Contemporary Inter-Ethnic Relations and the Role of History:

The Past in the Present

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ABSTRACT

What does 'ethnicity' really mean? What about 'integration'? In this article, Nuno Dias argues that the language of inter-ethnic relations needs to be redefined. Racism and prejudice still exist in our societies, and according to the author, we require a greater number of policy-makers to focus on constructing concepts that will help us to better understand diversity.

Addressing the challenge of old categories and conceptual frameworks that inform inter-ethnic relations (reminiscent of the colonial epoch) is crucial to the edification of a society capable of dealing, without prejudice, with difference of any kind, not only in political discourse but also, and above all, in the academic sphere.

I say 'above all' because academia should be a privileged space for critical reflection on new forms of racism and discrimination. It should be able to involve other stakeholders in the discussion about the creation of a systemic field of debate over what the words race, ethnicity and their many unscientific alternatives represent in the public sphere and how they affect integration of immigrants and other minorities. In fact, despite all of the social and political bodies at work, ethnicity continues to be one of the most complex, multidimensional and scientifically misapprehended contemporaneous social subjects.

According to our theoretical options, it is important to search for the foundations of inter-ethnic relations in historiography and significant philosophical environments (in colonial documentation and other types of literary and academic productions of the epoch). This should be complemented by research into individual histories of the representations of the subjects involved (as product and architects of the interactive definitions that uphold the spaces of ethnicity).

Whether it is taken as a post-war synonym for race or as a post-modern cultural deposit of the commoditisation of globalization, ethnicity, as a concept, has failed to achieve a consensual definition that suits social researchers, policy-makers or even self ascribed definitions of ethnic belonging. Not that it should necessarily be consensual. Given its relational essence it is obvious that it is meant to be the object of fierce discussion. However, we are a long way from being able to find a cooperative and fruitful environment inside academia, let alone between academics and policy-makers.

Irrefutably, words have a strong effect on the creation of social beliefs and hence in the reproduction of social practices – a per formative effect as Austin[1] puts it. It is the origin and historical meaning of words that we should question in order to understand how they evolved, or not, and came to mean what they do now. After such an exercise, going beyond the lexicon definitions and into the social genesis and evolution of words and the social categories to which they refer, we can better understand the stereotyping nature of certain words, even when used as sociological concepts.

Ethnicity presumes a contextual existence; in other words, it entails a relationship between two or more groups in a certain bounded territory. Its political use suggests that is only after social collectives interact with each other that it comes into being. Unless same sort of borders – cultural, national or even social – are at stake, ethnicity would hardly be an issue addressed in politics. However, what empirical work has been telling us is that the representations over ethnic boundaries and unequal relations vary, often inside what could be perceived, or categorized, as a group or a minority.

Ethnicity means different things in different contexts. For instance, in newborn States from the former Yugoslavia, ethnicity means a defiant concept to what a review of the same nature would produce in England, in Portugal, or to that extent in any other country. Yet this does not imply that some characteristics of ethnic minority groups (whatever features their self-definition fall upon) dwelling in different parts of the globe cannot be analogous or summoned in a comparative study.

It is true that the social significance of "ethnic and racial distinctions" may vary from one society to another[2]. However, the outputs of racialization processes are usually similar, varying, we believe, only in degree and time, hindering certain groups from climbing the social ladder or from having access to certain spheres (e.g. housing, education, health, political

representation, cultural expression, etc.). We argue that it is possible to identify some common patterns in the racialization, or in a more straightforward way, the exclusion of certain groups across national borders.

This research field, as ignored by some and held by others, is an intricate and complex labyrinth with different questions and answers to similar social realities. As Banton put it when he said that " at present the field of study [ethnic and racial studies] is a thing of shreds and patches,"[3] there is no reason or argument for enduring so.

Surprisingly enough this field has not benefited as it should have from comparative research, theoretically or empirically grounded. But, we argue, if we focus on the processes rather than only on interpretations of an abstract nature, we should eventually come across an operative and balanced framework proposal for the interpretation of contemporary inter-ethnic relations in western societies.

There are several studies assuming the relationship between imperial notions of race and civilization and the actual place of minorities in old imperial centres concerning racist stereotypes, exclusion and discrimination practices.[4] What does not exist, we believe, is a mapping exercise of how those processes can occur through time in different societies regarding the 'same' minority groups, and to what extent that can lead, or not, to distinct outcomes.

In the work we are now carrying out, we decided to select a particular group of migrants, with a similar social and geographical pre-migration history, and with comparable after-migration trajectories in two different national contexts: Gujarati-Hindus that were established in Eastern African countries and that left to the former metropolises after the 'Africanization' processes following independence from European colonizers. Also, the Portuguese and the British cases are examples of societies where discrimination exists, as asserted by a handful of studies and surveys, and where a condescending state of mind still sometimes disturbs the discernment between perception, or in other words 'categories', and reality.

There is, however, a chronological disparity amongst the Indian origin immigration experience of both countries that could possibly help to explain some differences in the settlement processes in the same. In the British case these populations already crossed several global crises with repercussions in the British labour market. This association is now followed by the rebirth of the inevitable causal connection between unemployment and immigration, and therefore of potential disruptive elements to the illusion of national homogeneity and singularity[5] usually spoken through right-wing political parties. In Portugal there could possibly be an imminent similar situation emerging with the continuous increase and diversification of immigrant populations and the uprising of immigration problems in the media and political agendas, making skin colour difference more noticeable. This concerns, in particular, the increasing flows from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and the present association with Islam and terrorism.

The absence of policy-makers from this particular field – the area of defining and discussing concepts – has contributed decisively to the crystallization of stereotypes attached to the legacies of the broader time that compounded colonial histories and western racially structured societies.[6] It is true that the 'politics of integration' try to anticipate social disruption by designing assimilationist strategies aiming at the more socially conspicuous groups. But it is no less true that visibility and the way 'others' are represented by the majority can change, and is very much dependent on contemporary political readings of national history.

The problematic of immigration and inter-ethnic conviviality does not accept a-historical approaches that are insensitive to the possibility of individual choices and collective existences. Some proposals have already been made by researchers aiming at avoiding limited perspectives by instead moving on to work with post-ethnic citizenships where multiple affiliations are considered and where social identities are not protected by an imagined, as in political, overarching national identity.[7]

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The largest flow of immigrants coming from the Indian sub-continent occurred in the period after India's partition and the subsequent foundation of Pakistan. As of the mid 60s to mid 70s, the largest immigrant flow corresponded predominantly to Gujarati naturals who fled from former British colonies in the African continent. The habits of these contingents, upon arrival, soon created for them integration difficulties by virtue of contrast with the autochthonous population conventions, thus emerging at that time several ethnic enclaves spread around major English cities.[8]

An investigation carried out by the European Community in 1989[9] discloses 'Asians' as the most hated group in Great Britain, and not only the one which evidences a larger contrast. Bearing in mind those results, and the results of his own research, Moodod[10] concluded that what existed was not a generalized success of the macro category 'Asians,' but instead, an 'Indian' success, that nevertheless was, and is, not a sufficient condition to eliminate the incorporation problems in the host society.

That success, he claims, was a consequence of the operationalization of particular norms and values, in which family appears before the individual, and of the previous migratory experience that made possible the constitution of a knowledge reservoir fundamental in disruptive situations.[11] The same can be said about Hindu migrants living in Portugal.[12] This study allows, according to the author and starting from the Indian case, to mention the causal relationship that usually connects racial discrimination to weak socio-economic performance.

In Portugal, the post-colonial incorporation of Indians and their present status is quite distinct – there is almost immediate association between populations of Indian origin

and commerce, and furthermore a relative success in the integration process. On the other hand, discrimination towards individuals of Indian origin does not appear to be significant in the picture of inter-ethnic tensions and of racist and xenophobic speeches that have been increasing in the last decade (Dias, 2002).

Hindus clearly depended on the support of social networks and personal resources in the reconstruction of some businesses and in finding a way to create independent ways of subsistence. Yet there were also numerous individuals channelled toward unskilled segments of the labour market, resembling what had happened in England. All of these resemblances should point to the same outputs in terms of problems experienced by the same minority groups in European societies with a colonial legacy, unless the representations of these societies depended on different conceptions of difference, which they do not.

In a survey carried out in Portugal in 1999, 70% of respondents affirmed that they recognize an immigrant by his skin colour.[13] The survey, given to the Portuguese population on immigrants and other groups (potential discrimination targets) allows us to characterize the populations of Indian origin as almost invisible. What stands out is that unlike Portugal, British survey results point to a far greater equivalence between the categories of Blacks and Asians in answers regarding racism, discrimination and lack of integration in the host society.

The constitution of enclaves and spaces regarded as outcasts, relating to the receiving society, doesn't necessary foretell the occurrence of processes of social reproduction that indiscriminately impel successive generations of certain minority groups to inferior segments of the social structure. It is here that the analysis of the racialization of certain groups appears as particularly complex and interesting.

In some situations, studies show an inversely proportional relation between a group's socio-economic performance and the representations by the host society. In England, the discriminatory bias of the South-Asian category hides not only a map of diversified proveniences as it halts possible positive effects of successful social trajectories (Ballard, 2002). How then can we understand mechanisms that shape the adversarial collective representations covered by classic readings on social conflicts?

Roger Ballard (1999) proposes a historical approach to discriminatory ethnicization processes in England. These processes, he argues, are not dissociable of the way English identity was and is constructed. In England, like in the United States, certain groups became invisible due to the absence of mainstream contrasting phenotypic markers. Skin colour has structured societies and conditioned and ruled life experiences of non-white individuals for generations. In Britain, as in Portugal, identity seems to be politically discussed through fixed, and blurred, notions of ethnicity, culture or even nationality (cf. Banton), therefore attaching the issue of ethnicity, and its association with race, in the integration agenda to the field of visibility or invisibility of minority (as in excluded) groups.

Politicians and policy-makers should be aware that inter-ethnic relations and the language and stereotypes associated with it are not in a galaxy different to the one where integration issues dwell. In Britain, as in Portugal, racism and prejudice still live on as observed in several studies, irrespective of the politicians who emphasize the important role of integration of minorities along with the need to block new immigrants.

Multiracial harmony and a distinctive ability to integrate is presented, in both countries, as a historical trait that still marks the political orientation continuing to push into oblivion unequal racial relations, thus jeopardizing a rational analysis of real inherited problems camouflaged with a normative discourse of who is apt to enter the Nation, entrance for which a 'super-citizen' (Soysal, Sayad) performance is demanded.

Inter-ethnic relations are not an absent element of minority claim-making. Nor even the issue of how to name those same minorities and groups. A better understanding of the diversity inside borders and a will to take a leap over the urge to categorize just for the sake of statistics would certainly lead to a different way of making immigrants, and so-called minorities, part of a nation.

A first promising step was the creation of a network of excellence in the domain of International Migration, Integration and Social Cohesion (IMISCOE), combining the expertise of 19 established European research institutes aiming to build a balanced theoretical and empirical knowledge platform "that can form a reliable basis for policy."[14] The variance in the racialized (hence disliked) groups with similar courses in both countries demands by itself an effort in commencing comparable transnational frame analysis and joint research plans on inter-ethnic relations, in order to perceive what we really have to consider when we discuss integration.

Notes

1 Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.

2 Banton, M. *The International Politics of Race.* New York: Polity Press, 2001.

3 2001:193.

4 Vd. *inter alia* van der Veer, P. *Imperial Encounters.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

5 Fenton, Steve. *Ethnicity.*1999.

6 For a detailed study on race and its role in the configuration of modern western societies see Winant, H. *The World is a Ghetto. Race and Democracy Since World War II.* New York: Basic Books, 2001.

7 vd. *inter* alia Hollinger, D. A. *Post Ethnic America.* New York: Basic Books, 1995.

8 Ballard, R. *The South Asian Presence in Britain.* Ed. Desh Pardesh. New Delhi: BRPC, 1996.

9 In Modood, T. "The Indian economic success: A challenge to some race relations assumptions." *Policy and Politics.* Vol. 19, 3, (1991): 177-189.

10 op. cit.

11 Moodod, 1991: 86.

12 Vd. Dias, N. (2002). "Beyond Familial Dharma Hindu entrepreneurial behaviour in a migratory context." *Immigration and Place in Mediterranean Metropolises.* Eds. M.L. Fonseca et al. Lisboa: Luso-american Foundation.

13 Garcia, J. L. (org.) *Portugal Migrante- Emigrantes e Imigrados, Dois estudos Introdutórios.* Oeiras: Celta, 2000.

14 http://www.imiscoe.org.