The role of ethnicity in ethnic conflicts: The case of Yugoslavia

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the Cold War, processes of democratization in some countries have revealed old ethnic, religious and cultural differences that have led to ethnic violent and conflicts. The administrative state and institutions of former socialist states, once relieved of central authoritarian leadership and one-party domination, did not have the capacity to accommodate diverse claims of constituent ethnic groups. (Vuckovic,1997,p:1). As a result, ethnic cleavages came to the surface, as a threatening force that jeopardized the unity of the states. As Moynihan (1993) stated in his *Pandemonium*, "the world was entering a period of ethnic conflict, following the relative stability of the cold war. This could be explained. As large formal structures broke up, and ideology lost its hold, people would revert to more primal identities. Conflict would arise based on these identities" (Moynihan in Vuckovic,1997,p:3). Yugoslavia can illustrate such a case, where the complexity of a multiethnic society, burdened with historical animosities, led to conflict and disintegration (Vuckovic,1997,p:3) and revealed that ethnicity had emerged as a serious threat for the state's unity. However, explanations of the conflict by Western leaders, such as "age-old antagonisms", "ancient hatreds", and "Balkan ghosts" (Sells in Davis,1996,p: 23), are simplistic ones and tend to confront the disintegration of Yugoslavia as a result of old animosities among its groups and attribute the tragedy to the force of "ethnicity". Yet, the issue is far more complicated.

In this essay, I am going to argue that the conflict between Yugoslavia's ethnic groups was not determined by ethnicity itself; rather that, ethnicity played an important role in the issue, as the political elites took advantage of the symbolic power that ethnicity has to offer and used it as a tool for pursuing territorial, political and economic objectives. Thus, ethnicity became the basis of political mobilization in pursuit of resurgent claims to territory and power (Cornel and Hartmann, 1998,p:149). Ethnicity, finally, became "politicized" (Grillo in Roessingh, 1996,p:5) for the exacerbation of nationalism, the manipulation of which was in turn the underling force of the conflict. Before analyzing the role of ethnicity in Yugoslavia's conflict, I consider it of crucial importance to define the concepts of "ethnicity", "ethnic conflict" and nationalism.

Key concepts

Ethnicity and ethnic identity

Ethnicity is the state of being ethnic or belonging to a certain ethnic group (Kellas, 1998,p:6). An ethnic group is defined as "a group of people who are generally recognized by themselves and/or the others as a distinct group, with such recognition based on social or cultural characteristics" (Farley in Cornell,1998,p:17). Thus, "when a subpopulation of individuals reveals, or is perceived to reveal, shared historical experiences as well as unique organizational, behavioral and cultural characteristics, it exhibits ethnicity" (Aguirre and Turner in Cornell,1998,p:17). Smith refers to six main attributes to define an *ethnie*, a group sharing the same ethnicity: a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, an association with a specific "homeland", and   a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population (Smith, 1991,p:21).

Since all the abovementioned attributes of ethnicity give the group its individual characteristics and distinguish it from the others, ethnicity could be considered in a way synonymous to the notion of "identity" or, to set it in a different way, "identity is that sense of ethnic distinctiveness" (Cornell, 1998,p:18). This link between identity and ethnicity is made explicit in Horowitz's(1985) definition of the latter: "ethnicity is a highly inclusive group identity based on some notion of common origin, recruited primarily through kinship and typically manifesting some measure of cultural distinctiveness"(Horowitz in Vuckovic, 1997,p:1).

Nationalism

Ethnicity is highly linked to the concept of nationalism, since the latter is based on real or assumed ethnic ties (Cornell,1998,p:37). However, nationalism has more ideological and political dimensions (Kellas,1998,p:5), as "it refers to the expressed desire of a people to establish and maintain a self-governed political entity"(Cornell,1998,p:34). When ethnicity becomes nationalist, the result is the emergence of ethnonationalism, which in turn can prove threatening for the existence of the state and lead to ethnic conflict and disintegration, as in the case of Yugoslavia.

Ethnic conflict

The term "ethnic conflict" is therefore "the result of 'cultural incompatibility' of groups, coupled with a sudden rise in awareness of one's identity *vis à vis* another ethnic group" (Roessingh, 1996,p:17). In such a conflict, at least one of the groups will define its goals in ethnic terms, i.e. it will claim that its distinct ethnic identity and the lack of the opportunity to preserve, express and develop it, is the reason that its members do not have the same rights, and cannot realize their interests. It is thus made clear that ethnicity and

ethnic identity play an important role in conflicts of that kind, as they can provide a power that is capable of arising passion and nationalistic feelings which thereof are used by elites for pursuing territorial and political power. From this point, I am going to analyze how these concepts were used in Yugoslavia's case and what was their role in the conflict.

THE ROLE OF ETHNICITY FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE STATE'S CREATION

Yugoslavia came into existence in the aftermath of World War I, in 1918, as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. (Jenkins and Sofos, 1996,p:254). The creation of the new state was based on the concept of ethnicity, i.e. that the South Slavs share an ethnicity and they should therefore be in the same state. (Schöpflin, 2000,p:330). Yet, the term ethnicity used at that time to imply only the notion of 'race' and its content was partly biological. Its essence was language. Thus, it was assumed that people speaking the same language were members of the same nation and should in accordance be living in the same state. Hence the South Slavs were all members of one nation (Schöpflin,2000,p:330). Such projects of social engineering were common in the nineteenth century. However, the exclusive emphasis on language as the basis of the state's creation implied that other key elements of identity-such as the South Slav's distinct histories and previous experiences, their diverse expectations and claims as well as their various religious affiliations- were ignored (Schöpflin,2000,p:331). This was an important flaw in the creation of the state, as it did not take into serious account the different ethnic identities of its groups and it did not try to form a system that could assimilate them in a way that they would not constitute the base of the 1991 conflict.

Yugoslavia under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito and his communist regime came into being at the end of World War II. It was the federation of six republics (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Slovenia) and of two autonomous provinces (Kosovo and Vojvodina) under the name of "The socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia" (1974 constitution). Its creation was based on the principle of *bratstvo i jedinstvo* (Jenkins and Sofos,1996,p:258), i.e. on the brotherhood and unity that was necessary for the state's coherence. The communists did not found the state's re-creation on ethnic and language ties. They rather based the paradigm for solidarity among Yugoslav ethnic groups on two 'supra-ethnic' elements (Höpken in Bokovoy, Irvine & Lilly, 1997,p:82). First, they stressed the 'all-Yugoslav', not just South Slav, historical experience of a common struggle for freedom and independence during the war and secondly, they relied on a shared sense of ideological values, symbolized on the term *self-managed socialism*. In that way, the regime attempted to emphasize the similarities and suppress the divisive characteristics among the ethnic groups (Jenkins and Sofos,1996,p:258). It tried to impose to the groups the doctrine of 'Yugoslavism' (Schöpflin,2000,p:338), i.e. a common Yugoslav identity that was beyond the individual ethnic ones.

Education played a crucial role in this attempt, since it is one of the most important means of identity formation. The principles of 'self-managed socialism' as well as 'brotherhood and unity', as the key concepts of the common Yugoslav identity, were the most desired values in the educational objectives.[1] Yet, the communists' attempt to create a common identity through the educational system based on these two paradigms proved not to be successful; instead, it brought forward more contradictions than it had expected. This result is due first of all, to the fact that the books of that period did not familiarize students with the idea of the multicultural society in which they had to live. They did not teach them effectively how to deal with ethnic diversity and distinctiveness, as they did not provide them with the knowledge that each ethnic group had its own historical identity, which definitely deserved the respect of the others, but at the same time it had to be peacefully embodied within the larger spectrum of a common Yugoslavian one.

Instead of that, history textbooks dealt mostly with the history of the Partisan movement and of each group's history, which in turn created the feeling thus left little space for the teaching of an ethnic identity loosing its historical basis. In addition, the ideological values were often linked with Tito himself, identifying thus the system strongly with the leader. In identifying the system with the ruler, the educational system did not prepare students for post-Tito conditions. As a result, historical education proved unable to "develop a didactical concept linking a respect for individual historical identity with a kind of common Yugoslav identity"[2] and therefore produced a vacuum in the historical memory of each group, which would be easier to be filled in with myths and prejudices against each other rather than with the values of respect and loyalty, which are essential for the peaceful cohabitation of the various ethnic groups within a multiethnic society.

With the death of Tito in 1980, the communist regime began to weaken and tensions between Yugoslavia's ethnic groups emerged. This was due to the fact that the communists never managed to build viable political institutions to codify and regulate relations among the groups (Kupchan,1995,p:105). The authoritarian leadership of the communist regime did not prove successful in creating a civic identity and in dealing effectively with the ethnic individual ones. As a result, the process of transition toward a multiparty democracy caught Yugoslavia with a weak central authority and its people organizing themselves into political parties along ethnic boundaries (Vuckovic, 1997,p:155). It was as if Tito himself "fanned the flames of the following ethnic tension" (Cornell, 1998,p:146). Thus, in the years after his death, conditions were ripe for ethnicity to emerge as a dominant source of social and political cleavage (Kupcan,1995,p:105).

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[1] Höpken in Bokovoy et al,1997,p:82.
[2] Höpken in Bokovoy et al,1997,p:91

From that point on, ethnicity was used "instrumentally" to further interests by the political elites who needed to mobilize large followings to support their goals in the struggle for power. In this struggle ethnicity became a very useful tool. (Smith,1991,p:20). It also became a distinguishing feature, in the sense that the various ethnic groups identified themselves with their own ethnic identity, which excluded the rest. Ethnicity became thus a matter of contrast (Cornell and Hartmann,1998,p:20) and excluded the groups that did not share the same identity. This exclusiveness that ethnicity can provide was used by the ethnonationalist elites for political ends and power. From the end of 1988 and especially in the months preceding the elections of 1990, Yugoslavia's groups were polarized along ethnic lines. This is made explicit in Arnautović's observation of the situation in Yugoslavia of that period. "Ethnic identity was the basis of political representation or political legitimacy" (Arnautovic in Burg and Shoup,2000,p:49). It was the nationalist party leaders that mobilized these ethnic identities of the people and aggravated the differences in their 'ethnicities' so as to provoke nationalistic feelings for their own purposes. They used all the power that ethnicity has to offer with horrifying results (Cornell and Hartmann,1998,p:151). My research is now going to focus on how the most crucial elements of ethnicity were manipulated and politicized by the elites for their specific political goals and the extent to which the contributed to the conflict.

THE MANIPULATION AND POLITICIZATION OF ETHNICITY

Historical memories and myths

Historical memories constitute a crucial element of ethnicity according to Smith's definition. An ethnic group is thus a cultural collectivity that shares the same historical memories of a common past (Smith,1991,p:20). These memories are supposed to link the group with bonds of loyalty and thus provide cohesion.

Yugoslavia's ethnic groups did not share the same historical memories and as a result, the myths created were not at all converging. I will refer to the myths of Serbia and Croatia, as they were the ones that dominated the political ideologies after the weakening of the communist regime and formed the basis of the manipulation of ethnicity by the elites. The Croat historical myth is based on the medieval kingdom of kings Tomislav and Krešimir(Pavkovic,1997,p:7). The kingdom lost its independence in 1097 and from 1102 it passed to the kings of Hungary. Within this context, "the Croatian Diet is portrayed as a political struggle for the preservation of old historical rights of the Croatian state against the encroachments of the Austrian Habsburgs"-that had gained the Croatian crown-aiming at assimilating Croats and their lands(Pavkovic,1997,p:7). The goal of this mythical struggle was a sovereign and independent Croatian state and became the focus of Croat national ideologies in the nineteenth century.

Also, the historical past of Croatia during World War II was connected to the Ustaša regime, the ideology of which was based on the hatred against the Serbs. The latter were considered by the Ustaša as having deprived the Croats of their historical liberties and in this way they developed a 'mystical fascination with rituals of violence and terror' (Pavkovic,1997,p:37) that linked them with the Nazis and Fascists. These myths and memories of the past were used by Croatia's elites and by the president of the Croatian Democratic Commmunity(HDZ), Franjo Tudjman, in order to mobilize the Croatian ethnicity for the persecution of an independent and "ethnically cleansed" state(Jenkins and Sofos,1996,p:269).

The Serb historical myth harks back at their medieval state that included the territory of Serbia, Herzegovina and Macedonia. Under Dušan the Mighty, the state extended over the areas of present-day Greece, Bulgaria and Albania. Within this myth, the history of the state was viewed as liberation of the Serbian territories from foreign rule. After Dušan's death, the empire disintegrated and conquered by the Islamic Ottoman empire. The battle on Kosovo's Polje in 1389 against the Ottomans became another myth. In this battle, the Serb nobility, according to the legend, sacrificed their lives for their faith and liberty. Prince Lazar, who lost his life in the territory, was canonized as a saint and the date of the battle became one of the central feast days, the day of the Kosovo martyrs[3]. During Milošević's years, this myth was used to mobilize popular support for the realization of political plans, mainly of a Greater Serbia, which I will refer to below. Consequently, the myths of the past became part of the Serbian memory during the nineteenth century and were being transformed by the Serbian elites into ideologies for the fulfillment of their political agendas. According to Horowitz, "history can be a weapon and tradition can fuel ethnic conflict"(Horowitz in Diamond,1994,p:118) but it is when these two elements are politicized that people become polarized along ethic lines and are led to a conflict.

Association with a 'homeland'

Another main feature of ethnicity is the attachment with a specific territory. Smith argues that "it is the attachments and associations, rather than residence in or possession of the land that matters for ethnic identification"(Smith,1991,p:23). Hence, an *ethnie* may persist, even in the case that it is long divorced from its homeland, through an intense nostalgia and spiritual attachment. Thus, the territory is an integral aspect of ethnic identity, as it represents the origins and the past of the group living in it or being attached to it, as well as its struggles to conquer it. In this way, it becomes a holy ground, or 'a sacred land of our forefathers, our kings and saints.'(Smith,1991,p:23).

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[3] Pavković, 1997,p:8

The case of Kosovo is of particular relevance to Smith's theory of symbolic attachment with a given territory. Kosovo was for Serbs the cradle of their culture and nation. They called it 'our Jerusalem'[4] emphasizing thus their rights on a territory that, as it was considered, was threatened by the existence of another ethnic group, that of Albanians. On the other hand, Albanians had also developed strong symbolic attachments with the land, as they claimed historical rights derived from the ancient Illyrians who populated the Balkans before the settlement of the South Slavs(Pavković,1997,p:87). Kosovo's case reveals the passion and the hatred that ethnicity can rise if it is manipulated by ethnonationalist political leaders. In Kosovo, the emotional attachment to the land of the two ethnic groups excluded one another. Milošević played an important role in the ethnic conflict that followed, by appealing to the deep patriotic feelings of the Serbian people, by becoming their 'voice' and by fueling nationalistic feelings when making statements like "Serbian nationalism is a serpent deep in the bosom of the Serbian people"(Bokovoy et al,1997,p:328). From this point on, I am going to analyze how Milošević used the historical memory and the attachment of the Serbian people to the 'homeland of Kosovo' for achieving his vision of a Greater Serbia under his own political control.

Milošević's programme was based on the nationalist ideology. Bette Denitch refering to the ideology of nationalism says that it involves "the exploitation of symbolic processes that mediate the communication between leaders and populace invoking them to think, feel and act according to its premises. This is the manipulation of symbols with polarizing emotional context."[5] Milošević accordingly, used the emotional ties of the Serbs with Kosovo's territory in order to pursue his dream of a Greater Serbia that would not only incorporate Kosovo, but also lands where many Serbs lived, such as Eastern Slavonia and Krajina. Milošević tried to manipulate people's patriotism and fuel nationalism in them by appealing to their traumatic historical memories on the land. During his 1987 visit in Kosovo's Polje, he mobilized aspects of the Serbian ethnicity, such as the sacrifice of Prince Lazar, so as to strengthen people's attachment with the land. He urged them in an indirect way to fight for their rights in the area and reassured them that "Yugoslavia and Serbia will not give Kosovo away"[6]. At Polje, Milošević "had cannily identified the instrument necessary for his political advancement"[7], that was the politicization of ethnicity's attributes, mainly that of historical myths and the association people have with a particular land.

Milošević also tried to achieve this purpose and to instill his nationalist ideology through the manipulation of the mass media. The Croatian government was portrayed by the broadcast media as fascists seeking to exterminate all Serbs and Germany and Austria were blamed for supporting the Croatian fascism. This image of the Croatian authorities as Ustaše was

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[4] Ramet and Adamovich,1995,p:20
[5] Denitch B., in Spencer and Wollman,2002,p:108.
[6] Cohen in Bokovoy et al,1997,p:324
[7] Cohen in Bokovoy et al,1997,p:327

reinforced by their decision to replace the flag with the traditional Croat shield with chequered squares resembling the insignia used by the Ustaše during World War II(Pavković,1997,p:38). Also, the war in Croatia was presented as the struggle of the Serbian people against the processes of 'genocide' by the Ustaše Croatian party of Franjo Tudjman. The Serbian media spread the fear all over Yugoslavia. 'Ethnic hatreds' and the 'Balkan ghosts' were coming more and more to the surface, as the nationalist propaganda continued by the Croatian media, after 1990 that the HDZ took over their control. Consequently, the historical myths and memories of Yugoslavia's ethnic groups as well as their attachments to particular territories became central devices in the process of national emancipation, which resulted in the most violent conflict in the history of the Balkans.

Features of common culture (Religion)

Religion is considered as the most important element of a common culture. Religious affiliations case became a significant marker of ethnicity (Pavković,1997,p:6) and religious symbols, ritual and institutions were used to activate aggressive nationalistic feelings for the promotion of political agendas.

Yugoslavia's ethnic groups were differentiated in their religious beliefs. Serbs, Montenegrins and Macedonians are Eastern Orthodox. Croats and Slovenes are Roman Catholics, while in Bosnia-Herzegovina there is a sizeable Muslim population. (Kupchan,1995,p:105). The differentiations in terms of the various religious affiliations created distinctive customs, rituals and beliefs which shaped the everyday life of the groups. The separate calendars- Julian for the Eastern Orthodox and Gregorian for the Roman Catholic- prescribed a separate set of feast days even for the common Christian celebrations. In particular, Serb Eastern Orthodoxy developed two distinct cults; that of the medieval founder of the Serb Orthodox Church, St Sava, and that of the Kosovo martyrs. The celebration of these two cults clearly marks off the Serb Orthodox from the Roman Catholic believers (Pavković,1997,p:6). However, these differences in the way of life and religion, although they differentiated the culture of Yugoslavia's groups, they could not have shaped a national ideology capable of leading to an ethnic conflict. It was again the politicization of these religious identities and the polarization of the people along ethnic lines that created the conditions for the conflict. An example proving that is the dramatic rise of the Muslim's religious identities in Bosnia. Such identities had not been so strong before their politicization. The Serbs, Croats and Muslims of the area lived peacefully for many years as neighbours, even though there were differences in their religious dogmas. As Huntington mentions, "Muslims were Bosnians who did not go to the mosque, Croats were Bosnians who did not go to the cathedral and Serbs were Bosnians who did not go to the Orthodox church."(Huntington,1997,p:269). It was when the elites started to play upon these differences that religious beliefs became a marker of ethnic identity and, to quote Huntington again, "each ethnic group identified itself with its broader cultural community and defined itself in

religious terms"(Huntington,1997,p:269). In 1990, the Muslims of Bosnia voted for the Muslim Party of Democratic Action (SDA) led by Alija Izetbegović. He was a devout Muslim, imprisoned for his Islamic activism by the communist government. Izetbegović inroduced to the Muslim society the 'pan-Islamist version of Muslim nationalism', which regarded Islam as the immutable core of Muslim ethnic and political identity (Pavković,1997,p:95). In his book *The Islamic Declaration: A programme for the Islamisation of Muslims and Muslim peoples,* he aimed at the revival of an authentic Islamic consciousness and he argued for "the incompatibility of Islam with non-Islamic systems. There can be neither peace nor coexistence between the Islamic religion and non-Islamic social and political institutions" (Huntington,1997,p:269). Thus, as Pavković argues, Izetbegović affirmed the Islamic religiously-defined ethnic identity in politics and tried to promote a project of an Islamic society, where non-Muslims (Serbs and Croats) were second class citizens with no political civil rights (Pavković,1997,p:97). This resulted in the reaction of the Serbs and Croats, as it was viewed as a force towards the political dominance of the Muslims in Bosnia. Soon the conflict took dimensions of genocide, as the Serbs cleansed the Bosnian town of Zvornik of its 40.000 Muslims and the symbols of the opposing religion became destroying mosques and Croats blowing up Orthodox monasteries (Huntington,1997,p:272). Consequently, religion, as a fundamental aspect of ethnicity, became a useful political tool in the hands of the elites for the promotion of their own plans.

Conclusion

This research leads us to the conclusion that ethnicity did play an important role in Yugoslavia's ethnic conflict. From the beginning of the state's creation, ethnicity was an important flaw. The communist regime suppressed the various ethnic identities of the groups and tried to create a Yugoslav one based on 'supra-ethnic' elements. Yet, the imperial suppression of these identities proved costly indeed, for when they permitted expression they took shape in ferocious forms(Davis,1996,p:50). The culpability of the political elites for giving expression to these identities and for emphasizing and politicizing their differences for their own political purposes can not be denied. In Yugoslavia's ethnic conflict, all the symbolic power that ethnicity can provide was manipulated in such a way that fanned the flames for an aggressive ethnonationalism to emerge as a force that finally led to chaos.

Ethnicity became the most prevalent element of the groups' identification. The political elites played a central role in it. According to Bourdieu, it is political leaders who emphasize the differences, who have the power of "imposing the vision of divisions, that is the power of making visible and explicit social divisions that are implicit. It is the power to make groups, to manipulate the objective structure of society"[8]. Yugoslavia was led to this sad ending mostly due to the emergence of nationalism and, within this context,

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[8] [WWW]http://condor.depaul.edu/~rrotenbe/aeer11_1/denitch.html

ethnicity's politicization offered fertile ground for the nationalistic ideologies to disintegrate the state and lead its people to conflict. Ethnicity thus became the "meat for the nationalist meal" (Spencer and Wollman,2002,p:98) and was perceived as an instrument for the realization of political plans. "The power of ethnicity lies in its capacity to arouse passion and commitment" (Cornell,1998,p:151) and it was because this symbolic power of ethnicity was taken full advantage of and was manipulated in such a way that Yugoslavia was led to ethnic conflict at the end of the previous century.

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