

Ethnicity: Some Conceptual Definitions

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1. INTRODUCTION

Migration has always characterised the experience of human beings and their evolution. Migration always involves upheaval in the structure and organization, of both the societies that are left behind and the societies where migrants arrive. Migration is thus an element of great social innovation. From the evolutionary perspective, the most important process is that which produces the best capacity for adaptation, through cultural diffusion and the use of a combination of factors, to the new type of social structure (Parsons 1975).

However, every innovative social event generates insecurity and fear, and can degenerate into social conflict and even violence. When we talk about the conflictual relationship between culture and society often we confuse the conceptual level. Violence in human and social relations is present in many shades. This brief essay aims to clarify some definitions on the topic of violence and conflict in relation to cultural diversity and more specifically to deepen the controversial concept of ethnicity, ethnic identity through the exploration of classical literature.

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2. ETHNICITY AS A QUALITY OF CULTURAL GROUPS

In the social sciences, few concepts are so controversial as that of ethnicity. In general, we may define ethnicity as the character or quality of an ethnic group (Glazer and Moynihan 1975). Defining this character is problematic. As with other concepts of status (those of nation and nationality, for example), the definitions are situated in the space between two poles: the objective and the subjective.

The objective definitions identify ethnicity in relation to a (variable) set of observable traits. The subjective definitions by contrast, identify ethnicity in relation to a categorization (provided by members of an ethnic group or by others) not necessarily linked to objective traits (language, culture, etc.), or to a general sense of belonging. Subjective definitions of ethnicity blur the concept with ethnic identity.

A famous example of an objective definition is that of M. G. Smith, for whom the concept of ethnicity denotes a common source and [is seen] as a unit of the hallmarks of biological and social reproduction, and consequently it connotes internal consistency and external distinctions in biological endowment, perhaps in language, kinship, culture, religion and other institutions (Smith 1969).

One famous example of subjectivism is provided by F. Barth (1969), for whom actors, to the extent that they employ ethnic categories to categorize themselves and others form ethnic groups, where these categories are only presumed to be linked to the origin of groups.

The idea of ethnicity as an objective phenomenon is usually associated with other ideas, like that of its “primitive” character or ascriptive nature. The idea of ethnicity as a subjective phenomenon (categorization) is often (though not always) linked to the idea that ethnicity is “instrumental” (manipulated or constructed to obtain benefits in favor of some group) or ‘symbolic’ (totally detached from observable traits or practices) or “elective” (such that it can be, at least within certain limits, the subject of a choice). Some authors believe that the process of modernization implies the transformation, in whole or in part, of ancient ethnicity, which is rigid, primordial, and ascriptive into a more open, fluid, subjective and elective neo-ethnicity, a set of symbols emptied of any drawn social distinction and thus able to operate freely and smoothly in our social system (Schneider 1968).

The bulk of the definitions, however, fall halfway between what we have called the objective and subjective poles, in that they combine a varying mix of the two dimensions. For Smith (1984), an ethnic group is a social group whose members share a sense of common origins, claim a historical past and a common and distinctive destiny, possess one or more specific attributes and perceive a sense of collective unity and solidarity or a group of people designated by a name, with a territory, and with shared myths of descent, history and culture.

To reduce ethnicity to a categorization is to rule out that relations (of conflict or collaboration) between people from different backgrounds could be influ-

enced by cultural patterns learned in the family. On the other hand, to give little importance to the categorization factor is to preclude any understanding of the continuous and often strongly marked redefinition of their own identity which young people face when they enter pluralistic contexts. But to understand these issues, we believe that the concept which really matters is indeed that of ethnic identity, which covers the subjective aspect of ethnicity and also allows us to take advantage of the powerful instruments provided by the sociological and psychological theories of identity and identification processes.

3. ETHNIC IDENTITY AND CULTURAL STEREOTYPES

Ethnic identity is an identity expressed in terms of belonging to an ethnic group. It is the subjective dimension of ethnicity. As an identity, it is a very inclusive categorization of the subject, which is superordinate to other categorizations, e.g. categorizations in terms of roles and social status. In Parsons' framework, in fact, identity (which for him is always both individual and social) represents the structure of codes which, linking personality with the cultural system, gives meaning and unity to the various roles played by the subject (Parsons 1975). Similarly, according to Epstein (1978), identity is the process by which the person seeks to combine his or her various roles and status in a coherent image of him or herself.

Ethnic identity, as a social identity, includes a cognitive, evaluative and an emotional aspect. It may be defined as that part of the image that an individual has of him or herself, resulting from the awareness of belonging to a social group, combined with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (Tajfel 1981). The relationships between these components are the object of debate.

The categorization of "me" as an Italian, Frenchman / woman, Serbian, Croatian, etc. is a cognitive process, which consists in separat[ing] and aggregat[ing] the population into a number of categories defined in terms of "us" and "them". This process involves the definition of the other, and is particularly important when (as e.g. in migration contexts) individuals and groups are forced to confront their own identity, which stimulates the strengthening of already established forms of distinction and the emergence of new forms of exclusion and separation (Epstein 1978). In a context such as that of our research, in which ethnic identity is rendered particularly malleable by both the environment and the young age of the subjects, ethnic categorization and the specific traits that are used to construct the categories and define their boundaries are extremely important. Particular attention should be paid to avoiding confusing the hallmarks of the group and those that are used to categorize and define the boundaries between groups. It may happen that the weakening of the former does not match the weakening of the latter and the boundaries are maintained or reinforced, though constructed of purely symbolic materials.

Categorization is based on and / or produces assessments that can be (in varying degrees) positive or negative. The mark of the assessments being made of an ethnic group will contribute powerfully to determine the propensity of individuals to identify with and (in a context of choice), adhere to it, or to not identify themselves with it and abandon it (Tajfel 1981). The main source of the mark of the evaluation is the origin of the categorization. A self-categorization will almost invariably produce a positive evaluation, while an externally imposed categorization will usually promote negative assessments.

Ethnic identity, like any social identity, particularly any community identity, is based on strong affective components. A. L. Epstein tends to recognize a kind of primacy of affective (or emotional) components in the formation of ethnic identity. «The perception of shared economic interests or ethnic mobilization for political purposes are, according to Epstein, the product of the emotional bonds that hold the members of a certain group together: in other words, the cognitive (not to mention the evaluative) dimension of identity is largely a function of the emotional dimension» (Urpis 1994, 280). Ethnic groups are secondary groups, but the ethnic environment of individuals is structured through personal ties, the attachment to family, involvement in networks of relations with one's 'fellows' and participation in circles of close friends, an encapsulation which not only reinforces the sense of identity, but also enriches these personal ties with a powerful emotional charge (Epstein 1978, cf. D. Bell 1975). The intensity of affective bonds explains the particular importance, in the expressions of ethnic identity, of symbolism, which is the traditional channel through which feelings arise and operate.

In migration processes the question of identity (and its ethnic and psychological component) is crucial in the adaptability and social inclusion. Understanding these concepts favors good social policy practices. «The concept of integration does not encompass adequately issues of psycho-social adaptation, including identity and a need for stability, although identity has become a crucial category for both theoretical considerations and sociological research due to its significance for understanding individuals and society as a whole (Jenkins, 2004). Identity has gained importance as a fundamental category which mediates between individuals and society» (Paddock 2016, 1124).

4. DIFFERENT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL APPROACHES: MULTICULTURALISM AND INTERCULTURALISM

Multiculturalism is an ethical-political position according to which a democratic state should ensure their "recognition" to cultural communities, which are collective subjects, going beyond traditional liberalism, which recognizes only individual rights (Habermas and Taylor 1999). Multicultural policies are designed to defend and promote rights specific to each cultural group. The defense / promo-

tion of the (collective) rights of a cultural group, however, could collide with the rights of (individual) of their members. Moreover, recognition of special rights of the individual groups, presenting a variety of plural and separate nationalities 'breaks up' an open society, which is the condition for the recognition of all rights, and subdivides it into closed societies (Sartori 2000).

What is now described as "strong" multiculturalism not only takes cultural diversity within society into account, but also takes into consideration the demands of those claiming the recognition of special rights and preferential treatment in regard to specific needs of each group (Martiniello 2000). There is also, according to Martiniello weak (soft) multiculturalism, which is the enhancement of cultural diversity when this does not require special legal measures and does not create problems with other groups or society as a whole (e.g. eating habits, forms of artistic expression, etc.). However it is not always easy to discriminate between the two forms of multiculturalism. While the kebab is not a problem, indeed it is welcome, the chador is, because more than an article of clothing it is a product (and a symbol) of a regulatory system concerning the rights of women, which is largely incompatible with that of the West.

We believe that multiculturalism must be taken generally for some purpose only in the strong sense, however difficult it is to define its boundaries. In fact, strong multiculturalism solves some problems, particularly the collective identity of people, but (as mentioned) it produces more. At the social level, it tends to encapsulate collective groups of people in poorly communicating and tendentially conflictual communities. This requires "subsidiary" political readjustments which, recognizing shares of representation and power in each group, further institutionalize those groups and reinforce the segmentation of society. For these reasons, as well as the unavoidable tension between individual rights and collective rights which multiculturalism would produce, those today who hold culture dear, but see relations from a perspective of integration rather than separation, prefer to speak of "interculturalism".

The concept of interculturalism, by contrast, is diametrically opposed to strong multiculturalism. It represents an ethical-political project, which is realized in "intercultural" practices aimed at solving the problems of coexistence between cultural groups in multiethnic societies by promoting active engagement and constant communication between them. Like multiculturalism, interculturalism recognizes and values cultural groups, but unlike multiculturalism it does not invoke the protection and promotion of collective rights if they are incompatible with individual rights and the universalistic principles from which they derive. In the words of Marazzi (1998), while multiculturalism suggests a static situation of basic co-existence of groups of different origins, without reciprocally productive encounters interculturalism proposes understanding and mutual exchanges, resulting in cultural enrichment of both individuals and groups in society in general.

At the basis of interculturalism is a dynamic concept of culture, which may be continuously redefined and reshaped, and it is hence a more elective than ascriptive vision of ethnicity. It involves the abandonment of all forms of dogmatism and the willingness of each culture to engage with and to draw on the best that other cultures have to offer. Underlying this position is the basic idea that all cultures have a common foundation in belonging to the human race and are therefore naturally inclined to unite people on the grounds of shared universal principles. Intercultural practices are designed primarily to be applied in education.

5. SOCIAL CONFLICT AND DIFFERENT FORMS OF VIOLENCE

Conflict and violence are different things. Social conflict (psychological conflict is something else) can be defined as a competitive situation where the parties are aware of the incompatibility of potential future positions and in which each party seeks to occupy a position that is incompatible with the aspirations of the other (Boulding 1962). Conflict is thus an extreme form of competition characterized by a distribution of pay-offs that tend to be zero sum. It can be solved, or mitigated, turning this situation into a distribution of joint payoffs. As highlighted by some classic authors, conflict is not necessarily a bad thing either, because it may lead to new forms of integration between the parties (Coser 1956) and because it is an important way of giving a certain direction to social change (Dahrendorf 1959).

A conflict is not necessarily violent, nor does its possible violent character necessarily depend on its intensity. In its narrowest sense, violence is a physical action of an individual or group against another individual or group, or even against itself; where such action is voluntary, it is usually exercised against the will of those who suffer (with the obvious exception of violence against oneself), and aims to destroy, offend, oppress (Stoppino 2001). Narrow definitions of this type are also present in the work of major sociologists such as T. Parsons (1968) and others.

However, in everyday but also in scientific language “violence” goes beyond the boundaries of mere physical intervention, including for example “potential” violence, which consists in the threat of physical intervention, or “psychological” or “moral” violence. In our opinion it is necessary to take account of these more extended uses, without however stretching the concept to the point where the phenomena covered by it are too dissimilar to be usefully included in a single category.

Potential violence, or the threat of violence falls within the category of violence because, although a form of communicative action, it is inextricably linked to actual violence (Nieburg 1969). On the one hand, actual violence is a frequent consequence of the threat of violence, being typically used when threats have no

effect. On the other hand, violence may be imposed to make future threats credible, and hence establish a coercive power based on violence.

Psychological violence, consisting of conduct that has as its object not the physical but the mental state of the other, should also be considered a form of violence, for several reasons.

1. It has some important features in common with violence in the strict sense: it is intentional, it is meant to inflict damage and even extreme suffering, and it is an operation conducted against the wishes of those who suffer (although they may not be fully aware of this).
2. It's hard to say where psychological suffering ends and where physical suffering begins, on account of the obvious connection between the two (a depression caused by the withdrawal of esteem or affection always compromises bodily functions more or less seriously).
3. Psychological violence can push those who undergo it to acts of physical violence toward others or, more importantly, towards themselves (suicide, self harm).
4. In some situations, physical and mental violence are used together to annihilate the other. The most extreme cases are torture and brainwashing. But the use of insults and beatings are a common practice outside of these extreme phenomena, and widespread in relationships between young people.

On the basis of these considerations, we will define violence as any action on the physical status of the other intended to destroy, offend or coerce; any threat of such action, any intervention intended to cause severe emotional distress. The 2002 WHO Report on Violence and Health defines violence not dissimilarly as the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which results in or has a high degree of probability of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, poor development or deprivation (WHO 2002).

In the category of interpersonal violence the above-mentioned WHO report identifies three types of violence: self-inflicted violence (suicide and self-abusive behavior), interpersonal violence (domestic violence and in the community), collective violence (social, political and economic). Omitting self-inflicted violence (suicide or self-abuse interest us as possible consequences of other acts of violence), interpersonal violence differs from collective violence in that the perpetrators are individual and not collective subjects.

Violence in school is considered a form of interpersonal violence "in the community", which also includes: youth violence, random acts of violence, rape, violence in workplaces, prisons, etc.

The distinction between interpersonal violence and collective violence is not always easy to draw on the basis proposed, namely that of the "individual" or

“collective” nature of the actors. An act of violence committed by a protester in a peaceful protest will be considered an act of interpersonal violence by the event organizers, who disassociate themselves from it by stressing the peaceful nature of their initiative, but it will be branded as an act of “political” (and therefore collective) violence by political antagonists, who would prefer to qualify the event as a whole as violent. On the other hand, an act of violence committed by one person against another person in the name of a nation, an ideology, or a political party will be considered interpersonal by those who wish to disassociate themselves from it, but political (and therefore collective) by the political forces with an interest in criminalizing the action, party, or ideology and all those aligned with it.

For us this is a difficult problem, because conflict and ethnic violence, or situations of conflict or violence involving actors from different ethnic groups, but which somehow refer to collective categorizations (ethnic groups), are a central theme. If the actors were acting completely outside of any reference to their ethnicity, it would be misleading to speak of ethnic conflict and violence.

To talk about conflict and ethnic violence means to speak of collective phenomena or (if preferred) of collective relief. As is known, collective phenomena (or collective relief) can hardly be explained by psychological variables – psychological reductionism – and by idiosyncratic factors related to the life situation of the actors. Rather, interpersonal violence is usually attributed to micro phenomena: experiences such as abuse, social isolation, discomfort, poor control, the family, dis-adaptive socialization (Vergati 2003), etc. Invoking causes of this kind to explain inter-ethnic violence or inter-ethnic conflict, would be far too inadequate unless in the context of theories at the macro level of social process. The same goes for any other forms of violence involving the presence of reference groups or systems of collective ideas.

For these reasons we define interpersonal violence as any violent behavior by individual actors directed against individual actors, with the exception of those behaviors that have the same characteristics but which are adopted in the name of some collective actor or take place in the context of a collective action.

Within behavioral acts of interpersonal violence we find violence between peers. A peer group is a voluntary group of individuals who share a common set of traits or personal situations, mainly age, school or work, leisure activities, and are bound by affective ties. Usually groups of teenagers (or in some cases, pre-teens) are defined in this way, and the important role these traits play in the socialization of the young is stressed (starting with work by Riesman 1950).

The peer group is accompanied, even when its function is antagonistic, by the family group as a source of standards and values, and is the context in which the young person starts to become autonomous, to learn alternative behavior patterns, to develop a new identity, different from that of son or daughter. The peer group provides a tendentially egalitarian, free and open environment for the young, unlike the relatively immutable family environment.

In fact there is no ready-made organization, or fixed hierarchy, or any indisputable standards or values sanctified by tradition. The only absolute value is loyalty to the group, which is non-negotiable, and the only rule is not to betray one's friends. Numerous opportunities for violent behavior arise from this situation. The first and most obvious, is the ultimate sanction: expulsion from the group / ostracism, which serves to reinforce the boundaries of the group against the outside environment. Other occasions concern the internal life of the group. Between members there are exchanges of course, of positive (rewards) and negative values (penalties). The internal hierarchies depend on the results of these exchanges. An actor X will make a positive value (i.e. his or her competence in some useful activity, or the garage of his or her father for the holidays) available to others. If others are unable to reciprocate with positive values, X will acquire a place in the hierarchy of status and power. However, if Y, who practices martial arts, finds an opportunity to humiliate X physically, this will be seen by all as a challenge, and as a new claim. This may trigger an escalation and re-define the hierarchy: over time this model gives rise to the pecking order and respect for the pyramids that form the basis of hierarchical social organization (Nieburg 1974). There is no shortage of opportunities for violence among groups of teenagers when they begin to compete for respect and power, whether it is to redefine roles or to assert their sexual identity. We should keep in mind that most young people do not have (or at least do not directly control) large amounts of positive values other than those related to personal qualities such as beauty, intelligence, charm, and so on. Therefore, they are often forced to exchange negative sanctions, amongst which physical or psychological actions or threats are common currency.

In addition, as noted, the peer group is typically an "audience" for the deeds of its members, which amplifies their meaning and, in some cases exhibits them with pride and defiance to the outside world. This happens especially with delinquent groups: whoever commits a crime always feels supported by a system of values. What he wants and is seeking is the recognition of his peers, and he'll go happily to the electric chair, because the sympathy and admiration they reward him with mean that he feels enveloped in an aura of martyrdom and immortality (Nieburg 1974). However, given the structural antagonism between the peer group and the environment, it is common for transgressive or violent acts, to have this function even in more integrated groups. In this case, however, we are faced with violent acts committed by the peer group and its members, towards actors outside the group, and therefore not an act of violence between equals. Given the importance of this phenomenon, we believe it should be taken into account.

We therefore define violence in the peer group as any act of violence perpetrated by one or more members of a group against other members in order to consolidate the group's boundaries or to redefine the group hierarchy. To these uses of violence we should add violence of the same group members towards actors external to it, with the intention of enhancing the prestige (or menace) of the group for other groups and, in general, to the outside world.

There are a great many current uses of the term “institutional violence”, covering a range that goes from abuses by institutional actors in the performance of their duties, domestic violence, laws that are thought to damage the interests or the dignity of social categories (e.g. gender discrimination), or the dignity of human beings (e.g. laws on euthanasia). The concept is thus too broad and unwieldy.

We believe that the term institutional violence should cover only acts of violence (physical violence, threats of physical violence, emotional abuse) committed by institutional actors whilst exercising their functions; that it is necessary to distinguish at least two types of institutions, and that it is appropriate to distinguish between the acts of violence committed by the institutions towards other actors and those carried out between the staff members of institutions.

For some institutions, such as the military, police and prisons, the use of physical violence is, in varying degrees, the very *raison d'être*. These institutions possess to a considerable extent and in an organized manner the means of physical violence (weapons, detention centers, etc.). And their staff is trained to use them with external actors (other armies, criminals, etc.). We could call these institutions “constitutionally violent”. In principle “legal” acts of violence should be distinguished from illegal ones, although sometimes the distinction is difficult because of the presence of many borderline cases. In some cases it may be useful for the institution to stretch the limits of legality (e.g. during interrogations, or in certain military operations). In other cases, the mere possession of instruments of violence and habits of violence may lead staff to commit abuses (cases of beatings in prison, the raping of prostitutes by police, etc.). Acts of violence perpetrated by staff from these institutions outside of their duties (e.g. a police officer who beats up his wife, or even policemen who improvise as vigilantes outside the institution and secretly use violence against others) should not be considered acts of institutional violence. The case of institutional violence “in disguise” is common in authoritarian regimes, where acts of apparently non-institutional violence (assassinations of opponents, provocations, etc.), are actually orchestrated under the direction of the secret police.

In institutions functionally equipped to exercise some degree of physical violence, recourse to emotional abuse is of course common, often in combination with physical violence.

In other institutions, like schools, hospitals, etc., which we define as “constitutionally non-violent”, the use of violence is not only an unforeseen function, but it is explicitly banned. Psychiatric hospitals are (and in Italy were) the exception, where the use of physical violence (straitjackets, bed restraint, perhaps electric shocks, the administration of abnormal amounts of drugs) is (or was) routine for “therapeutic” purposes. In school, the institution that interests us, institutional violence of a physical nature is not only forbidden, but is also quite rare. So much so that cases of abuse (especially in preschools) cause a stir and are widely covered in the media. The case of emotional abuse is different. Each institution is hierarchically structured, and those with power can abuse it often

through practices that are less visible, but whose effects can be severe. A teacher who systematically commits injustices against a student, will produce in him or her psychological reactions, the extent of which is incalculable. A teacher can easily discriminate the less gifted students within his or her class, increasing their frustration and leading to aggression towards others or themselves. One of the most serious cases is the discrimination against students of certain ethnicities, invoking formally unobjectionable, universalistic criteria: the student does not fail because he or she is Chinese, but because he or she does not know good Italian. In general, universalism used as a cover for particularism is one of the ugliest forms of emotional abuse.

Violence also occurs between the staff of institutions. In constitutively violent institutions faults or failures are sometimes punished with physical violence (punishment cell), often accompanied by heavy mockery, insults, etc. In addition, the training of these personnel often involves the use of varying measures of physical and psychological violence (we may recall the instructor in Full Metal Jacket). In constitutively non-violent institutions, as in any organization, violence (in this case mental) between staff is always enabled by the hierarchical structure and the possibility of blackmail by superiors towards their inferiors and by the envy of those of equal status. This may involve sexual harassment, bullying and other forms of abuse that have recently attracted the attention of scholars and the public.

We conclude with an observation. In general, institutions have varying degrees of “closure” to the outside, i.e. they are worlds in themselves. This closure facilitates violence because it conceals the institution from external observers and guarantees a certain internal solidarity. In addition, it also encourages “horizontal” violence between the recipients of institutional functions. A lot of peer violence occurs in school. The closure is greatest in so-called total institutions: prisons, mental hospitals, etc. (Goffman 1961); it is smaller but still significant in other institutions such as barracks and colleges, which reproduce in an attenuated form some of the traits of total institutions. In fact it is in these institutions that violence is more widespread, whether vertical – perpetrated by staff on the “inmates” – or horizontal – amongst the inmates themselves (fights, injuries and killings of prisoners, harassment of university students, etc.). According to our definition, horizontal violence amongst inmates is not institutional, but it is institutionally induced, and because it is not uncommonly tolerated or even encouraged by those responsible for the institutions, it should be taken into account.

6. ETHNIC CONFLICT AND ETHNIC VIOLENCE

We define as “ethnic” any conflict motivated and / or symbolized in terms of the ethnicity of the actors. The distinction between motivation and symbolism is important. We give three typical cases.

1. A conflict may be motivated by reasons other than ethnicity but symbolized in ethnic terms. For example, the conflict between two children can be motivated by personal or social factors, but symbolized (and justified) in ethnic terms: he's a "nigger", a "Jew", a "foreign" and that is why I have it in for him. In general, this situation arises where ethnicity is a sufficiently widespread social category to provide an accepted criterion of justification for actions not motivated by ethnic factors, and thus to "ethn-icise" virtually everything.
2. Another, opposite case is that of a conflict motivated by ethnic hostility, but justified in extra-ethnic terms, which may in turn refer to circumstances related to persons or to social status. Such conflict is likely to occur in contexts that reject ethnic categorizations as morally unacceptable or politically incorrect, and hence translate conflicts whose basis is in fact ethnic, into ethical or social terms.
3. The third and final case is one where reasoning and symbolization are the same, because they are both ethnic.

We believe the moment of symbolization, which reveals the nature of the conflict and therefore its collective and social relevance, to be decisive. Although it occurs between individual actors, in fact, an ethnic conflict (as well as an act of ethnic violence) should be considered collective (or of "collective significance") because it brings into play collective entities, such as ethnic groups, whose relations it can influence. Conflicts related to the latter are not strictly speaking inter-ethnic. We are inclined to consider them as "racially motivated" forms of interpersonal conflict.

Like any form of conflict, inter-ethnic conflict, is also defined on the basis of incompatibility. Incompatibilities may include interests (i.e. positions of social status, wealth, power) or values (i.e. beliefs, religions, customs, etc.). What makes the conflict ethnic is the fact that these interests or incompatible values are attributed to ethnic groups, and not to other formations.

Contemporary literature often interprets ethnic conflict privileging the category of "interests." These are related to ethnic conflict in two different ways, depending on the theoretical model adopted.

The theory of "competition for resources," argues that ethnic conflict arises from competition between ethnic groups for the same resources. Barth, in one of his papers (1969) suggests that the very genesis and persistence of ethnic boundaries, and the structure of inter-ethnic relations, depend on factors that affect competition for resources. This theory leads to a view of ethnicity which is biased towards the "subjective", "instrumental" and "elective" side, because ethnic groups are formed from the identity that actors use to categorize themselves and others in the competition for resources. It also implies that the social environment is quite fluid and egalitarian in its distribution of opportunities to allow at least some groups access to real competition, even if the competition outcome

may be the formation of a very rigid system of stratification of class and ethnicity (Van den Berghe 1975).

The theory of “reactive ethnicity” (Hechter 1975) is founded on the assumption of a rigid system of stratification in which class and ethnic group membership overlap. According to this approach, the mere fact of belonging to a cultural group does not by itself generate ethnic conflict unless it is accompanied by a disadvantage in the distribution of resources. Coincidence between membership of a particular cultural group and a situation of social deprivation mobilizes ethnicity and triggers conflicts (symbolized in ethnic terms) that are also driven by reasons of class.

For our purposes, both theories have merit. The theory of competition for resources highlights the dynamics and conflicts that are largely evident in today’s society, characterized by the presence of substantial numbers of immigrants, often regarded as dangerous competitors in the competition for scarce resources: jobs, especially, but also housing, health care, etc. A study in Trieste (Urpis 2010) reveals that Italian students, perhaps influenced by their families, strongly share this sense of threat. Competition involves the spatial proximity and communication between groups. And as already noted by Deutsch that the chances of violent conflict will increase with the volume and variety of transactions (1953). In this regard, see Kriesi (2000).

The theory of reactive ethnicity highlights an important wellspring of the stereotypes that accompany and symbolize ethnic conflict: the overlap between certain cultural traits and disadvantageous position in social stratification. Gellner (1983) finds that the concentration of people at the bottom of the social ladder who have a particular cultural trait activates negative prejudice according to which the low socioeconomic status is attributed to a supposed inferiority of those with that trait. In addition, the theory of reactive ethnicity, combining in one postulate the severity of socio-economic deprivation and affectivity proper to ethnic identity (see below), helps to account for the intensity and intractability of ethnic conflict.

Ethnic violence is a possible mode of inter-ethnic conflict. It consists in the use of physical violence, threats of violence, psychological violence during ethnic conflict. The targets of ethnic violence are individual or collective actors symbolized as belonging to ethnic groups.

Ethnic violence may occur as a result of non-violent ethnic conflict. The prejudices and stereotypes (especially those which are degrading or dehumanizing) facilitate inter-ethnic violence, as does the state of “relative deprivation” of those on the last rung of the social ladder, generating frustration and aggression (Gurr 1971). However, relative deprivation does not adequately explain violence, and the function of stereotypes is more to justify or reinforce than to trigger violent behavior.

The degree of perceived deprivation is influenced by the prevailing value system. A member of a socially disadvantaged ethnic group can accept his or her

position if s/he thinks it is imposed by a god or by nature, or if s/he believes it can be bettered with knowledge and hard work. Deprivation is furthermore unlikely to turn into conflict (and even less into violence) if the use of violence is not profitable or if the situation appears unchangeable and if the violence is effectively socially and institutionally sanctioned. In other words, given a psychological propensity of ethnic conflict (as in all conflicts) to escalate to more extreme tactics, many cultural, cognitive and structural factors intervene to promote or to discourage it (Gordon 1975). These observations are relevant in the case of European countries affected by immigration where the level of ethnic violence (i.e. symbolized in ethnic terms) is low, and where the commitment to education of foreign students, which is on average higher than that of Italian children, is motivated by the expectation that study will open the way to jobs and prosperity.

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