

DIFFERENCE

Susanne Hoerber Rudolph, University of Chicago

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In titling this taskforce Inequality and Difference in Developing Societies I had in mind stimulating deliberation similar to that of my predecessor , Theda Skocpol, when she launched a task force entitled Inequality in American Democracy (Taskforce on Inequality). Yet the title is distinct from hers because it includes the noun, “difference,” with all the empirical and theoretical baggage it has accumulated in recent years. “Inequality in Developing Societies” by itself would almost immediately point the reader in the direction of unequal material conditions such as the distribution of income and wealth. Analysis of material conditions will indeed figure in our report. Underlying such an economic assumption is an implicit condemnation of inequality and an implicit affirmation of the Aristotelian view that where

people of the middle sort are most numerous the polity is likely to enjoy stability and practice virtue, or the more recent assertion that higher incomes coincide with democracy. (Lipset; Przeworski et al)

I chose a title that included the word difference because it invokes another kind of inequality, status inequality. In today's context, difference suggests ethnic, regional, gender, religious, caste, race, and linguistic diversity. Inequality based on the distribution of income and wealth calls for economic solutions. Inequality based on difference calls in addition for symbolic, psychological and political solutions. Status inequality has to do with esteem and disesteem, respect and disrespect; it is about the politics of identity and recognition. These matter as much in creating the preconditions of functioning polities as do policies that address economic inequality. For a casual test of this assertion, consider for a moment how much time has been allocated to the discussion of difference as against discussion of

economic inequality in the daily broadcasts of news from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Primordialism and Constructivism

Scholars and policy makers are better able to think about the problems of difference today than they were ten years ago because the pervasive primordialism that characterized discussions of identity (Geertz) have been at least partly replaced by a popular version of constructivism. As little as seven years ago President Clinton's speechwriters reflected the then conventional way of thinking about identity when they explained the ethnic war in Serbia as arising out of "Ancient Hatreds"—that is, inherited propensities that conflated culture with biology (Rudolph and Rudolph, "Ancient Hatred"). Since then, differences have been increasingly understood as being "constructed," that is, they are discursive formations and cultural practices that are subject to change by the activity of human agents and the force of historical

events. Slobodan Milosovic was the critical pedagogue. His strategic move to rouse sleeping Serbian myths helped reveal that what he represented as ancient hatreds was a newly created hegemonic discourse.

The contest between constructivist and primordial positions in the understanding of difference is not simply an arcane problem for the academy. It makes a lot of difference for policy whether the understanding of policy intellectuals and of the general public is animated by primordial or constructivist perspectives.

Primordialism asserts that certain cultural traits are inborn, enduring and irreversible. Primordialism implies a relentless determinism. As it is applied to understanding difference in the modern world it is fatalistic, hopeless about the possibilities for identity transformations, pessimistic in its predictions for conciliation between allegedly inimical identities. Acolytes of primordialism argue that it sets the stage for two alternatives, rigorous separation along national lines or ethnic cleansing and genocide, as it will not yield to milder remedies. (Mearsheimer and

Van Evera; Bieber) Short of eradication, ethnic groups must be separated, compartmentalized; they can not live together without violence. Federalism, consociationalism, or other modes of harmonious pluralism are ruled out.

Constructivists, in contrast to primordialists, argue that identities have been created and re-created within the lifetime of living observers, that historical circumstances and powerful events transform identities. Constructivists' understanding that identities are made, not born, that they are the result of social interaction, suggests that identities can be shaped and altered. Societies that harbor deep differences can find institutional arrangements that accommodate both commonality and difference. Agency can make a difference.

The Community of Equal Citizens, the Community of Communities, and the Accomodation of Difference.

It is ironic that despite America's standing as a country of immigrants, the notion of difference is not natural to Americans or

has only recently become so. Its Lockean liberalism assumes a universal human nature; unmarked individuals share natural rights and reason. One of the predispositions Americans bring to the table of international relations is the belief in equality and individuality. America's liberal democracy, like other liberal democracies, at the formal level tends to efface socially ascribed identities, ignoring social and cultural differences in the name of equality as sameness. Its citizens constitute a homogeneous public whose separate and autonomous members are equal not only in the eye of the law but in their moral standing. The metaphor of the melting pot points to the fact that until recently assimilation to a common template was considered the American norm. (Glazer and Moynihan). The polity is understood as consisting of individual units and these units are basically constituted of the same materials. This vision of the polity does not serve well as the only conceptual apparatus for examining the polities of the developing world, from Sarajevo to Baghdad, that have become relevant to Americans in the last ten years.

Nor is it just Americans for whom the polity is understood as composed of individual homogeneous units . Variations on the liberal tradition of uniform citizenship characterize most European states. But in the European case liberal uniformity is tempered by Europe's feudal legacies. The memory of a society constituted of estates and status orders represented in medieval constitutions qualifies Europe's commitment to liberal individualism (Hartz).

But there are other visions of the polity. The concept of a multi-cultural nation; the recognition of diversity in the public arena; the idea that individuals are marked by ethnicity, race, religion and language; and that difference should be represented, challenges America's commitment to Lockean liberal uniformity. Several decades of affirmative action and of a new multi-cultural attentiveness in educational institutions, cultural performances and the work force have challenged but not reversed the liberal commitment to homogeneity. The representation of social pluralism was sufficiently radical to the American mind that President Clinton had to hastily remove Lanie Guinier from

consideration as Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights in the Justice Department because she favored the representation of difference and minority rights (Guinier and Torres). Such ideas are conventional rather than radical in Malaysia, Nigeria, India, Canada, where the idea of a polity built out of recognized and represented ethnic identities is central to the constitutional vision.

State-centric and Multiple Actor Theories of Identity

Construction

Constructivism, which teaches that identities are made, not given, leads us to ask who are the agents and what are the forces of identity formation. Identifying the agents is critical to the question of how to address difference. The Serbian case suggests an elite agency theory of constructivism, i.e. that political actors self-consciously and deliberately used the media, literature and the political pulpit to market representations which created in-group solidarity and out-group demonization.

Identity formation under colonialism is also said to be the product of elite agency, that of the state. Colonial and post colonial writers on South Asia read British raj administrators as freezing the fluid social structure of South Asia by imposing social stereotypes of castes and religions in their official censuses, manuals and gazetteers (Rudolph and Rudolph; Jenkins; Bayly) The result was the metaphor of an unchanging traditional “village India.”

Scholars of colonial rule accuse raj administrators of failing to recognize the ceaseless and pervasive social change that characterized 18th and 19th century India. The changeless stereotypes used by administrators “created” the very hierarchical society that they saw the Indians nurturing.

By contrast to elite theories of constructivism, I have argued that the construction of identities is an interactive social process in which multiple actors, states, governments, civil society and individuals all play a part. States invent social categories to map society and to depict the objects of social policy so that they can

collect taxes, provide services, maintain law and order, enforce legislation. States often work under the positivist illusion that social categories are objective, “out there,” needing only to be actualized in administrative records. They do not recognize that the very act of naming creates or transforms reality. When the ruled experience the consequences of being categorized, they often respond by denying or challenging the naming that has taken place. The construction of difference is not the exclusive domain of the state or of elites. Groups and individuals that constitute civil society confront states in a contest over the content and consequences of discursive formations and social constructions.

The debate in the U.S. about the ways to represent racial categories in the 2001 census, whether to provide predetermined categories or let respondents give their own version, illustrates the role of the state data apparatus in the construction of difference. The state must have categories in order to make social policy. Somewhat surprisingly, the American state did not assert that its

categories were objective. It recognized they were political: *the categories represent a social-political construct designed for collecting data on the race and ethnicity of broad population groups in this country, and are not anthropologically or scientifically based*(en.wikipedia.org). And the state was not the only actor. There was strong opposition to self-designation by parts of the black community, fearing the effects on black-targeted legislation if numbers were reduced by defection to mixed race categories. That seven million persons chose to report themselves in the 2001 Census as multiracial suggests the fluidity of social categories.

The Census of India under the raj too provides an example of how states can take a lead role in naming and ranking social groups. From their reading of classic Sanskrit texts, raj officials inferred that Indian society consisted of discrete social groups with firmly ascribed rules of conduct and specifically ranked positions in a social hierarchy. They reified the meaning of texts that native interpreters were in the habit of using more flexibly (Rudolph and

Rudolph, The Modernity). Starting in 1888, raj officials used the census in ways that were supposed to lend scientific precision to these social categories. They defined and enumerated: Brahmans, literate persons who perform ritual functions, advise authorities on correct Hindu conduct, and occupy the top of the socio-religious ladder; Gujars, herdsmen, of modest social standing; Jats, sturdy cultivators; Nadars, laborers who climb the coconut palm and whose polluting work of making liquor relegates them to the lower end of the social ladder. Such listings created both a certified reality and resistance to it. The certified social designations became the basis for social policy, which further confirmed the categories.

The census story does not end with a document-creating state freezing social phenomena in stereotypical categories run, the state did not succeed in imposing a neo-Brahmanical view of Indian social structure. Civil society groups countered the census descriptions by organizing self-help caste associations. The associations mounted legal, administrative and political challenges

to the names, occupations and histories that the census imposed on them . In the case of the cocopalm-climbing Nadars, their caste association presented evidence to the authorities that many of their caste fellows had left the polluting work of palm liquor production and become merchants, and that by history they had been regional lords (Hardgrave). Hence they were incorrectly named, characterized, and ranked. Nadar associations vigorously lobbied the authorities to change what the census said about them and encouraged thousands of Nadars to offer a different occupational description to the census takers.

In the Nadar story we see the creation and re-creation of identity and status as a result of interaction and contestation between state and civil society. It is a different story than that narrated about the Serbs, which envisions elite actors, especially the state, as leading the process of identity formation.

Redressing Differenc

talk about poverty alleviation, increases in per capita income, improving physical quality of life. What are the possible remedies for problems raised by difference? Let us consider several. Will the march of history itself eliminate or diminish difference, as a more homogeneous world replaces the colorfully disparate one of our day? If that is not in the cards, what other remedies are there? If identities are constructed in part by identifiable agents in state, polity, or civil society, can conscious policy intervene? If ethnic difference is fortified by economic difference, can reducing economic inequality affect difference? Can representation in governance and in civil associations give satisfaction to contesting ethnic actors? What part can symbolic representation play in conferring dignity and respect?

The first remedy envisions spontaneous historical processes rendering the problem of difference irrelevant. There is the supposition, common to modern residues of the enlightenment tradition, that difference will fade away, extinguished by the natural forces of progressive history. Modernization theory in the

1960-1980s followed in the 1990s by globalization theory held that the salience of difference will diminish as ascribed characteristics such as language or religion are displaced by voluntary associations and individual choices. But the homogenizing logic of modernization and globalization, of sameness created by technology, migration, communication, has worked less powerfully than expected. Take religion, the favorite target of 18th century rationalism. The philosophers were certain that religion would give way to reason. Its dramatic persistence in developing countries, in the form of Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist fundamentalisms and its even more dramatic revival in America in the form of evangelical Christianity may be emblematic of the more general hardness of "ethnic" identities and the politics of recognition (Huntington, Rudolph Fading States)

Difference has survived the most determined efforts by the project of modernity to eliminate it. Identities—linguistic, religious, caste, gender, race—persist. Spontaneous progressive history is no remedy.

Economic Inequality and Difference

What other devices are there for addressing the demands of difference? What is the relationship of inequality to difference? Can reducing economic inequalities address problems of difference? Marxism as a preeminent bearer of enlightenment rationalism was confident that differences, questions of language, culture, caste, gender, religion were super-structure, a second order problem, derivative expressions of the basic identity, class. Marxists thought that economic difference trumped all other identities. There is a wider consensus that economic inequality in the form of class is related to identity differences other than class and that economic policy can therefore affect difference . We know for example that low caste Indian peasants who profited from land reform have risen in social and political power and have partially replaced high caste landowners. (Rudolph and Rudolph, Lakshmi) But other identities have proved to be autonomous of economic condition. Indian Dalits like African-Americans complain that increased economic equality does not

assure breaching the pollution or race barrier. South Indian Dalits (“untouchables”) who had become prosperous merchants, landowners still find themselves humiliated and excluded in education, work and other social locations (Malik).

Representation and Difference

The negotiations in April 2005 over the formation of an elected government in Iraq illustrate the problems and opportunities that difference can pose. Specifically they illustrate the problems difference poses under democratic institutions. In a polity with homogeneous population the practice of majority rule that democracy mandates is said to be relatively unproblematic. In polities with heterogeneous populations marked by strong group difference, majority rule becomes more difficult. Is it possible to give expression to majority rule even while assuring minorities that they are legitimate members of the polity whose rights will be recognized and whose interests will be taken into account? If Kurds and Shias constitute a majority, how can minority Sunnis be assured that their rights will be recognized and their voices

heard? A stable democracy operating with strong diversity has to devise ways of representing that diversity.

Political representation is an obvious means for addressing the demands of difference. Diversity can be recognized and accommodated in electoral systems that provide special guarantees or protections for minorities, by affirmative action and by various forms of sharing sovereignty such as local autonomy, federalism or millet-like arrangements. Parties can build alliances that bring together diverse groups. Indeed the imperatives of majoritarianism under democracy can provide a powerful incentive for otherwise uncongenial groups to cooperate—as the Kurds and Shia in today’s Iraq have done or as the upper caste BJP (Bharatiya Janta Party) and the Dalit (ex-untouchable) BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) have done in India’s most populous state, Uttar Pradesh. Such alliances do not eliminate difference, but because they require tactical or strategic collaboration they open the way to finding common ground and learning to live with difference.

Symbolic Acts and Generating Esteem

Political scientists are said to be adept at institutional solutions to problems of difference. But the state-centric ways of recognizing and addressing identity that political scientists are adept at leave out the large role played by informal cultural practices in the marking and accommodation of difference.

Symbolic practices perform a lot of the work ideology was thought to perform, when ideology was the vehicle for expressing significant political difference. Political scientists used to emphasise the power of ideologies in creating or eliminating difference, such as class and race: Hitler's **Mein Kampf**, Marx's **Manifesto**, Mao's small red book. But political scientists are less accustomed to look to the cultural component of quotidian behavior and discourse as the vehicle for the construction and reconciliation of difference. Political scientists do not recognize

that in post-ideological times ways of addressing differences are less fashioned by revolutionary intellectuals than by politically charged daily symbolism and speech acts invented by common folk. At this historical moment the ideological power of the hijab—head scarf—seems to trump the power of the Manifesto.

Speech forms are a consequential cultural practice.

Mayawati, the erstwhile brash and vigorous chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, is one of my tutors in symbolic formulations. Mayawati is a.....what shall I call her? In India I call her a Dalit, a noun designating an oppressed person. I do not call her an ex-untouchable, because the meaning structure of untouchability has been diluted, overturned, embattled since untouchability was formally abolished in the constitution of 1950. I do not call her harijan, child of god, the term that Mahatma Gandhi invented as part of his anti-untouchability campaign, because modern Dalits consider it a patronizing designation. She might be called a scheduled caste, a British bureaucratic

euphemism that is sufficiently bland to be inoffensive, and refers to the fact that the raj made a list, a schedule, for official purposes, of this category of persons. The term Dalit emerged from civil society, not from the state. Dalit writers and poets began to reshape the self-perception of ex-untouchables in ways that allowed them to articulate their oppression and assert a collective self. Usage of the term has become routine in the bureaucracy, media and among politicians. It is a category imposed from below, not above.

“Politically correct” speech is no minor eccentricity. Using novel, counter-intuitive speech forms is a training tool. It forces speakers to rearrange their social landscape by re-doing their vocabulary, at first reluctantly and awkwardly, but gradually in newly routinized fashion. “Dalit” performs the function in India that “Black” and “African-American” did at various points in the US in the reconstruction of the American “Negro;” both words overtly feature difference. “Black” affirms what Erik Erikson called a negative identity (Erikson). It converts a slur into a positive designation. Demanding the usage “Dalit” accomplishes

the same task as the grammatical gymnastics required by American feminism. Using the awkward his/her, him/her, he/she speech forms demonstrates the speaker's awareness that conventionally gendered language has a non-recognition of women built into it. It represents a formal promise that the speaker, out of motives sincere or instrumental, is willing to collaborate in transforming the conventional understanding, to participate in the social reconstruction of identity.

When Mayawati became the Chief Minister of India's most populous state, she did not significantly raise the budget allocation to education and health, two of the greatest needs of poor Dalits. To the distress of national and regional public intellectuals, she did use the significant patronage of her office to favor Dalits in appointments and to steer special welfare and housing funds to so called Ambedkar villages—villages with a high percentage of Dalits, and named for a famous Dalit leader. The policy did not significantly advance the condition of the poor in Uttar Pradesh. (Pai; Hassan)

Her symbolic politics may have accomplished more. Mayawati ceremonially profaned icons of Brahmanic culture, damning sacred or semi sacred texts that used to be recognized as the voice of Hindu culture in general, but now are seen as an upper caste view of the Indian world. Upper castes were mockingly declared to be Manuvatis, exponents of the principles of Manu, the great lawgiver, whose definitive voice rationalized the inferiority of the lower orders.

She replaced the statues of Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose, upper caste national heroes that festooned every village square in Uttar Pradesh, with statues of Dr. Ambedkar, the eminent Dalit who led the process of writing the 1950 constitution, as well as those of other low caste social reformers from North and South India. The practice recalls the row of sculptures of heroes of the Southern anti-Brahmin movement that decorates the beach front of Madras (now Chennai) city. And it recalls the plethora of Irish names that feature on tunnels, bridges and highways in and around

Boston, MA, markers of a different successful anti-Brahmin movement.

Holidays, public statues, political rituals, speech forms, clothing, food, museology: such symbol-bearing practices are both agents of and retrospective markers of the way India deals with difference. In a world infused with constructed practices, they are among the means by which esteem is enhanced and dis-esteem countered. In a world infused by constructivist practices, these are the vehicles, though not the only causes, of India's status revolution.

Difference is a natural condition in many developing and some developed societies. America, however, evolved under conditions that emphasized assimilation to a common identity. Until recently American society held to a liberal universalism that regarded difference as unnatural and destined to fade away. Very few observers now hold to the optimistic enlightenment view that

difference is destined to disappear, yielding to the progressive march of history. If difference has a future, how to address the problems that it raises? As primordialist ways of understanding difference have waned, constructivist theories suggesting difference is amenable to agency, intervention and reconstruction have become more influential. The construction of identity is an interactive social process in which states, civil society and individuals all play a part. This paper reviews the array of ways in which politics may address difference: reducing the economic inequalities that exacerbate difference; representing diversity through political institutions and processes; and everyday discursive and behavioral practices that carry symbolic force.

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