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Ethnicity and the Notion of Progress

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Zusammenfassung/Abstract

Seit dem 18. Jh. wurde die soziale Entwicklung als eine Abfolge vom einsamen Individuum zu der Herausbildung zunehmend geschichteter, größerer Gruppen mit stärkerem Zusammenhalt dargestellt. In den meisten Fällen wird die Entwicklung sozialer Ungleichheit als ein notwendiger Bestandteil allgemeinen Fortschritts gesehen. Das Ziel jeder geschichtlichen Entwicklung war die Herausbildung von Völkern und Nationen, und solche teleologischen Narrative beeinflussen die Archäologie noch heute, auch wenn das Konzept als solches als widerlegt gilt. In diesem Artikel behaupte ich, dass die Herausbildung von aktiver Ethnizität für den Großteil der menschlichen Vorgeschichte und Geschichte die Ausnahme, nicht die Regel war und befürworte eine veränderte Meistererzählung, die auf den Werten moderner demokratischer Gesellschaften beruht.

Developmental schemes since the 18th century have proposed a sequence from the individual to the formation of increasingly stratified, numerous and cohesive groups. In the main, increasing inequality was closely linked to the concept of progress. Ethnicity and finally nationhood were depicted as the goal of human history, and teleological narratives leading to that goal have influenced archaeological discourse to that very day, even if the concept itself has been repudiated. In contrast, I argue that through most of human history and prehistory, active ethnicity was the exception rather than the rule and argue for a changed master narrative based the values of modern democratic society.

Schlagworte: Ethnische Identität, Fortschritt, Kulturwechsel, Materielle Kultur

Keywords: Culture Change, Ethnic Identity, Material Culture, Progress

Introduction

The relation between archaeological cultures and ethnic groups has been a central, but highly contested subject in prehistory ever since its origin as a discipline. Early accounts tried to use archaeological finds to illustrate and substantiate the national origin story, illustrating how the aspired future development was already presaged in the remote past. Later on, selected aspects of archaeological research could be integrated into these stories, or, more rarely, be formed into an origin story on their own, with Switzerland and the pile dwellers (Kaeser 2006) or the Dacians in Ceaucescu era Romania as well known examples. While this is a use of archaeological research mainly by people outside the discipline, archaeologists themselves have also been fervently involved in nation building exercises - even if their influence was normally less than they wished for.

However, archaeology as a discipline has its intellectual roots in 19th century concepts, and the whole idea of ethnic groups, "people", is closely intertwined with the rise of nation states in the aftermath of the French revolution. The concept of ethnicity is also inextricably linked to the notion of progress and various developmental schemes in the Hegelian tradition.

Developmental schemes

The majority of enlightenment philosophers started their account of the development of society with isolated individuals, perceiving the formation of groups as something in need of explanation, rather than a given. This is a contrast to modern anthropological research where it is assumed that hominins have always been gregarious, based on analogies with the great apes.[1]

The development from an amorphous and egalitarian original group to the modern state has been laid out in a number of schemes, starting with Gianbattista Vico (1725) in the 18th century. Today, the best known evolutionary schemes are probably those by Lewis Morgan (1877) and Friedrich Engels (1884), with a progress from horde to family, tribe and finally the state. Numerous alternative pathways were proposed, e.g. by List (1841), Bachofen (1861), Maine (1861), Bücher (1893), Tönnies (1935) among others, all following the ascendant model. Indeed, it seems difficult to find any 19th century theorist who has not proposed one evolutionary scheme or the other. In these schemata, ethnic identity, the formation of self-defined peoples, belongs to a relatively high state of development, the last before the apogee of human history, or indeed the beginning of history proper, the state, is reached. This development is often connected to different forms of social cohesion: from morals to law (Hegel 1820), status to contract (Maine 1861), community to society (Tönnies 1887) or mechanical to organic solidarity (Durkheim 1893).

In classical political philosophy, ethnic identity is seen as a necessary but temporary condition on the way to the formation of a nation. Hegel (1830) propagated the nation as the highest form of social organisation. Implicitly, groups that did not achieve (or aspire) nationhood were perceived as having failed in some way, either by lack of trying, a lack of innate strength, dedication, political organisation and heroism or even a congenital inability to do so – the inability of Slavic people to form a nation is a recurring *topos* in German nationalist discourse from the 1840s (Thörner 2008, 33) to Hitler's "Mein Kampf". This view could also provide the justification for colonialism: certain people were not able to rule themselves and needed the stern but benevolent guidance of more developed nations.

Communities that "could not make it" to state level were either expected to be forcefully "assimilated" into a group with a "higher" form of organisation, exterminated as a group or pushed to the rims of the inhabited earth. This is related to the more general ideas of competing tribes or peoples and the "wave-model" of prehistory as developed by thinkers like J. Grimm and Schlegel (Sommer 2009). Prehistoric monuments were thus seen as the work of early people like Fins or Celts, driven West or North by later waves of migrants. Hence present-day "primitive people" could serve as a model for the prehistoric ancestors of modern peoples and nations (Nilson 1838). The term "substrate" was sometimes used to denominate people that have disappeared as distinct groups. Often, their existence is only deduced linguistically, in other context, there could be a later "resurgence" which introduced more primitive cultural elements into the dominant culture.

The failure to develop would ultimately lead to the displacement and extinction of a group (Sollas 1911, 382–383). The process was seen as part of the general progress of mankind (Lubbock 1865; Nielson 1862) from the individual or the horde to the state. In the Hegelian scheme, the World Spirit was moving from one ethnic group to another, which meant that general history progressed, even if specific peoples fell behind. In Hegel's lifetime, the Germanic speaking peoples were the bearers of the world spirit, but they would ultimately be superseded by the "younger" and more dynamic Slavic peoples.

In the 1960s, anthropologist theorists like Fried (1967), Service (1971) and Sahlins (1968) defined sequences of increasing social complexity, illustrated with ethnographic analogues.

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1 E.g. Ghiglieri 1987; Wrangham 1987; Foley/Gamble 2009, 3268.

Their neo-evolutionist schemes were ultimately based on Morgan's developmental hierarchies. Social complexity was marked by division of labour, the exploitation of the labour of others (surplus) by elites, increased inequality and the institutionalisation of inequality by the development of political organisations. Fried (1967) distinguished egalitarian society, ranked society, stratified society and early state, while Service (1971) proposed a development from horde to tribal society to ranked society and finally the early state. These schemes were eagerly adopted in archaeology (Theel 2006). The implicit assumption that social inequality was a prerequisite for any development soon attracted conservative thinkers as well, for example Colin Renfrew (1972).

This evolutionary perspective continued well into the late 20th century. In the political sciences, it is linked to the idea that ethnic identity finds its fullest expression as a nation and the definition of a nation as "self-aware ethnic groups"[2] and is echoed in Anthony Smith's concept of ethnic Nationalism[3]. This implied that the formation of tribal and ethnic groups was a necessary step on the way to nationhood (Crone 1986, 56) as well. Even in classical Marxist thought, capitalism was perceived as a necessary step on the way to communism. Only Leo Trotzki's concept of the permanent revolution (1930) envisaged omitting this step of Engel's (1884) developmental scheme.

This evolutionary, global perspective (Kaeser 2010), eventually got entangled with the ideas advocated in the "failed states" of Italy and Germany in the 19th century, the propaganda of nationalist ethnic groups in 19th century Empires and the concept of "Kulturnation". A specific culture was seen as prerequisite and justification for claims to independent nationhood, and this culture had to be constructed (Anderson 1983).

Group identity was presumed to be pronounced and visible only at a certain level of development, both in terms of material culture and in mental and individual outlook. Already in 1770, Thomas Percy claimed that: "[t]he more men approach to a state of wild and uncivilized life, the greater resemblance they will have in manners; because savage nature, reduced almost to meer [*sic!*] brutal instinct, is simple and uniform, whereas art and refinement are infinitely various" (Percy 1770, VI).

In contrast to the linear scheme of constant progress outlined above, several conservative and reactionary thinkers emphasised the constant danger of retrogression and degeneration, of "slipping back". Barbarity lurked as a constant threat under the veneer of civilisation. Giambattista Vico (1725) proposed a circular development of civilisation, from barbarity to the divine, the heroic and the human, then falling back into barbarity again. Oswald Spengler (1923) in his influential "Der Untergang des Abendlandes" gave a detailed account of the rise and fall of civilisations, from ancient times to modernity. Helena Blavatskaja's (1877) theosophy, quite influential in the 1920s and 30s linked the rise and fall of several, increasingly inferior races with geological cataclysms. With the scientific racism of the late 19th century and the ascent of fascism in the 1920s, Vico's *curso* of rise and fall was linked to miscegenation and the fast reproduction of inferior races by authors like Chamberlain (1899), Lanz von Liebenfels, Alfred Rosenberg and Adolf Hitler (Daim 1993). The circular development of Vico and others was replaced by one episode of rise and fall: if the white race could not maintain its purity and its superiority, all mankind was doomed.

In archaeology, the progressive variant seems to dominate. But while the typological method of Montelius (1903) is based on an evolutionary framework, he saw evolution as probable as degeneration. In trying to establish chronologies for the prehistoric period, authors like Kossinna (1911) also argued with both the development and degeneration of artefact styles. The latter is often linked to the assimilation of other, inferior peoples.

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2   Smith 2013, 59; cf. Connor 1990; 1991; 2004.
3   Smith 1986; 1993; 2005; 2009.

With the rise of postprocessualism and constructivism, evolutionary schemes came under heavy criticism and have been more or less discredited. The use of terms like horde and tribe in the developmental schemes outlined above has made their application to present-day groups problematic, as they imply a lack of development and hence inferiority (Leach 1986). The whole concept of tribe was seen as flawed.[4] It was claimed that most tribes, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, were really colonial constructs (Wright 1999, 421), which has become more or less accepted in Anglophone anthropology. Yet recent years saw a backlash, claiming that this denies the ability of "Third World" people to form political organisations on their own, as a part of Jack Goody's (2006) "Theft of History".

Groups and ethnic groups

Clearly, the definition of ethnic groups is contentious. If we refuse any biological definition or a definition based on shared experiences, self-ascription, including emotional investment, is clearly an important factor. Most authors would agree, however would not consider stockbrokers or fans of a football club as ethnic groups. There is an increasing awareness that identities are situational and nested, including ethnic identities. Frederick Barth's definition of ethnic identity as a person's "[…] basic, most general identity […]" (Barth 1969, 13) is confusing at first sight, as it would imply that, for example, an early Christian's ethnicity, who refused to sacrifice to the emperor in the face of certain death, would be "Christian" rather than "Roman". This again seems to run counter to the expectation that ethnicity is based on shared experience. Of course, membership in a religious community is very much based on shared practice and shared tradition (Connerton 1989), even if this tradition has not necessarily been passed down by parents and co-residents. Barth, however, acknowledges the importance of tradition when he expects ethnic identity to be "[…] presumptively deter-

mined by […] origin and background" (ibd.). When examining the origins of specific ethnic identities it is helpful, however, to distinguish between the two factors. Basic Identities can change over the course of a lifetime, and new Basic Identities can arise, be they religions, nations or political convictions. However, the very formation of a new Basic Identity creates highly emotional shared experiences that normally form an important part of group identity henceforth, as is evidenced in numerous origin myths from the *Exodus* to the *Gesta Langobardorum*. In addition, the past is often appropriated in a teleological way. To keep with the example above, the Old Testament and the whole history of the Jewish people were turned into a prediction of the birth of Christ and the emergence of the Christian religion.

During the French Revolution, a misinterpreted item of Roman dress – the Phrygian cap – became the hallmark of a political movement as the liberty cap of the Jacobines, and Jacques-Louis David's scenes from Roman history celebrated republican values.

Once the heroic phase of a movement is over, identity is increasingly maintained by custom and tradition. Cultural "stuff" is acquired, which may reference the history of the heroic phase. The choice often seems quite haphazard, for example the Chassidic or Amish dress, fossilised and overemphasised material culture from the foundation phase. It serves an important purpose, however, as it signals the difference between "us" and "them". During the "tradition phase", the no longer new identity can remain the "Basic Identity", or fade to a less important type of identity. It may, however, be mobilised again in the case of conflict, or to support a new "Basic Identity". It is difficult to escape the essentialist thinking associated with "ethnic identity" – for us, the Heroic phase of an emergent "Basic Identity" equates with a political movement rather than a people, but it can turn a group and their descendants into a traditional people in the long run.

Waxing and waning ethnicity

Barth's definition also seems to imply that ethnicity is a human universal. Groups, even

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4   Curtin et al. 1978, 579; Vail 1989; Thiong'o 2009.

antagonistic groups exist among gorillas and chimpanzees (Stearns 2007), and culturally transmitted behaviour is used to emphasise group identity and the difference to other groups. Claims of cultural behaviour have even been made for dolphins and whales (Norris 2002). There is little doubt that early hominins lived in groups, and some authors have argued for the existence of tribes or ethnic groups in the Palaeolithic, based on different types of stone tools (Wendowski 1995) or symbolic behaviour.[5] The low genetic diversity of both Neanderthals and Homo sapiens in comparison to the great apes has been used to postulate cultural groups with reduced interbreeding from the Middle Palaeolithic onwards (Premo/Hublin 2009).

In contrast, numerous areas without clearly defined ethnic groups are well known from ethnography, with Leach's (1954) Highland Burma and Moerman's (1965) study of "the" Lue as the best known examples.

If ethnic identity is not universal then, the genesis and maintenance of ethnicity needs explanation. I have argued elsewhere (Sommer in press) that ethnic identity is created or mobilised under conditions of conflict over scarce resources. This can involve class conflicts or, in more equalitarian societies, conflicts between occupational specialists, genders or age groups. In this model, ethnicity is defined as politically mobilised culture that comes into existence when there is a competition over limited resources. These conflicts can lead to a split and the formation of new settlements or groups linked to a new ideology. In this case, cultural differences can be actively imbued with meaning to create visible differences. Archaeologically, this will be perceived as culture change. Over time, as the new groups stabilise and reach the "tradition phase", these stylistic differences loose much of their meaning, but are still visible archaeologically. Conflicts can also arise between different residential groups or groups with different economies, which will

also lead to the deliberate enhancement of existing cultural differences. Over time, stochastic variation (Bentley et al. 2004) will lessen these differences, however, and instead lead to a geographical cline in stylistic variation. Loss of "ethnic identity" is thus not a catastrophic and traumatic event, but the return to the status quo after a period of unrest and change under open competition. To persist, ethnic identity needs to be actively maintained, which is impossible without a specialised class of indoctrinators (priests and scholars) and stable institutions like schools, libraries and mass media with associated specialists.

Under conditions of low population density (cf. Powell et al. 2009, 1299) and low inequality, phases of active ethnic mobilisation can be supposed to be quite rare. That is, most of the time, there will not be any ethnic groups, ethnicity is rare *event* rather than the rule. This is somewhat masked by the nature of material culture and the archaeological record: even if the specific shape or decoration of a pot or metal pin has lost its signalling value, people will still need pots or pins, and will continue to make them in the customary style, even if they put less effort into careful reproduction and elaboration. Periods of activated material culture see rapid change, but that is effectively masked by "blending and smearing" (Ascher 1968) which affects stratigraphies, typological methods of ordering and dating, and 14C dates.

Progress, inequality and ethnicity

The connection between ethnic groups and progress is thus a real one, if progress is defined by social differentiation/increased inequality. Hordes and matriarchal societies at the most primitive stage of development have fluid membership and no sense of group identity, while states are characterised by institutionalised ethnicity, a distinctive culture actively maintained by the state.

Under a low degree of division of labour and a nomadic lifestyle there may not be structures to deal with intergroup conflicts, as individuals or families can simply leave and move elsewhere. Increasing inequality will increase the probability of inter-group conflicts. Con-

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5 Barham 2002, 181; d'Errico et al. 2003; d'Errico 2008.

scious attempts to maintain ethnicity and to foster social cohesion lead to the eventual emergence of ideological specialists. The creation of the "other" will increase the possibility, and indeed the desirability of inter-group conflicts, which can be used as a safety valve to mask social tension and offer an additional way to reach a higher social position. The emergence of specialised warrior role, be it caste, age group or class, will lead to constant external conflicts, strengthening existing ethnicisation and making it more permanent.

The formation of ethnic groups is one of the ways of dealing with conflicts, as described above. This mechanism is not used by all social groups, however. In conditions of low population density and high residential mobility, it can be easier to shift to another group or form a new group. However, there are ways of controlling dissent and keeping groups together even under these conditions, as exemplified by initiation ceremonies in desert Australia, which helped to maintain the control of the tribal elders. In settled agricultural communities with more investment in the land, incentives for leaving to avoid conflicts or oppression are lessened (Gilman 1981), which necessitates new ways of dealing with intragroup conflict. This can lead to the development of hereditary leaders (chiefs), as in the classic evolutionary model, or, in contrast, new ways of maintaining and enforcing equality.[6]

Alternative ways of measuring progress

There have been limited attempts of measuring progress in general. Technological progress forms the base of the typological approach by Thompsen and Montelius. Gordon Childe (1936, 14) used population density to assess the impact of economic changes. Julian Stewards's (1955) cultural ecology looked at the adaptation to the environment, Leslie White (1959) at energy expenditure. Apart from the "social differentiation" discussed above, other factors could be taken into ac-

count, not all of them visible archaeologically, or even easily quantifiable in modern societies, like the level of general happiness. The general level of health, life expectancy, social equality, lack of conflict, equal access to resources, knowledge and social roles, level of participation in political decisions, personal freedom, control over reproduction have rarely been investigated systematically. The development of a personality, indicated by "symbolic behaviour" (Vanhaeren/D'Errico 2011) has been used for the transition to the Upper Palaeolithic, but not beyond. Arponen et al. (2016) use Amartya Sen's capability approach – the "capability to function" (ibd. 544) in the analysis of the Butmir site of Okolište.

Conclusion

As outlined at the beginning, accounts of the past are stories we make up to justify the present as well as our aims and aspirations for the future. Now that aims have shifted from belligerent nation states to regional or international integration, and from hierarchies to social justice, the story has to change, include the large bits that did not fit into the previous picture and ask new questions. In a democratic society that aspires to equal rights and equal opportunities for everybody, we need to stop normalizing ethnicity and inequality, as something that was already presaged in deep prehistory and came about by necessity, painting them as necessary steps to general progress, and illustrate alternative pathways that did not involve oppression and exclusion, or stop painting them as less "advanced" than their more "civilized" neighbours.

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6 Barclay 1982; Scott 2009.

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Inhaltsverzeichnis