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Collective Ethnic Identities as Status Functions

Extended Abstract (1011 words)

In social and political theory two competing approaches dominate the discussion concerning collective ethnic identities: essentialism and constructivism. Essentialism, prominently defended by Anthony Smith, holds that there is an ethnic and historical core to nationalism and collective ethnic identities that is never a pure construction. The constructivist position, exemplified famously by Eric Hobsbawm, sees nationalism and collective ethnic identities as modern, rather artificial constructions.

Today essentialism is often seen as an obviously mistaken position based on a naïve reification of social issues. While we agree that contemporary, naturalistic philosophy has very little room for essences, we think that an acceptable theory of collective ethnic identities should be able to acknowledge and accommodate the animating idea behind the essentialist position, namely that collective identities are in a sense conceptually prior to individual agency. We argue that collective identities are, to use Appiah's terminology, *scripts* constitutive of personal identity rather than intentional constructions of individuals. However, an acceptable theory of collective ethnic identities must nonetheless subscribe to the view that *ontologically speaking* collective identities are constructions.

Accordingly, although we are sympathetic to the ontological motivation behind constructivism, we think that the Hobsbawmian view of seeing collective ethnic identities as intentional constructions that strategic elites use for mobilising and controlling the masses underestimates the role of collective ethnic identities as building blocks of who we are. We should not think of collective ethnic identities primarily in terms of a Hobsbawmian conspiracy theory.

Our paper applies Searle's theory of the ontology of the social world in general and his account of *status functions* in particular to develop a novel philosophical theory of the nature and structure of ethnic collective identities that takes into account the core insights of both essentialism and constructivism while avoiding the problems inherent in these views. To put it roughly, we argue that collective ethnic identities are social statuses or status functions, constructed in accordance with Searle's famous formula: We collectively accept that X counts as Y in context C, where the collective ethnic identity Y is assigned to an individual X. Moreover, our paper takes very seriously another formula of Searle, namely his suggestion that the practical content of social statuses is given by collectively reproduced behavioural norms that are collectively agreed to go with the Y-status: The content of the fact that X counts as Y is that it is collectively accepted/required that certain norms apply to X qua Y. Or, as Searle puts this, we collectively accept, recognise, require, go along with etc. that (X has power (X does A)). In Searle's terminology, the construction of social statuses creates deontic powers or rights and duties.

Hence, in our view a collective ethnic identity requires that there is (i) a social conception or a label (the Y-term) for picking out certain individuals as bearers of the identity, (ii) a collective acceptance that certain individuals counts as bearers of the label and (iii) a concrete, normative practice of treating individuals as bearers of the label and individuals living their lives as bearers of the label. Obviously, our Searlean theory sides with the ontological naturalism of the constructivist camp. For example, the Searlean approach implies that when we want to know whether someone counts as a bearer of a collective identity, we should not think that the physical features of the individual in question unproblematically determine whether she is to count as a bearer of the identity. Rather, what matters is

the collective recognition that she counts as a member. Thus, there is always social or political story to be told about why a certain individual is or is not accepted as a bearer of the identity – and, moreover, what kinds of labels we use for dividing people into human kinds. The facts of the matter are always social facts, not biological or anything similar, although such facts may be referred to in the social process of assigning statuses to individuals.

However, our version of the Searlean status function theory seeks to capture also the anti-individualistic insight of the essentialist view. Moving away from Searle's theory of social ontology (but being inspired partly by Searle's theory of rational action), we argue that since the practical content of a collective ethnic identity is to be analysed in terms of behavioural norms, identification with a collective gives an individual certain group-specific *desire-independent reasons* for action to be referred to in practical and theoretical reasoning. Moreover, we defend the Wittgensteinian view that intentional action and the possibility of agency belong to the normative space of reasons constituted by the norms in terms of which we can rationalise our actions. We argue that collective identities are, as the Searlean analysis of their ontological nature reveals, such norms. More precisely, collective identification gives us socially reproduced models and narrative conventions of how to tell our lives so that they make sense, i.e. so that they can be seen as intentional activities of an agent. Collective identities make it possible to ask for reasons of actions, as opposed to asking merely for causes of physical movements.

Thus, similarly to the essentialist approach, we argue that collective identities should not be seen as mere roles individuals can adopt. In our view collective identities are something much more fundamental: by providing socially reproduced ways of giving reasons for one's behaviour, i.e. by making it possible to rationalise actions in terms of collectively accepted reasons, collective identities are scripts that make human agency as we know it possible. They constitute our bodies as agents.

However, *pace* traditional essentialist and in accordance with constructivists, such collective identities are not stable constraints outside the realm of individual interactions. Rather, they exist, are reproduced and, sometimes, transformed in actual interactions. Nonetheless, their acceptance is largely implicit or pre-intentional, since – *pace* the conspiracy theories of traditional constructivists and just as essentialists say – they are constitutive of the possibility of intentional action and personal identity and agency.

Our Searlean theory of collective ethnic identities forms a novel – and in our view superior – way for social and political theorists to think of collective identities and ethnicity.