

## **ETHNIC, RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS MINORITIES**

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### **Summary**

In this article, the author presents the current scientific discussion about ethnic, racial and religious minorities. After a brief definition of the notion of minority, which is opposed to that of majority, the author sets out a typology of minorities. This typology was developed by the German sociologist Heckmann and permits to differentiate between minorities according to historical processes. The particularities of the following minorities are discussed: national minorities, regional minorities, migration and ethnic minorities, immigrant minorities, and finally colonial minorities and minorities in new nations. In the second part of the article, the author gives a historical overview of the notion of race. It is shown that it is nowadays no longer possible to separate races, a fact which permits the author to discuss the social construction of racial groups. Furthermore, the race-class debate and the problem of racial and/or ethnic stratification are presented. In the third part of the article, the author discusses religious minorities and the religious side of minorities. Moreover, the problem of the relation of religious minorities and states is discussed. In a concluding part, the author emphasizes the further development of cultures and focuses on the concept of inter-culturalism which seems more appropriate to the actual relations between majority and minority groups than multi-culturalism.

## 1. Introduction

Ethnic minorities can only be understood when we compare them to majorities. Anthropologists such as Charles Wagley and Marvin Harris defined minority groups in 1958 by five characteristics: their relative powerlessness when compared to majority groups, their distinct cultural and/or physical characteristics, their self-consciousness, the transmittance of membership by descent rules, and inter-marriage. The first of these criteria is normally considered as the most important criterion. This means that a numerical majority group such as the blacks under South African apartheid could be powerless, while whites, a numerical minority, could be dominant.

On the contrary, sociologists argue that minorities and majorities may be composed of distinct ethnic, racial and religious groups. These various sorts of people differ from each other according to symbolic characteristics that we will discuss below. A given minority group may thus be characterized simultaneously by several of these elements. An example of such a minority group would be black, Senegalese, and Muslim.

The use of common language adopts a rather general definition on the topic of minority. Minority means often a numerical small group. In the USA, a *minority group* becomes synonymous to individuals belonging to racial and/or ethnic groups. Thus, minority is understood as blacks and/or Hispanics. The affirmative action program in the USA intending to help the disadvantaged groups makes evident that it may be advantageous to be a member of these groups. Yet, what about Jews, or Japanese Americans who are numerical minorities, but who enjoy often favoured social positions compared to blacks and Hispanics. In these cases, the term *minority group* seems more or less inappropriate. In Europe, the concept of minority has long been used to describe national groups forming enclaves in societies dominated by other groups. The notion has proven to be useful in the last decades: remember the intergroup conflicts after the decolonization movements in former European colonial countries in Asia and Africa, or the more recent examples of the former Soviet Union where long-lasting racial, ethnic, and religious conflicts ended in open wars. Even countries such as Germany and France are now confronted by anti-minority movements: in Germany, groups on the political right attacked, and continue to attack, for instance, African or Eastern European immigrants. In France, the government passed laws regulating the movements of immigrants. The importance of these conflicts illustrates why the concept of minority retains its utility.

Historically, the notion *minority* was linked to a group who failed in a vote and was excluded from political government. Ethnic minorities are thus groups living in multi-ethnic states, groups who are excluded and discriminated against. On the other side, ethnic majorities are those groups which dominate in a system of ethnic stratification. Ethnic minorities can be differentiated according to several criteria: the origin of their situation, their structural position in a society and their ethnic-political orientations. The German sociologist Heckmann differentiates minorities according to historical processes: the foundation of the modern nation-state (national and regional minorities), internal and international migrations after processes of unequal industrialization (settler minorities), colonization and the creation of nation-states in Africa and Asia (colonial minorities and new national minorities). Heckmann developed the typology presented below.

## **2. National and regional minorities**

### **2.1. National minorities**

The foundation of modern nation-states implied the creation of ethnic minorities insofar as the nation-state was interested in homogeneous ethnic citizens. The alien groups living on its territory became ethnic minorities. The history of Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth century saw the creation of numerous ethnic minorities not only in Italy and Germany, but in Eastern Europe, too. The treaty of Versailles involved the creation of numerous national minority groups in countries such as Poland, Yugoslavia and Rumania. It was a general political aim to protect these groups, because of the fact that most of the states tried to oppress them or to pursue politics of assimilation. A more recent example is the creation of nation-states after the disintegration of the former Soviet Union where many national minorities decided to recreate their own states.

Conflicts between the nation-state and the minority rise on the problem of minority languages in schools, and in administration or over the political rights of minorities. Often, national minorities try to fasten their contacts with the nation-state where the members of *their* ethnic group are citizens. In contrast to economic migrants, the social structure of national minorities is relatively normal and comparable to the structure of the whole society.

### **2.2. Regional minorities**

Processes of ethnic assimilation and acculturation are linked to the creation of modern nation-states. Former independent ethnic groups were supposed to be included in the new nations. Social integration was and is implemented by public education and the administration, but is linked to the general economic change, too. The processes of unification are not always successful. Regional minorities may oppose their ethnic identity, their traditions and their cultures to such processes. In Europe, examples of these groups are, for instance, the Scots, the Basques or the Welshmen. Further examples are the kurds,, the Berbers and the Tamils. These groups have a heterogeneous social structure, similar to national minorities. They differ from them in their political perspective: most often, regional minorities try to obtain political autonomy within the nation-state, insofar as they find their legitimization in factors coming from traditions whose origins lie in factors dominant before the creation of the nation-states.

## **3. Migration and ethnic minorities**

The development of capitalism was and is still accompanied by large movements of population from the countryside to the urban areas, and from less developed countries to countries with a higher development of the industry. In the case of the USA, we can speak of settler minorities who entered the country in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Often, they settled as a relatively close national group who developed a system of institutions and associations similar to that of their country of origin. Chain-migration was characteristic for these groups: relatives and neighbours tried to settle together. A particular case of settlement is the settlement of religious groups, such as the Mennonites from Russia to Canada, where they built a nearly identical social system.

Francis underlines that the Mennonites tried to resist assimilation processes. According to this particularity, they can be considered as an ethnic minority, a situation which is intensified by their religious identity.

Another form of economic migration was indentured labour, which replaced slavery in colonial systems such as Britain. Indenture contracts, even if they were apparently voluntarily concluded, operated in practice, after 1833, as a mean of securing cheap labour, and supplying workers in regions such as the Fiji Islands, Malaya and the Caribbean. Diasporic communities, for instance, Indians and Chinese, were transported under this system. In English colonies and in Latin America, the forms of agriculture which developed under the slave system required such a continued supply of cheap labor.

### **3.1. Immigrant minorities: Economic migrants**

Economic migrants are those migrants who leave their country because of economic reasons. Often, they come from rather privileged groups in their own countries. In the countries of immigration, they may obtain a status as blue collar workers and occupy the lowest positions of the social structure. A small part of them is highly qualified, but has to tackle discrimination of various sorts. Economic migration can be temporal, but most often it is permanent with the coming of the immigrants' families after several years of staying alone in the country of settlement. Because of differences in national integration policies, the outcome of these settlement processes are different: in Germany, for instance, until recently, immigrants stayed foreign citizens with distinct cultural institutions; in France, immigrants can rather easily obtain the French nationality, and are supposed to assimilate to the French culture. In countries of the Near and Far East which are favored by oil production, economic migration is an important factor of the labor recruiting process, too. In the coming decades, economic migration will play a more important role in European countries, too, because of the ageing of its population and the economic necessity to have a younger labor force.

Economic migrants can be considered as ethnic minorities when they develop an immigrant community resulting from factors due, on one side, to their common origin and, on the other side, to their life conditions in the immigrant society.

### **3.2. Colonialism and minorities**

As a result of colonization, social structures influenced by the former colonial territories developed from the sixteenth century. Certain characteristics of these social structures are described in the scientific literature under the notion of ethnic minorities. For instance, blacks in North America, Chinese and Indian populations having migrated to other parts of Asia and Africa as indentured labor migrants, and native Americans or the Aborigines in Australia are included in this group. The land of the last group of people has been considered as a *no man's land*. They were murdered, displaced, imprisoned; their culture was destroyed and they were forced to settle in special territories. Their suppression has been followed by forms of collective apathy, high child mortality, low life expectancy, alcoholism, and a high rate of suicide.

Colonial minorities are thus descendants of original populations in colonized territories. Their social structure and culture have been destroyed during the process of colonization. Often, these groups were and are excluded from important societal processes (economy and communication) and live under poor economic, social and psychic conditions.

### 3.3. Ethnic minorities in nations in the southern hemisphere

When the frontiers of the former colonized states in Asia and Africa were defined, the colonial powers did not take account of ethnic groups. Political or economic reasons were often at the origin of these frontiers. The composition of historically developed societies was most of the time ignored. The creation of minorities results thus from the efforts of new ruling ethnic groups to dominate in a given multi-ethnic situation. Countries such as Burundi, Rwanda or the former French and Belgian Congo are recent examples where ethnic conflicts divided population. These states have difficulties to institute a multi-ethnic political system, which was introduced with more or less success in other African states, such as Senegal and the Ivory Coast. These new forms of ethnic minorities display situations where groups are discriminated in their economic possibilities, their political rights, and their cultural development. Elements which have already been discussed, when regional and national ethnic minorities were tackled, can be found in this case.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Ulrike Schuerkens** has doctorates in both sociology (1983), and social anthropology and ethnology (1993), from the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in Paris. She received the diploma 'Habilitation à diriger des recherches' from the University Paris V - René Descartes (2002). From 1983 to 1985, she was an Associate Program Officer at the Regional Branch Office for West Africa at the United Nations High Office for Refugees (UNHCR) in Dakar, Senegal. From 1995 to 2003, she was a lecturer at Humboldt University Berlin (Germany). Currently, she teaches at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, Paris (France). She has published extensively on development, social change, migration, multiculturalism, and colonialism. Her regional research focus is on Africa. Her latest publications are *International Migration and the Issue of Multiculturalism* (ed.), *International Review of Sociology* (10, 3, 2000), *Changement social sous régime colonial: Du Togo allemand aux Togo et Ghana indépendants* (L'Harmattan, 2001), *Transformationsprozesse in der Elfenbeinküste und in Ghana* (Lit, 2001), *Social Transformations between Global Forces and Local Life-Worlds* (ed.) (*Current Sociology*, 51, 3/4, Monograph 1/2, 2003). Currently, she is president of the Research Committee 09 *Social Transformations and Sociology of Development* of the International Sociological Association. She was a councillor of the International Institute of Sociology from 1997 to 2001. (Address: 10, Rue Jonquoy, 75014 Paris, France. (email: ulrike.schuerkens@caramail.com)