

Historical Minorities and Migrants: Foes or Allies?

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In Europe, and more generally in Western countries, immigration is becoming an increasingly important reality for the major cities within the territory of national minorities: Barcelona (Catalonia), Bilbao (Basque Country), Glasgow (Scotland), Brussels (Flanders), Bolzano/Bozen (South Tyrol), and Montreal (Quebec). Some of these cities have attracted immigrants for decades, while others are only recently seeing a significant level of immigrants.

The main research question that this article seeks to analyse is whether, in contexts where immigrants settle in the territories traditionally inhabited by historical minorities, it is possible to reconcile the claims of historical minorities and of new groups originating from immigration, and whether policies that accommodate traditional minorities and migrants as allies in the pursuit of a pluralist and tolerant society are realistically conceivable.

Studying the interactions and complementarities of these two minority groups is regarded as an important task for future research in Europe where many states have established systems of rights for “old” minority groups, but have not yet developed sound policies for the integration[1] of new minority groups originating from immigration, and where the two topics have been generally discussed in isolation from each other.

Differences and Similarities Between Old and New Minorities

The terms *historical*, *national* or *traditional* or *autochthonous* minorities generally refer to communities whose members have a distinct language and/or culture or religion of their own. Very often, they became minorities as a consequence of a re-drawing of international borders and their settlement area changing from the sovereignty of one country to another; or they are ethnic groups which, for a variety of reasons, did not achieve statehood of their own and instead form part of a larger country or several countries.

The *new minority groups* arising from immigration usually refer to groups formed by the decision of individuals and families to leave their original homeland and emigrate to another country for economic sometimes also for political reasons as well. They therefore consist thus of migrants and refugees and their descendants, who are living on a more than merely transitional basis in a country other than that of their origin. In most of the current discussions on minority issues, these groups are not recognised as minorities in the classical, conventional sense.

With regard to migrants, but also with regard to traditional minorities especially in case of mixed marriages, the problems of the second and third generations can be quite acute. They are in fact subjected to their parents’ decisions to migrate, and their life between two cultures and languages can be perceived either as an enriching experience or, often, as an excessive burden. Second and third generations of immigrants often have less cultural distance from the host society than their parents, yet have often undergone an assimilation process without reaching a satisfactory degree of integration from a socio-economic viewpoint.

Historically, immigrant groups have reacted very differently to majority/dominant societies than national minorities. Experience demonstrates that, unlike historical minorities whose cultural traditions may pre-date the establishment of the state of which its members now find themselves citizens, immigrants usually tend to integrate into the host society – that is, adopt certain practices of the dominant community (especially in linguistic respects) – more easily. This is especially so if this is prepared to accommodate their distinct identity, practices and beliefs to a certain degree. Indeed, few migrants object to the requirement that they must learn the official language of the host state as a condition of citizenship, or that their children must learn the official language in school. They usually accept that their life-chances, and those of their children, depend on the participation in mainstream institutions operating in the majority language.

The claims of historical minorities are not only those concerning equal treatment of their members and preservation and development of their identity within the dominant society, but also those aimed at guaranteeing the effective participation in public life for their members through measures that range from territorial or non-territorial forms of autonomy[2] to secession.

Conversely, although immigrant groups seek some forms of political participation in public life of the host countries together with some accommodations for their distinct identities and practices, there is no evidence that this entails supporting forms of self-government or secession as in the case of historical minorities.

Contrary to those of historical minorities, the main demands of immigrants are directed towards improving their integration in host communities. Immigrants seek to reform the main public institutions in the host countries so as to provide greater recognition of their identities, and greater accommodation of their cultural practices, thereby

facilitating their participation in these institutions. Thus, they want schools to provide more information about the immigrant experience; work-places to accommodate their religious holidays or traditional dress; government agencies to provide health care and welfare benefits in a way that are culturally sensitive; and so on.

Historical minorities instead, generally resist adaptation to aspects of the dominant culture, in spite of economic incentives and political pressures to do so, and seek official recognition of their language and culture together with various forms of political autonomy.

Allies or Foes?

Generally, the claims of both migrants and historical minorities have been perceived as challenges to the traditional model of homogeneous 'nation-states' and thus they are often viewed as "allies" by the majority group. In fact, minority groups usually seek to increase the opportunities for the individuals to express their identities and diversities, and so, in this perspective, they are perceived by majority groups as sharing a commitment to principles of pluralism and the recognition of difference.

In other terms, what distinguishes minority groups from the rest of the population is that they manifest, albeit implicitly, a desire to maintain a collective identity which differs from a dominant culture. Culture in this context is not synonymous with particular practices, customs or manners of dress. It is a sense of communal self-identity that pervades almost every aspect of life, including work and economic activity. It is the 'traditions of everyday life'. [3] In the eyes of nation-builders, minorities and migrants can represent a threat on various grounds. Historical minorities and migrants can be perceived as "foreigners" to the community of shared loyalty towards the state and shared rights guaranteed by that state. Members of historical minorities and migrants are seen as loyal to their kin-state or to the state whose citizens they are and to whose sovereign they belong, as long as they are not absorbed into the national body through assimilation and naturalisation. This perception has certainly increased after 11 September 2001 as illustrated by the growing interest on the political activity and loyalty of immigrants and members of historical minorities.

In reality, the relation between the two groups is more complicated and, historically, it has been marked by tension. Large-scale immigration has indeed typically been seen as a threat to historical minorities because immigrants have always demonstrated a tendency to integrate into the dominant culture, which usually offers greater mobility and economic opportunities. But if migrants settle in the territories traditionally inhabited by historical minorities and there integrate into the group dominant at the state-level, sometimes even deliberately encouraged by states, then the national minority risks becoming increasingly outnumbered and powerless in political life.

For these and other reasons, there has been a marked tendency for national minorities to adopt a defensive and exclusionary attitude towards migrants. As a result, minority nationalism has often become "ethnic" nationalism, which emphasises bonds of blood and descent, is deeply xenophobic and often racist, and, obviously, tends to exclude immigrants. In this perspective, this type of minority nationalism seems to be a reversion to a pre-modern, illiberal form of nationalism, even less tolerant of diversity than the sort of nationalism and national identity promoted by many nation-states. Indeed, some commentators insist that all forms of minority nationalism are by definition "ethnic" or exclusionary; and hence inherently antagonistic to immigrants. [4]

However, actual and historical evidence also demonstrates that many historical minorities welcome immigrants, and allow them to maintain and express their identity, while simultaneously encouraging their integration into the minority nation. Many historical minorities today welcome immigrants, and allow them to maintain and express their identity, while simultaneously encouraging their integration into the minority nation. The likelihood that a traditional minority will adopt such a pluralist model of minority nationalism seems to depend on a number of factors, in particular the specific political, social, economic and historical background of the national minority and of the state in which its members live.

Will Kymlicka identifies as important elements for maintaining and reinforcing claims of historical minorities and of those stemming from immigration, some forms of control that old minorities should exercise over immigration, such as the right to define their own immigration criteria, to set up their own target and levels based on their calculations regarding the absorption capacity of their society. [5] Clearly, as Kymlicka also admits that some of these decisions risk to be considered as illiberal or unfair. [6]

Developing Effective Minority Protection

Sound and pragmatic criteria to differentiate minority groups, and especially minority rights, can be established; these criteria may include whether a group is settled in a compact territory or is more broadly dispersed, or whether

the members of a community having distinct characteristics have been established for a long time on the territory, or have only recently arrived, whether or not they are recognised as minorities or historical minorities.

In fact, when reference is made to universal human rights there is obviously no need to distinguish between persons belonging to ethnic, religious or linguistic groups made up of recent immigrants, and historical minorities. Other rights, such as the right to use a minority language in relations with the authorities, or the right to street names in the minority language, can be claimed by persons belonging to groups which live compactly together in a particular area, but not by persons belonging to dispersed groups, whether they belong to historical minorities or to new minority groups originating from immigration.

In this connection, it is worth noting that the provisions of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, for instance, are formulated in a flexible manner in order to allow a case-by-case application depending on the specific circumstances of the group concerned and the state in which they live.

Both groups should have at least passive rights, such as the right to use their own language in private and public in communication with other members of the same linguistic group or to practise their religion together with other members of the same religious group. What remains to be decided on a case-by-case basis is, for instance, whether members of minority groups, historical or stemming from immigration alike, are entitled to positive measures, for example, state-supported education in their own language.

Conclusion

Questions of minority protection should not aim to establish uniform rules in all areas of public life and valid for any contexts. The nature and scope of the arrangements to accommodate minority claims and protection will necessarily vary from case to case, and cannot be settled a priori and on a theoretical level as ‘armchair speculations’.

Minority claims must be the object of negotiations among the groups concerned. If it is true that in some cases ethnicity or faith are non-negotiable in substance, the means and ways in which ethnicity is preserved or religion is practiced can be subject to various practical arrangements, on which the parties concerned may compromise.

On issues where there can be no consensus between majority and minority communities or between host and migrant communities, the purpose of deliberation will be not to agree on universal principles, but to recognise the differences and similarities of the respective communities in order that some form of agreement can be reached, which accommodates the differences in appropriate institutions and similarities in shared ones.

Footnotes

[1] Scholars and policy-makers alike do not have a common language for discussing the issue of integration between minority and majority groups. In the context of this paper, “integration” can be defined as a process of mutual accommodation between minority and majority groups, implying an asymmetric two-way process of adaptation in which both groups learn from each other and borrow aspects of each other's culture. The asymmetry of the process arises from the fact that members of the minority group face the necessity to adopt certain practices of the dominant community especially in linguistic respects.

[2] In general terms, “territorial autonomy” involves the granting of separate powers of internal administration, to various degrees, to such entities possessing some ethnic or cultural distinctiveness without those areas being detached from the state. The creation of new political units which enable members of historical minorities to exercise self-governing powers over public institutions are variously referred to as multinational federations, quasi-federal autonomy, or extensive self-government regimes.

[3] Steven Wheatley, “Deliberative Democracy and Minorities” in *European Journal of International Law* (2003), Vol. 14, No. 3, p. 508.

[4] Thomas Frank, “Tribe, Nation, World: Self-Identification in the Evolving International System”, in *Ethics and International Affairs*, No. 11, pp. 151-169; David Hollinger, *Post-ethnic America Beyond Multiculturalism*, Basic Books NY, 1995; Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belongings: Journeys into the New Nationalism*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, NY, 1993.

[5] Will Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular, Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship*, Oxford, 2001, pp. 275-289.

[6] *Ibidem*.