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Field Survey

Neo-institutionalism in Ethnic Studies

The course that I worked on for the CASE program will examine the neo-institutional methods in ethnic studies, institutional understanding of ethnic identity formation and institutional aspects of ethnic conflict prevention. Participation in the seminars, round table talks and other activities of the Institute of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies helped me strengthen methodological and empirical foundations of the course which will be based on neo-positivist assumptions.

The main point of the course is to consider ethnicity from the neo-institutional point of view. There are several approaches concerning ethnicity and ethnic identity from various points of view, and attempts are constantly undertaken to create a certain "general" theory. But as the subject of study is interdisciplinary in nature, there is not even the slightest consensus concerning this concept among proponents of Anthropology, Macro-historical Sociology or Political Science. Nevertheless, the majority of researchers assume that the modern phenomenon of "New Ethnicity" differs in any way from the past tribalism.

Analytical approaches to ethnicity traditionally begin with primordial studies, which can be defined as the analysis of subjective features and feelings of personal attachment to an ethnic group, to its activities, history and traditions. 'The question,' writes N. G. Skvortsov, 'is about such specific form of identification which consists in correlation by the man some components of his own distinctiveness with a number of characteristics of the group with which he identifies himself'. Therefore ethnic identity

consists in 'subjective symbolic or emblematic use of any of cultural aspects to distinguish oneself from other groups' (Skvortsov 1996:60). Primordial scientists often use the analogy between ethnos and the human body because, like an ethnic group, body also requires protection against penetration by alien elements and "illnesses". 'Ethnicity is something ancient, rooting into us at the biological level'. (Bedganov 1992:111). They indicate that the crises, observable within the ethnic group, are clear indications that it requires treatment and care. Therefore, migrants and refugees are considered alien elements which threaten not only physical, but also spiritual integrity. But such migrants also search for any haven where they can be themselves, given the internal social-psychological instability that results from migration". Migrants and refugees expect their own groups to be like a "big family" which remains the only way one is capable of coping with aggressive influences in the external social environment.

As a social phenomenon, ethnicity has the following features. First, ethnicity mobilizes people much more quickly that any other form of social identity. The reason is that membership in a particular ethnic group is one of the most salient features for a person. Besides, 'the only sacred thing, remaining in the soul of a man having been alienated from society when his hopes are destroyed, turn out to be his national feeling giving him a sense of belonging with those, who seem to him the most congenial, the people of his nationality' (Dzarasov 1994:171).

The essence of primordial studies was expressed concisely by the famous soviet psychologist L. S. Vygodsky: 'We do not want to be Ivan not remembering his fatherhood; we do not suffer from megalomaniacal thinking that the history begins with us; we do not want to receive from history a "pure" and flat name; we want the name on which there is the dust

of the centuries' (Vygodsky 1982: 428-429). L. N. Gumilev's views are usually also considered to be of primordial nature: 'people are united in accordance with the principle of complimentary nature. This is unconscious sympathy for one and antipathy for others' (Gumilev 1990:121-122). The primordial ideal is always transcendental. This image is often poorly connected to the surrounding reality, and it is a "supreme" criticism of the existing order. On the other hand, ideals and views of various primordial directions coincide with one another in their essence. This very fact explains that nationalists of the opposite sides can understand one another much easier, and sometimes – in special cases – even cross over to the opposite side.

In spite of the fact that supporters of this theoretical view point (and especially its genetic variation) give much attention to analyzing the origins of the concrete group, the essence of primordialism is the understanding how identities are perceived which as a whole is the object of the constructivist school. But there are also distinctions. First, there are distinctions in the methodological design. The theory of constructivism is based on the conceptual methods of the positivistic sociology, or more precisely, on methods of natural and engineering sciences. Another distinction consists of representations about the stability of ethnic identity. For primordialists, it is difficult to change ethnicity; from the practical point of view, it is even impossible. For them ethnicity is not based on social factors (e.g., "geographical primordialism" which emphasizes the role of geographical environment in identity formation (Kazi 1987). Constructivists, on the contrary, consider that although identity is "crystallized" in social structures, people can change their own sense of ethnic belonging rather easily. Constructivist researchers do not only emphasize the importance of social

institutions in the formation of ethnic consciousness. By investigating a social context on which the background of ethnic identification is formed, they specify peculiarities of institutional perceptions by the human consciousness.

Theoretical arguments of constructivism are closely related to the instrumentalist approach, which considers ethnicity as a result of particular social circumstances, external and internal, in which groups or communities are situated. In other words, it is considered as a result of influences of the social situation. Hence, ethnicity is 'an instrument in collective aspiration for material superiority on the socio-political arena, and observed in different forms of ethnic mobilization is dictated by the demands for these or those material factors which determine social behavior' (Tishkov 1993:25-44). Therefore ethnicity is analyzed as a '"title role" being calculated and consciously chosen by a person or a group' (Skvortsov 1997:137). A good example might be found in the census results from Russia. One finds that in some regions, Rostov Oblast, for example, some respondents cited their Scythian or Sarmatian identities – although such peoples have not existed since the Middle Ages (Don-TR 2002). So, if primordialism explains ethnicity by using socio-psychological categories (and sometimes assumptions of psychoanalysis) then instrumentalism prefers operational explanations. One may say that these are both their advantages and their disadvantages.

The defect of instrumentalism is its inability to explain the stability of preserving any ethnicity existing for a long time. If people constantly change their identity for achievement of the purposes external to it, how does one explain why so many ethnic groups have continued to reproduce their ethnic or national consciousness over centuries and even thousands of years? It is

clear enough that if to use such rigid behavioral explanations and to consider social behavior as a product and a result of an external situation, that any subsequent influence will have the same effect, as much as any previous one. As a result, the human consciousness becomes similar to a blank canvas or a strip of coastal surf on which each wave erases traces of its predecessors completely. However, in reality this does not happen. Alongside other elements that can change, in consciousness there are rather steady constructions responsible for personal integrity and all those factors that influence its stability, including the stability of ethnic identity. Therefore constructivism is rather doubtful. What one person can create, the other can destroy just as easily. Technologies and methods of identity construction have neutral values and implementing character. It looks like a mill: depending on a quality of grain, the same flour will be produced. Therefore, it is possible to impose the subsequent construction on the previous one, then another, and one more and so on.

One can notice that each theory has some objective positive advantages, and there appears to be a temptation to combine such advantages from all theories. But we should understand that from the structural point of view such a combination is impossible, because both positive features, and negative ones are constructed in a kind of unity, and one cannot separate them. Nevertheless, taking into account distinguishing features of the existing conceptions of ethnicity, I can suggest another point of view – neo-institutional.

It has already become commonplace to remember that the theory cannot be ideal because any true knowledge cannot be final in accordance with its definition. Therefore though the concept analyzed below is rather far from its completion, I will try to outline the variant of the general

constructivist approach to ethnicity, which seems to me the most appropriate. As we have seen, the basic flaw of constructivism is its inability to explain stability of ethnic constructions. Thus, the problem of "identification stability" can be considered as a variant of the classical problem of the off-system task, because the existence of ethnicity is explained by certain external factors every time which are not only covered within frameworks of each of the existing theories, but also are not treated in depth at all.

Most surprisingly, those researchers who in their analysis try to keep away from the social structure and institutional processes so strongly, nevertheless, offer concrete recommendations with reference to ethnic and national political issues based on the existing institutional structures of human society. In my opinion, one should only welcome such behavior -- though it also looks inconsistent. But turning away from the metaphysics of abstract reasons, we should return inevitably to the real institutional processes. In any case, such an attitude toward ethnic identity looks pragmatic, let alone there is a significant simplification of process of analyzed theoretical assumptions. Considering ethnicity among other institutional categories as derivatives of the social behavior and behavioral exceptions, one can always take advantage of the available theoretical knowledge and the empirical information, connected with institutions and the society as a whole. In this case we depart from individual - group dictatorship in the analysis of ethnicity inevitably, and we can consider ethnic identity not as a product of numerous natural and/or strong-willed efforts of separate subjects, but as a result of the manifestation of institutional mechanisms and actions of the social structure known beforehand and rather well understood. In other words, ethnicity can be

analyzed as a product of the social processes, and in particular, some qualities which can be named "institutional disintegration" ones.

In the class I am planning to teach, I will use institution as a "general working term" which can strengthen ethnic identity directly by changing actors' behavior. Such institutions 'provide information about the choices of other players by structuring their choices to achieve equilibrium outcomes", (Knigth and Sened, 1995, p. 10). Institutional processes have important practical consequences for social groups. The institutions play an important role in social life; the society exists only in so far as there are institutional relations. Lack of institutional definition can give rise to ethnic conflicts, or allow conflicts to fester, by failing to provide clear guidance for how people should respond to situations with serious implications. So the aim of the course is to give the understanding of the correlation between institutional processes and ethnic identity formation.