Ethnicity and Locality: The City as Venue of Ethnic Expression

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Introduction

Most scholarly discussions of ethnic politics focus on the national level because the ethnie is juxtaposed to the nation. The national is said to overwhelm and supersede the ethnic; ethnic politics is thus a struggle to contain and, if possible, to reverse this process. The modern nation is transethnic and the national government is supraethnic because, in what is considered its most advanced form, it has integrated ethnic minorities into a larger community.

But according to a well-known American maxim, “all politics is local.” It is in cities where life is lived in all its complexity; and these have served as the places where the special needs of ethnic and other subcommunities have had to be listened to. It is in cities where neighborly relations have developed in the context of the recognition of differences. Finally, it is the large city where ethnic groups transplanted from another country have succeeded best in maintaining their collective identities. The ethnic identity of immigrant groups is maintained by a “relocalization” of their homeland culture (Argun 2003, 20). This relocalization involves what Appadurai has called the “transnational construction of imaginary landscapes” (Appadurai 1996, 31). Such a construction needs opportunity structures—raw material and equipment, demographic density, institutions, global communication facilities and so on—and these can normally be found only in large cities.

Nevertheless, the translation of “Old Country” patterns is selective. It is easier to reconstitute a well remembered or—better yet—an experienced Old Country community than a completely imagined one. The place that is remembered most clearly is not a homeland country, but a homeland city with its particular features and atmosphere. These features are more likely to be reproduced in a hostland urban environment than in a provincial space “out there” where pressures to conform to the majority tend to be more intrusive. And there are no Chinatowns in the villages and heartlands of America or Europe. In a cosmopolis, in contrast, the pressure to conform to the majority is relaxed. That explains the existence of Turkish Berlin, Indian London, Algerian Paris, Greek

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1 The city is a microcosm of the polity; indeed, a citizen, i.e., a member of the political community, originally denoted a resident of a city, just as the civis was a member of the civitas, the bourgeois a member of a bourg, the citoyen a member of a cité, the Bürger an inhabitant of a Burg, and the grazhdanin the resident of a gorod. This membership was defined functionally (e.g., in terms of property ownership, the payment of taxes, military service, and political rights and responsibilities. But the city also harbored subcommunities defined in ascriptive terms. It has been a continuing challenge of civilized polities to keep these two communities distinct, to conserve oases of “natural” human relations, to preserve diversity, and yet to provide sufficient links between them to insure the maintenance of a peaceful social and political order.
Toronto, and Jewish New York. To be sure, some ethnic customs cannot be easily reproduced or maintained in the hostland—as for example, cliterectomies, honor killings, or wearing the burqa or the niqab in public, because they are impractical or even forbidden. Occasionally, however, minorities may behave in a more “ethnic” manner in a large hostland city than do their ethnic kin in the homeland. For example, Turkish women in Berlin may wear the Islamic veil in public, which in Turkey itself was until recently forbidden. This behavioral reversal may apply to ethnic narratives as well. Thus, for Armenians, Jews, and Sikhs in diaspora, the memory of oppression and martyrdom may play a greater role as a factor of ethnic identity than it does among their ethnic kin in the homeland, who are more concerned with national politics and with quotidian problems of survival (Safran 2007, 50).

Among other things, cities are the venues of institutions reflecting the homeland of minority groups (Centner 2010). Their Alliances Françaises, Case Italiane, Goethe Houses, Chinese Sunday schools, Scholem Aleichem schools, and Japanese cultural missions help to keep alive the ethnic identities of diasporas. In some cities with large diaspora communities, ethnonational cultures may sometimes be better maintained (by intellectuals-in-exile) than in their homeland habitats, as for example, the Tibetan religion, Russian (as opposed to Soviet) culture, Confucianism (as opposed to the atheism of the Chinese Peoples’ Republic), and German (as opposed to Nazi) culture. Curiously, languages spoken by very small groups of people may be preserved better in metropolises in diaspora than in their native habitat (Roberts 2010). In part, this is due to the fact that diasporas have nothing to gain from a suppression of these languages in the interest of promoting the national language of their home countries.

It is on the local level that ethnic identity is manifested, maintained, and mobilized politically. This applies in particular to large cities, such as London, Toronto, Montreal, New York, Paris, and Berlin, which have been the playgrounds of ethnic minorities for a number of reasons. Urban areas are often marked by segregation along ethnic lines, whether forced or voluntary; and therefore it is in those areas that ethnic minority languages and culture patterns are most likely to endure (Lieberson 1971).

The creation of ethnic cultural, social, religious, and educational space is often easier on a local rather than on a national level because its impact is more limited, at least initially; it is less difficult to contain; and it lends itself more easily to community building. On the one hand, large metropolises are often beyond the direct control of national governments; on the other hand, ethnically specific patterns and institutional innovations may be interesting and important enough to serve as prototypes or testing grounds for larger geographical areas and may be adopted on the national level. In the United States, this has happened in the case of teaching the national language as a second language; the accommodation of ethnic and religious requirements in schools and prisons, affirmative action, anti-discrimination laws, and dealing with hate crimes.

Cities are training grounds of ethnic minorities for political leadership, as, for example, African-Americans in Chicago and Latinos in Los Angeles, who often begin their political careers as community organizers. The copying of local innovations occurs especially when these local politicians serve on national decision-making bodies and thus bring local experiences to bear.

Moreover, the city is the most feasible ethnic minority site because of its concentrated and delimited space: there are no “national” ethnic community centers,
Chinatowns, barrios, Black ghettos, Little Italies, or eruvim.² It is in large cities where one finds dual language street signs; store marquees in a variety of languages; Chinese telephone booths, a profusion of mosques, synagogues, gurdwaras, Buddhist temples, Japanese pagodas, shinto shrines, and ethnically-specific churches.

This paper deals with local, and particular urban, space as the locus of ethnic identity expression. The typical urban metropolis is a collection of ethnopoles—it is the place where ethnic communities are most likely to thrive and resist the melting pot. Ethnies, unlike tribes, are not “primordial;” they have complex internal divisions, written narratives, a collective identity, institutional substructures, and other accouterments of self-maintenance. It is the metropolis that best accommodates these features of ethnic communities, in particular those of descendants of immigrants and those that have been minoritized due to boundary changes.

**The Local and the Global**

Large cities are engaged in important transnational interactions, such as exports and imports, tourism, and the welcoming and placement of immigrants. It is in large cities where homeland consulates are located. These are not only agencies for getting visas to visit the homeland, but they also function as sources of information about the homeland and as facilitators of cultural exchanges with it (Laguerre 2000, 53f). Hostland city governments also use the ethnic community as “an anchor for globalizing processes,” such as tours and commercial relations—processes for which the “ethnopoles” of large cities are ideally suited (Kwok 2008, 469-70). It is in large cities where diaspora communities organize for lobbying and paradiplomacy, and to whom the hostland government, in turn, appeals to help influence homeland governments in support of its foreign policy. For these purposes, the primordial aspect of the ethnic community is emphasized and instrumentalized (Laguerre 2000, 20-21). Ethnopoles are “sites of attraction and dispersion”—places that maintain ethnic activities and supportive institutions as well as global relations with fellow ethnics in homelands and elsewhere. In short, the ethnopole is “where the global meets the local” (Laguerre 2000, 24). Cities are also the places where the homeland can exert significant power to keep a migrant community ethnic (or ethno-religious) because it can send imams and cultural leaders from the homeland to get hold of expatriates en masse. Ethnic elites and ethnic entrepreneurs flourish in large cities; this applies especially to diaspora elites who maintain regular contact with the homeland. These must be distinguished from politicians who happen to be members of ethnic minority groups. The former have a cultural or ideological stake in maintaining the ethnic identity of their clientele; the latter merely instrumentalize that identity for their own political advancement.

Ethnicity and locality are often presumed to go hand-in-hand. As a subpolitical unit, the locality is regarded as the last preserve of ethnicity because it is on that level that kinship and other pre-modern social relationships are still possible. Yet the relationships between locality and ethnicity are complex and uneven. In some cities, minorities are more “ethnic” than in others. The intensity of ethnic consciousness depends on a number of variables: (1) the internal characteristics of the ethnic community; (2) the nature of the

² An eruv is a structure erected around an Orthodox Jewish community to circumscribe a neighborhood within which it is permitted to carry an object on the Sabbath. It reproduces the boundaries of the walled cities of ancient Palestine. It it usually marked by a barely visible wire mounted on utility poles.
political system; (3) public policy; (4) external conditions and influences, including those of the homeland; (5) the ethnic narrative; (6) economic conditions; (7) demography; (8) cultural “thickness;” (9) geographic location; and (10) elite structures.

It is true that the large metropolis is a major locus of discrimination against ethnic minorities. At the same time, it is also a place where the identity of ethnic groups—their culture, language, religion, and customs—is best preserved and promoted. It takes a city to keep ethnic identity alive, particularly one large enough to maintain a network of ethnically specific institutions and community services (Christensen 2012). It is the existence of these institutions, services, and relationships that generates a kind of local pride that is not simply topophilia; it is a pride based on the association of a city with a particular ethnic community that—like Honolulu, Miami, New York, and Santa Fe—distinguishes it from other cities and, for that matter, from the national territory.

When we speak of institutions, we are not referring to ethnic restaurants or bakeries, which increasingly attract customers across ethnic lines, but to social, cultural, educational, and philanthropic institutions whose appeal is more specific, such as ethnic minority community centers, schools, cultural centers, and libraries. These cannot be maintained in small towns, villages, or provincial heartlands.3

Ideally, the metropolis contains schools that provide ethnic-language instruction and keep the ethnonational narrative alive; houses of worship in which the services are in “national” churches and the sermons are delivered in the homeland language; and ethnic newspapers, television channels, and radio stations that report events occurring in the ethnic homeland. It is the city that is the usual port of entry of ethnic replenishments through immigration, e.g., Chinese in San Francisco and Seattle, Jews and Italians in New York, Koreans in Los Angeles, and Latinos in Miami.

Most of these immigrants remain in that city because it is a recreated, mimetic, homeland—which therefore underscores the city’s character as an ethnopolis. Members of ethnic minorities living in villages and small towns do not normally have the facilities necessary for such re-creation; their social relations are mostly with their (non-ethnic) neighbors; and since these are often more intimate, especially if compared with the often functional and superficial neighborly relations in large cities, ethnic community support is less needed, and ethnic identity weakens. To be sure, an exact replication of the native ethnic habitat is impossible. The Yiddish schools in Winnipeg, Canada, did not exactly recall the primitive conditions of the heder in the Lithuanian shtetl; and the German-language schools in selected Midwestern towns were not carbon copies of the Swabian Bauernschulen.

It is also in large cities that endogamy and other kinship-based social patterns among minority ethnic groups are more common that in small provincial towns, which lack an adequate pool of ethnic cohorts. This applies especially to ethnic groups who are confined to economically disadvantaged urban ghettos and whose social contacts with more affluent populations, and hence opportunities for meeting prospective marriage partners among them, outside their areas are limited (Williamson 1984, 174-5). That explains the existence of Turkish Berlin, Indian London, Algerian Paris, and Jewish New York.

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3 The exceptions are religious orders originally settled by religious orders as agricultural communities, such as the Amish in the United States and the Doukhobors in Canada.
The city constitutes an exception to the “national” space because it is more concentrated, more inwardly oriented, and more self-sufficient, sometimes more narcissistic, and therefore ethnic identity is less “thinned out” on a local level than on a national one. This applies in particular to cities where special conditions prevail due to their history, location, and/or ethnolinguistic mix.

The reconstitution of an ethnic community in a hostland metropolis such as New York, London, Paris, and Toronto is not necessarily based on “national” homeland patterns; rather, the identitarian point of reference may be a city, especially a border city such as Vilnius, Czernowitz, Odessa, Salonika, and Brussels. These cities contain a multiplicity of ethnic groups; they have come under periodically changing jurisdictions as a result of boundary changes; do not have stable national orientations because they are in weak nation-states whose sovereignty or national relationship is contested and which lack well-developed national institutions, and for that reason have enjoyed relative autonomy from central governments.

Jews immigrating to North America and Western Europe have had nostalgia for Vilnius (the “Jerusalem of Lithuania”), but not for Poland, which has often been anti-Semitic (Lipphardt 2010); for Odessa, but not for the Soviet Union; and for Czernowitz (“Little Vienna”) but not for Romania. Westerners coming from Hong Kong have identified specifically with that city, while being reserved, if not hostile, vis-à-vis the People’s Republic of China. Cuban refugees in Miami have pined for Havana but not for Castro’s Cuba. In building their communities in hostland cities, immigrants from the Mezzogiorno have not attempted to reconstitute Italy, but a more narrowly focused “agrotown,” or more particularly certain elements of it—the extended clan, the authority of the paterfamilias, the church and the distrust of central governments (Gabaccia 1984 100f). The culture of the Dominicans reconstituted in Manhattan is a mixture of Santo Domingo language, music, religion, political orientations (such as views of imperialism), corruption, intergenerational relations, and American Latino culture (Hoffnung 2008).

Collaboration, Competition, and Conflict
A city located in one country cannot be perfectly reconstituted in another one, nor can an ethnic community preserve its antecedent identity in pure form. Collective identities are modified by local conditions and influences, including contact with other communities. It is not always clear how the position of an ethnic group in an urban setting is affected by the presence of other ethnic groups, and how their presence affects their relationship with the urban population at large.

In the 19th century, the Irish Catholic population of New York was hostile to Jews, while the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) population was hostile to both the Irish and the Jews and considered them equally to be foreigners. Subsequently, the Irish were considered more “American” than were Italians or Jews. But later, the sizeable migration of African-Americans from the South to the North coupled with the cessation of immigration from eastern and southern Europe created a situation in which other whites muffled their negative disposition toward the new white immigrants and shifted their antagonisms toward the blacks (Wilson 1984, 95). In the second half of the 20th century, hyphenated identity became acceptable as long as it was confined to white ethnics, so that Jews were no longer considered a minority (at least as far as affirmative

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4 Brussels is not a border city in the “national” sense, but it straddles a linguistic border.
action was concerned). This development contributed to a “dediasporization” of Jews and a weakening of their ethnic identity. A similar situation is found in France. Before World War II, Jews were often regarded as alien implantation in the Parisian urban polity. But since the massive influx of Maghrebi Muslims, Jews have become more acceptable to the more “indigenous” French society, and their culture has come to be regarded as part of “Judeo-Christian civilization” (Club de l’Horloge 1985, 205). In Berlin, the image of immigrants from Balkan countries improved with the arrival of immigrants from Turkey.

Ideally, the existence of several ethnic minority groups facilitates a solidaristic relationship in the face of the dominant, and often hostile, majority. In the 1940s and 1950s, Jewish and Catholic groups in large American cities collaborated with the Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in promoting civil rights and better living conditions for African-Americans (Glazer 1983, 24-25). But interethnic collaboration broke down due to disagreements over affirmative action and the administration of the school system. Because the power relations between Jews and African-Americans on an urban level have been unequal, the African-American image of Jews has become a negative one: the Jews of New York City are no longer the descendants of the Israelites who are the heroes of Negro spirituals (Rose 1981, 57); rather, they are the heartless shopkeepers and slumlords of African-American neighborhoods of New York, Chicago, and Detroit. Moreover, interethnic relations have national and international dimensions that do not always coincide with the local. Thus African-Americans and Jews in the US, Jews and Maghrebs in France, and Indians and Pakistanis in the UK may support one another on local social and economic issues; but that support is not replicated on issues that go beyond the local setting. In New York, African-Americans have been unable to understand the Jews' concern for the safety of the State of Israel. Conversely, Jews and other white ethnics have not share the collective pride of Afro-Americans stimulated by the rise of sovereign states in Africa. In Paris, Jews and Muslims have collaborated in the fight for equality and have organized joint demonstrations against racism and xenophobia; but that collaboration has broken down over disagreements regarding Middle-East policies, and especially the Gulf crisis.

Relations between ethnic groups may reflect self-perceptions regarding their relative positions within society at large. Many white ethnics had entered the middle class, and their ethnic consciousness was no longer tied to poverty but to a vague cultural nostalgia that did not interfere with their American assimilation. They were not particularly interested in improving the lot of Blacks and Latinos, because that might destroy the status advantage of white ethnics and, more concretely, bring the Blacks into white neighborhoods and lower the value of housing and the quality of the public schools. The perception of such devaluation has led to the proliferation of private schools that are often ethnically based and hence, to a functional segregation of selected white ethnic middle class communities and a refortification of their collective ethnic consciousness.

The improvement of the relative status of an ethnic minority can serve to de-ethnify it and undermine its existence. Thus, the urban political machines, such as Tammany Hall in New York, had a strong preference for the Irish in their political appointments and contracts; and this preferment helped to integrate the Irish more quickly into the American system, but in this process the consciousness of Irishness became attenuated and devoid of clear cultural content. Most New York Irish relate to the
New York scene rather than to Ireland. There are still many Irish priests, but since they officiate at many non-Irish churches they have come to represent the Catholic priesthood in general rather than the Irish subculture. This is an instance of deethnicization, and is an unanticipated consequence of acculturation and acceptance. Curiously, the one ethnic institution that maintains itself well, even where ethnic population density is low, is the ethnic restaurant, because ethnic cuisine has become transethnic.⁵

Metropoles are particularly exposed to ethnocultural mixing, as manifested by Paris with its couscous-pommes frites; Tex-Mex in San Antonio; and Creole cuisine in New Orleans; hybrid Chinese-Cuban cuisine in a number of American cities; “the quasi-mythical “Leprecohen,” the New York Jew clad in green and participating in the annual parade on Saint Patrick's Day in New York; and the close relationships between the Italian and Jewish inhabitants of Massapequa, a city in the New York metropolitan area that is sometimes referred to as “Matzapizza.” Such ethnic interchanges give rise to a number of questions: Do they suggest an open-hearted cultural sharing and lead to interethnic understanding and intercultural comity, or do they lead to ethnic syncretism, thin out ethnic culture, reduce it to folklore and, ultimately, to kitsch? Or, if they are associated with interethnic rivalry, especially in an era of scarcity, do they lead ultimately to growing national hostility toward multiculturalism? It should be noted that in many cases, legislation affecting religious ritual and customs, naturalization, and immigration were responses to negative perceptions of ethnically mixed cities, e.g., “Londonistan,” “Judapest,” and “Havana in Florida.”

Identitarian Aggregations and Reconfigurations

The internal differentiations that characterize ethnic groups in their ancestral homeland are not necessarily replicated in their settlements abroad. The distinctions between Bavarians and Saxons that have traditionally prevailed in Germany have little relevance in New York. In large cities, internally divided ethnic groups sometimes unite for protection, and are often “aggregated” by the public authorities—they are treated as if they were one group, for statistical or public-policy purposes such as affirmative action. Thus we see references to “Hispanics” or “Latinos” rather than to Puerto Ricans, Chicano, or Cubans, and to “Indians” rather than Bengalis, Punjabis, or Sikhs in the United States. In London, Indians, Pakistanis and Chinese are sometimes collectively referred to as “Asians.”

Members of minority ethnic groups may reconfigure or relabel their identities in response to official pressures or as a result of influences by other minorities with whom they are in contact. This applies in particular to large cities, where ethnic groups can live more or less “under the radar” of census-taking authorities, if not illegally, and they can “relabel” their identities. Thus Black immigrants from the West Indies to New York undergo a process of “Haitization”—inter alia, by introducing Creole elements into their language—in order to fit in better with a well-established Haitian community (Morin 1990). The North African Jews who immigrated to Montreal, at least before the 1980s, tended to reconfigure their ethnicity” toward Ashkenazic culture, because it was the dominant one among Jews at that time (Elbaz 1990). On the national ideological level there are no race distinctions in France; but the Black neighborhoods of Paris, by virtue

⁵ There is the story of the Taiwanese who thought of opening a Chinese restaurant in an American urban neighborhood, but finally decided against it because it did not contain enough Jews.
of their size and population density, create a specific Parisian Black identity, called “Parisianism,” which distinguishes Black Paris from official Paris. It is based on feelings of exclusion and exile, which emphasizes a bond with Africa and negates attachment to France (Jules-Rosette 2000, 46f). Most residents of the casbah in Marseilles speak French and are largely secularized; but perceptions of relative socioeconomic disprivilege have "re-Arabized" and in some cases "re-Islamized" the consciousness of many of them and sharpened their feeling of belonging to a distinct subcommunity. In the Parisian metropolitan area and other French conurbations, zones d’urbanisation prioritaire were created to meet the demand of immigrant minorities for housing and to integrate them economically. Yet the housing conditions there have been cramped and poor and, instead of instilling gratitude to the local authorities and to the national government they exacerbated feelings of relative deprivation and sharpened the existing ethnic consciousness. In the US, too, densely populated Black neighborhoods in large cities—the consequence of poverty and discriminatory housing patterns—have developed a distinctive ghetto consciousness.

Conversely, many bourgeois and culturally assimilated Jews in Berlin cultivated exaggerated “Germanic” sentiments in order to distinguish themselves from their coreligionists who arrived from Eastern Europe between the 1880s and 1920 and whose foreign mannerisms and accents were a source of embarrassment and mutual antagonism. But after the Holocaust the old antagonisms disappeared, as distinctions between Lithuanian and Polish Jews or German and “Eastern” Jews that prevailed in the Old Country became irrelevant in New York.

In the early 1960s there were similar tensions between Ashkenazic Jews and North African Jewish rapatriés in Paris (Adler and Cohen 1985). But these two communities gradually merged organizationally and socially for a number of reasons: the initiatives of the Jewish leadership, the progressive embourgeoisement of the rapatriés, intermarriage, and the development of a common solidarity vis-a-vis Israel in the face of a common perception of a hostile government policy toward that country.

**The Constitutional-Institutional Context**

The local viability, legitimacy, and articulation of ethnicity depend not only on the intensity of ethnic consciousness, but also on the overall national political context, because that is where conditions of categoric and ascriptive belonging are determined, including the legal relationship of the ethnic community to the city and of the city to the state. Such a relationship varies considerably according to the division of jurisdictions between the central government and subnational units, the prevailing ideology, and established public policies. It is obvious that federal systems grant the greatest decision-making authority to regional and local authorities, in particular large cities, which have more extensive resources than small towns and villages. In the United States, the institutional pluralism reflected in a territorial division of functions, which has been paralleled by its ethnocultural pluralism: the multidimensional approach to being American—reflected in a distinction between “citizenship” and “nationality”—has accommodated itself easily to the retention of particular ethnic identities and to a variety of local ethnic voluntary institutions. Ethnic groups are components of civil society, which is autonomous.
Under the unitary system of France, in contrast, subnational units do not have a priori decision-making authority; its Jacobin ideology conceives of the republic as a centralized system in which the national government relates directly to the amorphous and abstract citizen. Intermediate, or mediating, identities are seen as interfering with this direct relationship. After the French Revolution of 1789, regional authorities were abolished and ethnoregional cultural-linguistic identities were systematically undermined by a centralized national school system.

On a national level, France frowns upon ethnoregional cultural expression, which, at best, is viewed as reactionary, and at worst, is denounced as communautarisme, an identitarian orientation reflected in an ethnie’s turning toward its own community. The former, expressed in regional costumes, folksongs, Breton bagpipes, and Occitan harvest festivals, is regarded as folklore and seen as harmless. Regional ethnic languages, on the other hand, have been considered mere patois, and could not be used publicly in a country whose constitution stipulated that “the language of the republic is French;” which has refused to this day to ratify the European charter on minority languages; and which persists in an official denial that French society contains ethnic minorities. The latter is more serious, for it suggests that its practitioners, the communautaristes, see themselves as not fully French. For the same ideological reasons, a large part of the political and cultural establishment has disapproved ethnically specific cultural expression, and has frowned upon the open involvement of ethnic minorities in the political process.

But Jacobin ideology is now competing with a droit à la difference, the right to be different (Giordan 1983). It is this right which prevails increasingly in real life. It is reflected in the official support of the teaching of ethnic minority languages, which are now considered part of the national cultural patrimony; in the official support by the public authorities of cultural institutions and programs of regional and “non-territorial” ethnic minorities and even of ethnic diasporas (Safran 1989,138-44; 2003, 443f).” The political involvement of ethnic groups takes place as well, and is even encouraged, albeit selectively, as when politicians, including presidents, appear at meetings organized by ethnic communities in Paris and other cities where these communities are concentrated. Furthermore, the authorities in Paris and other large cities organize Jewish, Russian, Chinese, and Armenian cultural festivals.

A number of categoric groups that had not been recognized since the French Revolution but whose members had been regarded only as individual members of a religious cult were gradually being acknowledged as ethnic communities. Jews in France, which had been de-ethnified and “nationalized” two centuries ago have become progressively re-ethnified; this development is expressed in a complex network of communal educational, philanthropic institutions, mostly concentrated in the Paris metropolitan area, where half of the country’s Jews live; and the local and national authorities have accommodated to them. Armenians, Greeks, Muslims, and Blacks have followed the Jewish model by forming roof organizations based, not on religion, but on ethnicity or race.

The ethnic identity of Armenians in Paris is reflected significantly in institutional terms such as social clubs, mutual-aid societies, and churches; but since most Armenians no longer speak Armenian, and many no longer attend church, their ethnic identity is expressed increasingly in keeping alive their national narrative, including the memory of genocide, and political and economic support of the homeland, and transnational
solidarity becomes particularly important during special events, such as an earthquake in the homeland a few years ago (Hovanessian 1992, 95f, passim).

These activities have not only been permitted, but even selectively supported by politicians, especially in urban centers where ethnic communities are significantly present. Politicians have been appearing before Jewish and Maghrebi audiences in Paris, Marseille and Lyon, especially during election campaigns; and in the spring of 2012 French political leaders lent their support to a mass demonstration by Armenians in favor of a government bill to penalize the denial of the genocide of Armenians committed by the Turks a century ago.

In Germany, too, the maintenance of ethnic identity has been difficult. Traditionally, membership in the German nation was based on kinship or descent (jus sanguinis), and those who did not share it would not become part of the German political community. This accounted for the fact that non-German residents were not considered immigrants but “guest workers” (Gastarbeiter)—for the most part Turks—who would eventually be returned to their countries of origin. This situation encouraged them to maintain their ethnic culture. But since the early 1990, foreigners can become naturalized citizens; as a result, Germany has become a much more ethnically mixed nation. While ever more open to non-German cultural contributions, including that of the Turks, German authorities have been wary of multiculturalism and have insisted that its ethnic minorities adhere to the country’s Leitkultur, its majority culture. Turkish-Germans have become increasingly accepted as citizens; but regardless of their official recognition they continue to be perceived as Turks rather than Germans. As a result, they organize along ethnic lines, especially where their numbers are large enough and institutional networks exist (Laguerre 2006, 135). These conditions usually obtain only in large cities. A prime example is the Kreuzberg section of Berlin, which is replete with Turkish institutions.

Other countries have more specific approaches to ethnicity, which often reflect the ethnopluralist conditions prevailing during the founding of their polities. Owing to the settlement of the country by two significant, and rival, ethnolinguistic groups, the concept of Canadian citizen coexists with a pluralistic definition of “Canadianness” so that a typical Canadian is also a member of some ethnic community, and as such entitled to municipally supported ethnic schools and other institutions. This began with a bicultural approach, and was gradually extended subsequently to ethnics of more recent immigrant origin, who maintain officially supported ethnic schools and other institutions, particularly in large cities, where the constitute a critical mass. A comparable situation prevails in Belgium, where the various constitutional revisions and institutional changes reflect the reality of two dominant ethnonational communities. This is manifested in a parallel system (dédoublment) on both national and municipal levels, of institutions such as education, civil-service recruitment, the media, and so on.

Although the United Kingdom is a unitary country, it is composed of a number of “ethnoregions” that enjoy considerable autonomy. In addition, local governments have been given a great deal of responsibility for education and social services; and in Greater London, this has been reflected in an array of institutions catering to, and run by, ethnic communities.

In many other countries, decision-making authority has been delegated to subnational units, for the most part urban, both in order to (re)establish a closer connection between the citizen and his decision-makers and to relieve national
governments of onerous financial burdens. In countries that are bifurcated along linguistic lines, as in Belgium, Canada, Spain, and South Africa, subnational units are in charge of education and religion, and they must pay particular attention to the cultural claims of ethnic minorities. Furthermore, there are cities where special regimes have been instituted pertaining to language use in public administration, social services, and education due to the multilingual character of their inhabitants, such as bilingual Brussels (French and Flemish) and Jerusalem (Hebrew and Arabic) and trilingual Vilnius (Lithuanian, Russian, and Polish).

The presence of concentrated ethnic minority communities in metropoles must inevitably be reflected in the political arena. In London, New York, Paris, and Toronto these communities make up a significant electoral element. On the one hand, minorities use their demographic weight to make demands by means of bloc voting; on the other hand politicians instrumentalize this weight to further their own political ambitions by meeting these demands, in the form of financial support for schools, community centers, and other municipal projects and distributing political or public-service jobs on an ethnic basis. Often the politicians are themselves ethnic entrepreneurs.

It may be true that the absence of any kind of formal participation in urban politics sharpens the feeling of ethnic exclusion. It is far from certain, however, whether ethnically based recruitment serves to institutionalize ethnic minority participation and thereby to strengthen ethnic identity or, conversely, to weaken it by coopting it—and in particular its leaders. Urban ethnic patterns do not ipso facto add up to intermediate political communities or what has been called “mesogovernments” (Moreno 2000, 69), but they do make possible a functional autonomy in selective areas. In cities with large ethnic concentrations, this autonomy has an ethnopolitical dimension involving lobbying, rainbow coalitions, balanced tickets, and pork-barrel. Ethnic groups are a more concrete political force and more frequently to be reckoned with, not on a national but a local level, that is, a municipal one, because it is only in large cities that ethnic minorities are numerous enough to constitute a significant electorate (Laguerre 2006, 37).

Yet it is unclear what political consequences result from a concentration of ethnicities in an urban community that is strong enough to elect ethnic representatives to national and regional legislatures. On the one hand, ethnic minority candidates for public office have a vested interest in emphasizing their own ethnicity and in helping to maintain the ethnic identity of their minority electorate; on the other hand, the political success of that electorate helps to identify the minority with the political system as a whole, to instill in them the political values of that system, and to serve as an incentive to assimilation, which will ultimately undermine the political position of the ethnic politicians. The very success of Irish politicians in New York—a success originally owed to ethnic electoral solidarity—blunted the Irish-American distinctiveness, in terms of culture, language, and sociopolitical aspirations, from the “generic” urban American so that, in the end, the Irish influence on urban political machines weakened.

Some policies affecting minorities can be instituted only on the local level, such as criteria for ritual slaughtering, the building of mosques, the conduct of public prayer on the street, the cancelling of classes during ethnic or religious minority festivals, and the use of minority languages as media of instruction. But the basis for many of these may be determined by national rules.
In Sydney and other large Australian cities, political parties have developed “contribution networks” with Chinese communities, in which the latter become clients and their official participation legitimized them as political actors (Kwok 2008). This is often done by means of fundraising banquets.

One of the instruments of modernizing “nation-builders” has been the superiority of the national culture compared to the ethnic culture. In the case of ethnic minorities this has referred to the fact or belief that the culture of the hostland city in which ethnic minorities have settled has been preferable to the parochial culture of the Old Country they left behind. This argument has been effective with respect to the immigrants from Southern Italy, many of whom were semi-illiterate members of extended peasant families, and whose first important exposure to educational opportunity—and hence to upward mobility—was provided in the hostland city. Another argument was the political environment of the hostland, which compared favorably to the persecutions and oppressions they encountered in their countries of origin. Still another argument was the range of socioeconomic benefits provided by the hostland national government.

Public Policy

The last argument has been particularly effective in “nationalizing” the orientation of minorities and persuading them to give up their particular ethnic identities. In the United States, the New Deal legislation of the 1930s, under which the federal government assumed responsibility for numerous social and educational services that had once been provided by voluntary associations, including ethnic community organizations, acted as a powerful tool for stirring the melting pot.

Patterns of public policy that have the effect of maintaining subcommunities and fostering the ethnic consciousness on which they are based. In New York City, the municipal government has financed numerous welfare schemes that have benefited the Puerto Rican community; and it has facilitated the maintenance of a Latino cultural community by issuing public announcements in Spanish as well as English and by encouraging public employees to learn Spanish (Glazer and Moynihan 1970, 101). This official benevolence has reduced the pressure for the creation of voluntary community organizations; and it has also benefited the Cuban and other Latinos who are middle class and could easily afford to maintain such organizations. In France, social, cultural, and educational support organizations of immigrants and indigenous ethnic groups have been encouraged by national government subsidies (especially since 1981) as well as municipal governments, which have made agreements with ethnic national and urban neighborhood associations (Safran, 1989, 127, 142). Occasionally, however, public policy has served to sharpen the ethnoracial consciousness of selected categoric groups. That would be true of the “separate but equal” policy for American public school systems, whose constitutionality was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896 (Plessy v. Ferguson 1896) and that persisted until the mid-1950s, when a decision of the Court (Brown v. Board of Education of Kansas) inaugurated a process of “integration” of racial minorities in the schools.

To progressive integrationists, this federal intervention and many others that followed constituted proof that national governments are more “moral” than local ones. But the pretensions of many modern nations to morality have been tarnished by their behavior; moreover, in a number of countries, local policies may be more “advanced”
and more equitable than national ones. This is especially true where—as in the United States in recent years—national governments have abandoned their redistributive commitment and passed the buck to subnational governments as a consequence of economic pressures to rein in the welfare state.

If national services break down as a result of a retrenchment in the social safety net and other redistributive disbursements, educational, cultural, and health and welfare services must rely more on local resources, which are often private. Such services become more community-oriented, i.e., more “ethnic.” A current example is provided by many cities in the United States, where, due to steadily declining state and local budgets for education public schools have begun to deteriorate. As a consequence, the number of private schools and semi-private (charter) schools has mushroomed, and many of these are run by ethnic and/or religious minority communities. This development has reinforced ethnic identity.

But this has not caused the various ethnic communities to become more cooperative; on the contrary, it has exacerbated interethnic rivalries and hostilities. In Brooklyn, New York in the 1970s and 1980s, members of certain orthodox Jewish (Hasidic) sects organized the “Jewish Defense League” in response to increasing violence on the part of members of the Black community and the conviction that the municipal police was unable or unwilling to halt that violence. The riots of Latinos in a Washington, DC neighborhood in May 1991 reflected the belief of the Latinos that they were victimized not by the majority but by members of another minority community: by Black police officers who harassed them, and by Asian neighborhood merchants who overcharged them. Similar riots by African-Americans in Los Angeles were aimed at Koreans.

The causal relationship between class and economic condition on the one hand, and ethnicity on the other, remains a matter of controversy; nevertheless, particular occupations seem often to be identified with particular ethnic groups: Irish policemen in New York and Boston; Jewish garment workers and Black porters in New York; and sanitation workers in the Paris metro system hailing from Central Africa. In many cases, the connection of these occupations is viewed as the “turf” or entitlement of the ethnic group in question and becomes almost institutionalized.

Urban politics may be more “advanced” than national ones. This is particularly true of New York, Boston, and other metropoles in the United States, where social, economic, and educational policies have often been the reflection of the cultural influences and political pressures of immigrant ethnic minorities. But this fact has had an unanticipated consequence: the very existence of such public policies weakened the ethnic consciousness and cohesion of these minorities by undermining the relevance of ethnic social and philanthropic institutions on which such consciousness depended.

The abandonment of many of the national policies of the New Deal revived this dependence. To many Jews, Armenians, other white ethnics, and certain Asians, such dependence has a positive result insofar as it provides a justification for the maintenance of ethnic institutions and, by derivation, the ethnic sub-community and the culture it expresses. To many Black leaders, however, the existence of such subcommunities is reactionary because it permits the government to avoid its responsibilities and helps to maintain ethnic privileges and inequalities (Glazer 1983, 41-42; Patterson 1977).
Conclusion: Bones of Contention
The above suggests an uncertain, if not contradictory, causal relationship. On the one hand, large cities weaken ethnic ties because the cities provide a greater network of social services that are available to all residents—so long as these services continue; on the other hand, large cities strengthen ethnic ties because of a) the existence of ethnic enclaves and institutions that maintain ethnic culture and that attract newcomers; b) the adequate size and density of the ethnic population; c) the depersonalized nature of social relationship of large cities, which impels minorities to look for reassuring kinship-based relations. This is especially true of members of ethnic groups that come from rural backgrounds, such as Vietnamese and Hmong, or are subject to discrimination, such as Blacks and Latinos in the United States, Maghrebis in France, Pakistanis in Great Britain, and Turks in Germany. In some cases, Black and Latino leaders defend the existence of specifically Black or Latino institutions on local levels—but not necessarily for the sake of maintaining ethnic culture or sentiment as an end in itself. For example, in the 1820s, Blacks in Cincinnati, Ohio were forced to create a protective self-help organization because the municipal police refused to protect them adequately (Wade 1990, 4). In this case, ethnic identity maintenance was a by-product of communal self-help efforts.

Demographic density and the existence of institutional structures are important factors in such efforts. Yet the mere existence of a network of institutions in a large city densely inhabited by ethnic minorities does not mean that members of these minorities will necessarily join these institutions in large numbers. Many upwardly mobile African-Americans focus on their own ambitions and are uninvolved with specifically Black concerns, although their racial identity is ever present. The proportion of Jews joining synagogues is much larger in small towns or in suburbia than in the larger urban areas. In New York City it is not necessary for a Jew to join a synagogue in order to feel Jewish. The relative Jewish demographic “thickness” in that city makes it possible for a Jew to be a “free rider,” i.e., to remain Jewish by osmosis, as it were, because Jewishness is in the air—it is present in sufficient measure to guarantee a residual Jewishness without the person in question having to make a special effort. In small towns, by contrast, joining a church, synagogue, or ethnic institution is done in part in order to fulfill the expectations of neighbors, and in part in order to escape the cultural boredom often encountered in provincial America.

A note of caution is in order: Demographic thickness in a given locality does not guarantee the retention of diaspora identity; the fact that Chicago has more stores in which kilbasa is sold than in any other American city is not an indicator of Polish cultural reproduction. This is even more true of expressive ethnicity, such as Saint-Patrick’s Day parades and celebrations of Polish Constitution Day, Columbus Day, Cinco de Mayo, and Israel Independence, many of which are examples of “performance” ethnicity. Nor does demographic thickness alone guarantee ethnic solidarity.

A recent example of demonstrative ethnicity was the two-day celebration of the investiture of the regional chief of the Ashanti tribe of Ghana for the New York metropolitan area. The event, held in the Bronx, brought together scores of participants out of more than 20,000 members of the Ghanaian diaspora. The responsibilities of the new chief included mediation in family and business disputes and efforts at finding jobs, housing, and medical care for members of the community, as well as maintaining relations with the homeland. His appeal, however, has been limited, especially among
younger members of the Ghanaian diaspora, many of whom are American-born and do not belong to diaspora organizations (Semple 2012).

The maintenance of community networks may be impeded by peculiar features of family structure, external influences, and other factors. Mexican-Americans, for example, have smaller social networks and less contact with network members—including kinship groups and friendship circles—than non-Hispanic whites; they are more likely to have relatives, but not friends (Golding and Baezconde-Garbanati 1990).

The metropolis is the arena in which all sorts of ethnic identities, attitudes, and behavior can be found—other than those of “natural” ethnicity, that of the in the original or “homeland” locale, where it developed in a majoritarian context and was subject to little outside influence. Among these are the following:

1) adaptive ethnicity—ethnic culture that is heavily modified by the exigencies of the host environment and local conditions. This applies to the rural culture of Amish villages in Pennsylvania as it does to the religious culture of Greeks and Armenians in the United States, Britain, and France. The culture of the shtetl (the small, heavily Jewish small town in Poland and Russia) survived for many years in the form of Yiddish-language schools and Yiddish theater in New York and several other large American cities; but it was a deracinated culture reflected in a heavily Americanized Yiddish.

2) vestigial ethnicity—a vague ethnic identity underpinned by nostalgia, a gradually receding collective memory, and an ethnic interest often confined to ethnic foods and family customs: e.g., Italian-American, Pennsylvania Dutch, or Irish-American culture. The Irish (Gaelic) language had not been imported into New York City because it had ceased long ago to be a crucial element of Irish identity. In the nineteenth century, Irish-Americans, like their ethnic brethren who remained behind, had been intensely concerned with the Irish fight against the British; but the Irish-American distinction had become progressively detached from concern with the ancestral homeland by the end of World War II and had become identified with it in terms of residual habits and cultural patterns that fitted easily into New York, such as wakes, drunkenness, and a more or less distinct pronunciation (Glazer and Moynihan 1970, 245).

3) vicarious ethnicity—an ethnic identification reflected, not in an ethnic lifestyle, but in a significant and often intellectualized support of ethnic institutions. The following serve as examples: secular Jews who support orthodox religious seminaries because these are regarded as most effective in helping to preserve an authentic Jewish community; and urbanized Native Americans (Amerindians) who have become acculturated to Anglo lifestyles. The latter are more economically integrated than reservation Indians and they prefer to live in the city; paradoxically, however, they have a more highly developed ethnocultural cognition, in the sense that they care more about preserving native arts and crafts and tribal traditions, and in replenishing their ethnic consciousness by making frequent trips to their reservations and participating in powwows (Deloria 1981, 148).

These types of ethnicity are not sharply distinct from one another, nor are they static. The consciousness of members of ethnic “categoric” groups may be changed from one type to another in response to public policies or to the behavior of the host society. During the Nazi regime, Jews were transformed from ordinary (and often amorphous) citizens of urban communities into members of more or less quarantined “racial” sub-communities (even before they were physically removed from these communities by
deportation. Most of those who survived replaced their self-identification as “Germans of the Jewish faith” with that of “Jews.”

It is true that minority cultures adapt to the patterns and values of the host community in which they live. However, blood is often thicker than the municipal water supply. Living together in a locality even for several generations has not always been sufficient to foster a political or even cultural consciousness in common with the majority. Differences between ethnic communities tend to persist in part because the values on which they are based retain their importance owing to the fact that the majority population that surrounds them is less modern than they are (as, in the past, in the case of the Greek minority in the Ottoman Empire, the Jewish minority in Poland, and the Chinese minorities in various parts of southeast Asia); because, conversely, the dominant element is too modern and its values so different from those of the ethnic minority that the two cannot be easily reconciled; or because the retention of the ethnic minority culture is reinforced or encouraged by external linkages. During the period between the two world wars, Lithuanians, Poles, and Jews shared a common space and common municipal services in Vilnius; yet each of these communities remained distinct because they had different external points of reference: the Lithuanians with the newly independent republic next door and the countryside surrounding the city; the Poles, with the reestablished Polish state to which they were forcibly annexed—and with the memory of a proud Polish cultural tradition identified with that city for several centuries; and the Jews, with a sizable “transnational” Yiddish-speaking region. During the same period, most of the Polish residents of Warsaw defined their communal identity in terms of the old Polish nobility, Roman Catholic saints, and a collective memory of Polish national independence, while to the majority of the Jewish proletariat in the same city, “the Vistula,” as the writer I. B. Singer once put it, “spoke in Yiddish.” Living together has not created a common political identity for the Protestants and Catholics in Belfast; they are linguistically homogeneous, yet each community has a separate identity; there are separate residential neighborhoods, social and political organizations, schools, and, of course, churches, and there is little intermarriage (Schmitt 1988, 34ff). The Protestants are supported by elements across the Irish Sea, and the Catholics, by elements in the Republic of Ireland.

New York has been the place where homelands could be (more or less) reconstituted; where, specifically, it has been possible for the Jews of Bialystok and other cities of the Russian Pale to “rebuild the homeland in the Promised Land”—by means of community centers, old-age homes, synagogues, newspapers, hometown benevolent associations (Landsmannschaften), and burial societies (Kobrin 2010, 69ff). Another example is provided by the Bukharan Jewish diaspora in the United States, whose 50,000 members are heavily concentrated in the Queens section of New York. While insisting that Israel is their “real” homeland, they have been able to rebuild a semblance of their former community, once centered in Uzbekistan, by establishing Bukharan synagogues, cultural centers, schools, a theater, and specialized shops, and celebrating traditional rites of passage. Such a phenomenon may apply to entire towns. The inhabitants of Kiryas Joel and New Square, “ethnoburgs” built outside of New York City, identify more with Jewish communities in Hungary and Ukraine that no longer exist than with the United States. They cannot be exact replicas of the Old Country shtetl, of course; but they are even better, because they do not suffer under political oppression. This kind of self-
isolation is difficult, if not impossible, in a metropolis that is not hermetically sealed by ghetto walls (see Logan, Alba, Zhang 2001).

The above examples suggest a successful ethnic identity maintenance by means of reproductions of Old Country institutions in hostland metropoles. But the realism and durability of these reproductions are variable: some fit easily into the context of the dominant culture, whereas others are untenable in the long run. In New York, the ethnic identity of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe was expressed importantly in terms of socialism (which clashed with dominant American ideology) but survived in the form of trade unionism (which gradually became de-ethnified); and secular Yiddish culture (the societal basis of which had been destroyed) survived only as a narrow academic concern. As was indicated above, the rural institutions of the Italian immigrant community could not be replicated in the American metropole, and its extended family structure could not easily maintain itself in the face of the Gesellschaft-oriented pressures of the hostland society. The ethnic identity of the Italian immigrant community, which lacked a cultural elite, came to express itself largely in Catholic religious terms. But since Catholicism in the typical large American city has been transethnic, the Italian ethnic specificity has been progressively dilated. One of the few Italian—or more correctly Southern Italian—features that have been successfully transplanted to American metropoles is the mafia, but it is no longer purely Italian.

It is an open question how the identity of ethnic minority communities will maintain itself in the face of the abandonment of old urban neighborhoods by members of these communities and their move to the suburbs, a development that, according to one estimate, already applies to a quarter of ethnic minorities (Scheffer 2011, 47). The ethnic identity of members of this category, most of whom have entered the middle class, will inevitably be attenuated. The identity of those left behind—the “core” ethnics—may remain strong, but since they are also likely to be much poorer than the co-ethnics who have abandoned them, their institutional means of community cohesion will have been curtailed.

References


