien" rule – the rule of a group or structure (e.g. Yugoslavia) which is not an ethno-national competitor. The rulers had great influence in shaping or avoiding ethno-national camps. They constituted the platform to which ethno-nationalist leaders had to refer and on which political struggles were fought.

The Habsburgs, and later the international community during the Bosnian war, as well as the British in India, started out from the "ethnic" paradigm as described above. Respectively, they considered Serbs/Croats/Muslims in Bosnia, as well as Muslims/Hindus in India, as different, irreconcilable "ethnic groups", or even races, and acted accordingly. In both cases, they played them out against each other for their own purposes. Often this was also compounded with ignorance due to a historiography within the "ethnic" paradigm (communal history).

The views of the external actors resemble each other strikingly: "This is a country in which at least three religions and half a dozen ethnic groups have fought with each other for centuries". (U.S. Foreign Secretary Warren Christo-


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Rosopher on Yugoslavia, 1993)55 – and “[W]e are confronted with the age-old antagonism of Hindu and Mohammadan, representatives not only of two religions but of two civilizations [...]” (Joint Committee of Indian Constitutional Reform, 1934)56. Both views have clearly taken over the "ethnic" paradigm with religion as ethnic center as described above.

In practice, the Habsburgs and British founded cultural institutes along supposed "ethnic" lines, promoted "ethnically" diverging languages, and created a party system which was prone to translate their assumptions directly into politics. This meant an ethno-national quota system and separate electorates in India. The quota system in Yugoslavia's political system was set up to guarantee proportional representation along "ethnic" lines. The communist party was split up according to ethno-national sub-republics. Career chances were dependent on "ethnic" origin. Political and societal conflicts were solved along "ethnic" lines as well.

Laslo Sekelj concludes: "The gradual emergence of a plurality of power centers since the 1960s was not an aspect of political but of national pluralism [...]"58.

Thus cross-cutting cleavages, respectively multi- or trans-"ethnic" parties, found no support within the political systems of colonial India and Yugoslavia. This left heavy traces after their collapse. Population censuses, in addition, served a political purpose and helped to categorize, and often to confuse, societal realities.

Under these circumstances, the different groups could not form a common political will. At the same time, however, with the break up of old structures a power struggle of elites began, and economic competition became more obvious. Yugoslavia and colonial India fell apart not because the ethno-national groups were incompatible, but because their elites could not find any power sharing arrangements.

In the time shortly before the break ups, foreign powers were very active in promoting ethno-national cleavages. For example, they supported ethnic-national spokesmen far beyond the degree to which members of the proclaimed ethno- nation backed them. Radovan Karadžić was courted as the "Serb leader", although he lacked the support of the majority of Bosnian Serbs, let alone Serbs all over the Balkans59. Alija Izetbegović was seen to represent "the Muslim" side

58 More than half of the Bosnian Serbs emigrated or lived together with Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats in the territory controlled by the government of Alija Izetbegović (often rashly
although many other groups lived and chose to live in “the Muslim” territory, etc., Mohammed Ali Jinnah emerged as the spokesman of “all Muslims” in India, although he only led one Muslim party out of many. It does not matter here if the protagonists saw themselves accordingly. What matters is that their positions as ethno-national leaders were strengthened by the external actors who meddled in the affairs. Moreover, they accepted the territorial claims of the ethno-national spokesmen for “their” respective “ethnic group.” Once in the vicious circle of this paradigm, solutions were sought in the haggling about borders and territorial percentage points, in corridors, bridges and tunnels, so that the hostile “ethnic groups” would not get in touch with each other. “Ethnic” expulsions and millions of refugees are another consequence.

In an allusion to the catch-word of British policy in India, Kumar describes the policy of international actors during the Bosnian war as “divide and quit.” In turn, the British called their plan to split up India into supposedly “ethnic” units, the “Balkan Plan.”

5. The Ethno-nationalists’ Easy Success

The influence of foreign actors gives an answer to the question: why did ethno-national state building succeed, even though not all of the nation’s members by far supported the project (in both India and Bosnia), and even though the ethno-national protagonists themselves did not back the project entirely (in Bosnia)? The projects succeeded without fulfilling Miroslav Hroch’s conditions – the three stages of nation building as a gradual mass-mobilizing force.

The external forces were a catalyst for the success of ethno-national forces in the internal power struggle. Only few scholars have incorporated the external aspect in their definition of nation-building. One exception is Rupert Emerson who said: “The case of Pakistan came close to sustaining the theory that a nation is whatever can get away with establishing its claim to being one [...]”. This referred to as the “Muslim government”). See: Wieland, Carsten, «Die aktuellen Konfliktlinien in Bosnien-Herzegowina», in Südosteuropa-Mitteilungen, No. 3, 1995.

60 Kumar, Radha, «Bosnia in the Annals of Partition: From Divide and Rule to Divide and Quit», in Hasan, Mustufi (ed.), Islam, Communities and the Nation: Muslim Identities in South Asia and Beyond, Delhi, 1998, p. 426.

In both cases a Muslim “nation-state” was proclaimed (Pakistan) or came close to existence (Bosnia) although many Muslims did not support this idea. In Bosnia, Izbegovics and his colleagues in the SDA were at least ambiguous about this concept. Wieland, 2000.

64 Emerson, Rupert, From Empire to Nation: The Rise to Self-Assertion of Asian and African

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statement is important because it stresses both factors which are in dialectic relation: a) interests have to be articulated actively and effectively (no matter on what they are founded), and b) external authorities must accept these claims in some form or another. One who “gets away” with something has to manage to “get through” somewhere. Max Weber, too, already had both angles in mind. According to him, the term “nation” means that it “imposes on certain groups of people a specific notion of solidarity vis-à-vis others.”

Many authors ignore the external or “passive” aspect. Seton-Watson, for example, calls it a nation if “a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed one.” Gellner, too, considers merely the “active” internal aspect. Recognition plays a part only among the members themselves: “Two men are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation.”

However, considering the nation-building in the Balkans and the Indian subcontinent, the internal aspect does not suffice to explain the political outcomes. Claims have to be heard in the world. If they are ignored, they often perish. If they are furtured they sometimes reach goals which even their own adherents did not believe possible. Founding a state is not easy, but full of obstacles, enemies and risks – it’s often the last resort of political escalation. But for the British in India and the international community in Bosnia, ethno-national states somehow made sense because they were themselves thinking within the “ethnic” paradigm. In the Yugoslavian case, the break-up of the Soviet Union, the rise of ethno-nationalism in Eastern Europe, and German unification underpinned the trend of “one nation – one state” even at the end of the 20th century. Significantly, in common use today, the notion of a “nation state” has become firmly loaded with ethno-national connotations. The so-called French version of a political, legal and civic nation has lost practical influence. Hence, the ideological background has become favorable for the ethno-national spokesmen. Hobbsawn also criticizes that “the states of the European Union at the beginning of the 1990s were involved equally in the destruction of Yugoslavia as Tito’s heirs themselves.”

The confusion of state and (ethno-)nation has a long history. It went from the League of Nations to the United Nations, where states and not nations are

65 Weber, Max, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, p. 528 (original emphasis).
67 Gellner, Ernest, Nations and Nationalism, cit., p. 7 (original emphasis).
69 Eric J. Hobbsawn, «Die neuen Nationalismen», in Die Zeit, 06.05.1999.
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members – although the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights confuse these terms more than once. What about peoples that are not considered nations, about nations that are not states, and about states that are not nations (which amounts to 96% of the population in the non-nation states of this world)? There is no answer in international law. This makes minority issues and the concept of self-determination so tricky from Woodrow Wilson onwards. Nobody knows exactly what the “self” is that should determine itself. Already in 1973 the French general Carnot warned: “If any community whatever had the right to proclaim its will and separate from the main body under the influence of rebels, etc., every country, every town, every village, every farmstead might declare itself independent.”

The stakes are high but so are the gains. Ethno-national elites are lured to enhance their efforts for freedom because political and economic resources are rich when the aim is reached. World politics works under the presumptions that: 1) states are the dominant actors in international relations, 2) states have the monopoly of power, and 3) conflicts and interventions are fought and settled on inter-state levels.

Hence, Mayall and Simpson conclude:

The state is often a valued prize in the competition between opposing ethnic and/or religious groups. The winners gain monopoly access to the outside world and the ability, therefore, to extract a rent from foreign governments, or private investors, during the process of modernization. [...] In other words, both the heterogeneous nature of post-colonial society and the international environment provide a fertile soil in which separatism and secession can propagate and flourish.

Thinking in these categories, the former German foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher tried to solve the Yugoslav conflict by upgrading the conflicting parties to subjects of international law, i.e. states. But after the recognition of Croatia and Slovenia, no further step followed to solve the problems. Instead, they escalated into a new constellation with enhanced encouragement and military power. One should have learned from India and Pakistan: by founding a so-called Muslim “nation-state”, the quarrels between the proclaimed ethno-national camps have been far from over. On the contrary, the conflict has grown more heated with new reasons like disputed territory and new resources like national armies and even atomic bombs.

For this reason, modern scholars of international law have criticized the concept of sovereignty as outdated, dangerous, superfluous, diffuse, and normatively overloaded. The catastrophe in the Balkans in the 1990s has contributed to great skepticism of the classic notion of self-determination. In order to guarantee human rights in contrast to national rights, and in order to put a buffer between democratic self-determination and state building, the concept of “internal self-determination” has arisen. This means that states should be organized in such a way that willing minorities can determine their political fate within the existing state, which would make the concept of “external or offensive self-determination”, i.e. the founding of an ethno-national state, obsolete. In other words, a particular form of internal state organization becomes the precondition of its international recognition.

This was also the argument with which a military intervention in Serbia was justified during the Kosovo conflict in 1999. All these were lessons from the Yugoslav disaster. For, at that time, Croatia could declare itself independent with the backing of the European Community without guaranteeing minority-rights to its Serbian citizens. In turn, the Kosovo intervention sent a clear message to the Albanian minority: “We will help you, even with military means, but we won’t give you a perspective to have your own state!” This precondition is a valuable

70 Article 4 of the UN Charter says: “Membership of the United Nations is open to all other peace-loving states [...]”. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is defined as a measure for “all peoples and all nations” irrespectively of “race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”. Charter, 1945, p. 6 (emphasis added), Universal Declaration, 1945, pp. 6-7 (emphasis added).


72 Lazare Carnot (1753-1823) was also member of the French National Assembly during the Revolution (quoted from Emerson, Rupert, From Empire to Nation: The Rise to Self-Affirmation of Asian and African Peoples, cit., p. 299).


76 On the internal right of self-determination, see Heintze, Hans-Joachim, Selbstbestimmungsrecht und Minderheitenrecht im Völkerrecht: Herausforderungen an den globalen und regionalen Menscherechtsstaat, cit., pp. 84ff, 153ff.

insight which could have prevented the explosive chain reaction that destroyed the Yugoslav concept of a political and civic state, which some forces, like the League of Communists and the Reformists under Ante Marković, still defended.

In Bosnia and colonial India, the separation plans along “ethnic” lines made it difficult for alternative forces to gain a political profile. In both cases one could say: “There are few rewards, if any, for those policy makers who really care for ethnic harmony [...]” (Rizman)86.

6. Crumbling Contrasts

Foreign powers have influenced the outcome of the political struggle in Bosnia and India in favor of the “ethnic” paradigm. This is remarkable as such and perhaps disappointing. But it is even more striking that, in spite of this, the ethnonational frontlines crumbled quite rapidly afterwards. Or is it more appropriate to say: because of this? Two reasons can be put forward that explain the weakness of the “ethnic” concept and the short breath of ethnonational movements – one is external and one is theoretically inherent to the concept itself.

1. Since ethno-national cleavages were duplicated mentally and promoted actively by external actors, no broad mass movement was necessary in order to reach the final goal of an ethno-national state. The many existing contradictions – like the discrepancy between the action group and the members of the promoted “ethnic group”, cross-cutting primordial factors and cleavages within the alleged “ethnic group” (ethnic factors against the “ethnic” concept), and the discord among the ethnonational spokesmen themselves – did not kill the project87. Instead the concept worked very well by tapping external resources.

Huntington argues this way, too. He holds that Pakistan got its statehood too easily. Jinnah’s Muslim League could not form any mass appeal and remained with a thin social basis. Therefore, “in post-independence Pakistan the League lost both its constituency and its purposes”88.

The Muslims in Bosnia have not formed a broad national movement either and, still, almost ended up in their “own” state – simply because the structure around them fell into pieces. One could speak of a negative nation-building.

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Muslims in Bosnia, even after the war, have shown the strongest inclination of all “ethnic groups” to keep up the idea of a multi-“ethnic” state. They have also shown a variety of dogmatic and political approaches and are far from homogeneous89. This can be explained by a rather slow process of Muslim nation-building throughout history. For these standards, the opportunity of ethno-national statehood came rashly and too suddenly.

2. The second reason has to do with the idea of “ethnicity” itself. This action concept is ideologically thin and has nothing to offer except a notion of “ethnic” homogeneity, ethno-national competition or hatred, and the promise of one’s “own” state with its political resources granted on the international platform. Emancipative ideas of societal or economic progress hardly exist. It was no coincidence that the party-programs of the ethno-national parties for the Bosnian elections in 1990 were much thinner than that of the alternative forces.

The advantage of “ethnic” action concepts is – as mentioned above – that they have a time lead in mobilizing people since they do not need discussions but latch onto primordial elements which seem ready and clear. But they turn out to be of use in a dynamic process only, i.e. on the way towards the maximum goal of an ethno-national state. Once this stage is reached, the ethno-national cleavage loses its meaning and purpose. For then, great parts of the ethno-national, hostile “camps” are fenced in by state borders. The “homogenized” interior does not hold long. Instead, other cleavages will emerge in the business of every-day politics.

This can be observed ideally in Pakistan: after Partition the ethnicizer “religion” crumbled and the ethnicizer of “language” took the lead. New contrasts have gained importance and influenced political outcomes. Intra-religious cleavages have sharpened, too. Confrontations between Sunnis and the Shia minority have become more and more frequent.

To a certain extent, this tendency can be also observed in Serbia and the Serbian parts of Bosnia, where “ethnic” harmony is far and political dissent strong. The Bosnian Muslim case has already been mentioned – the difference is, however, that there is not such a great discrepancy between claim and reality, since the goal of a Bosnian Muslim ethno-national state was neither fully clear nor strongly pursued.

The observations lead to the conclusion that, in the end, there cannot be such things as ethno-national states (commonly called “nation-states”) at all. The “ethnic” cleavage becomes obsolete or the “ethnic” concept will die with its own “success” which is, in the final stage, the ethno-national state.

This is just the opposite of what John Stuart Mill once recommended: before democracy enters, society must be homogenized and develop a “harmony of

87 Above all, in the Balkans in the first half of the 20th century, it was common that even representatives of ethno-national parties, mostly of “Muslim” parties, described themselves “ethnically” as Serb or Croatian. All different combinations were possible. Examples in: Ramet, Sabrina P., «Primordial Ethnicity or Modern Nationalism: The Case of Yugoslavia’s Muslims, Reconsidered», in South Slav Journal, p. 10.
88 Huntington, Samuel P., Political Order in Changing Societies, cit. p. 442.
89 See tables.
feeling. If this were true, democracy and ethno-nationally heterogeneous states could not exist together. However, almost all people in the world live in heterogeneous states and more and more of them are democracies. Instead, as we have seen, if states are formed or do exist with the presumption of being ethno-nationally homogeneous, the democratic system furthers and helps display ethno-national heterogenization.

7. Breaking Out of the Vicious Circle

What happened in Bosnia and colonial India was actually the result of a "big mistake". The error started to take hold in theory and later in practice. Internal and external actors fell prey to, or actively promoted, the notion that, first, clear-cut ethnic groups exist and, second, that they are politically incompatible. Primordially speaking, this was nonsense because ethnic features are spread diffusely and do not coincide with the proclaimed groups. Also politically, the cleavages were not that clear cut at all. Ethnic conflict did not exist. Instead, ethnic cleavages in the primordial sense (and political cleavages) ran counter to the "ethnic" concepts presented by cultural and political spokesmen who argued that Serbs, Croats, Hindus, and Muslims were indeed ethnic groups. To make their arguments more convincing, they searched for additional contrasts to the people's beliefs, which they found in allegedly primordial features (language, customs, etc.) as well as in distorted historiography.

The findings herein constitute a recommendation to political actors - external ones and internal ones anyway - not to give way to ethno-national demands, neither symbolically, nor politically, nor institutionally. For this will start a vicious circle in which every further step to solve conflicts, including the drawing of borders, will be ever more tightly bound to the "ethnic" paradigm.

When conflicting parties speak of ethnic conflict, alarm bells should be ringing not only with politicians but also with journalists. This was not the case in the past. Instead, they adopted these ideas without scrutiny, which led to reporting and policy-outcomes that were located within the "ethnic" paradigm.

What this means for party systems is described by Horowitz: "Once ethnic politics begins in earnest, each party, recognizing that it cannot count on defections from members of the other ethnic group, has the incentive to solidify the support of its own group." This has an escalating effect in sharpening political

contrasts along ethno-national lines. Multi- and trans-"ethnic" parties will be ground between the millstones. The unbridgeable and exclusive friend-foe-scheme of Carl Schmitt will be projected on the ethno-national camps. Political constituencies will become unmovable. The state will be paralyzed.

It is doubtful whether and when the ex-Yugoslavian states can break out of this vicious circle. There are encouraging signs. The biggest single steps were the death of Franjo Tudjman, the internal struggle of HDZ-hardliners in Croatia and Herzegovina, the election victory of non-ethno-national forces in Croatia at the beginning of 2000, and the successful anti-Milošević revolution in October 2000. Now in Bosnia, trans-"ethnic" parties are also a force to be reckoned with, despite their poor performance in the latest election in October 2002 (after their big success two years earlier).

The rise of alternatives in the Balkans depends largely on two dialectical factors:

1. The external actors, who once gave incentives to ethno-nationalists, must now turn to supporting multi- and trans-"ethnic" forces. New policy issues and cleavages beyond the ethno-national question can be promoted, among others, by economic progress and new foreign policy perspectives. This leads to the second point:

2. Non-ethno-national governments will profit from a realistic perspective of international partnership. The domestic political climate of Slovenia and Croatia has profited from the mere existence of the question of approaching the European Union, until Slovenia even entered it in 2004. For Croatia this may be a long-term perspective but it already helps to deviate the debates away from the single issue of ethno-nationalism.

The sphere of influence of this far-fetched aim also reached the Macedonian Republic before the parliamentary elections in 1998. All political parties - moderates or ethno-nationalist Macedonians and Albanians alike - supported the idea of approaching the EU. This was not for economic reasons only, but they also saw a possibility to break the vicious circle of ethno-nationalism. "We hope that the national element will get out of fashion with the abolition of borders in Europe", said, for example, the head of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

When ethno-national politics exists in an advanced stage, solutions are hard or impossible to find within the "nation-state" itself, despite varying institutional

82 Mill, John Stuart, On Liberty and Other Essays, cit., p. 434.
83 This contradiction is mentioned in: Mayall, James and Simpson, Mark, "Ethnicity is not Enough: Reflections on Protracted Secessionism in the Third Worlds", in Smith, Anthony D. (ed.), Ethnicity and Nationalism, cit., p. 6; Rizman, Rudolf, "The Sociological Dimension of Conflicts Between Ethnonationalisms", in Devetak, Silvo and Flere, Sergej and Seewann, Gerhard (eds.), Kleine Nationen und Ethnische Minderheiten im Umbruch Europa, cit., p. 504.
84 Horowitz, Donald L., Ethnic Groups in Conflict, cit., p. 318.
85 Schmitt, Carl, Der Begriff des Politischen, Berlin, 1991 [1922].
86 Angelka Peeva in an interview with the author in Skopje (18.11.1997). See also: Wieland, Carsten, "Ein Makedonien mit drei Gesichtern: Innenpolitische Debatten und Nationenkonzepte", in Südosteuropa, 1997, No. 12, p. 710. The author's judgement is drawn from interviews with leaders of all important parties during the election campaign.
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it, that “ethnicity” has something to do with real origin. As a last resort of argumentation one can look at anthropology: excavations of skulls and bones in the Balkans and on the Indian subcontinent don’t reflect the “ethnic” cleavage at all89. So it’s not about what people are but what people think. Worlds of experience shape peoples’ minds and, at one point, even take over the place of primordial factors. Terror, war, and rape have contributed to the conviction of many that “ethnic groups” cannot live together, although the strategies of a relatively few brutal activists have been laid bare90.

These case studies of Bosnia and India lead to the following conclusion that is waiting to be tested in other areas: Ethnic groups are not politically incompatible, but they are incompatible with politics. If this insight descends from the sphere of academics to that of Western policy advisers and policy makers, it could give them a better grip on conflict-solving in modern times. Supranationality, devaluation of political sovereignty, conceptual separation of nation and state, and the consequent denial of ethnic conflict could bring about new worlds of experience, which may gradually influence views and finally political outcomes. This may open new doors in international politics at the beginning of the new millennium.
