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Ethnocracy Without Groups: Conceptualising Ethnocratiser States Without Reifying Ethnic Categories¹

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ABSTRACT

This article advances a non-groupist understanding of the foundation, operation and self-perpetuation of states that scholars have hitherto labelled ethnocracies or ethnic democracies. Such states create and ignite zero-sum internal conflicts between portions of their populations. They do so by demarcating the population into ethnic categories. They apply labels to individuals and hierarchically order the categories to which they are deemed to belong, awarding one cohort more privilege than the other. Existing literature on such states has obscured the processes by which states reify and institutionalise identity, instead presenting it through groupist frames in which ethnicity is a pre-existing variable. Re-conceptualising the doing of ethnicity as a process enables us to study internal dissent against ethnic privilege and consider its transformational capacity in inspiring new nationalist discourses.

Introduction

This article uses the case of Israel to conceptualise state institutionalisation of ethnic categories whilst avoiding 'groupism'. This is an important exercise for a number of reasons,

¹ This title pays homage to Rogers Brubaker's *Ethnocracy Without Groups* (2004).

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one of which is its contribution to the study of internal dissent against ethnic privilege. Such analysis is limited when undertaken within a framing and language that cement 'identities'. Scholars analysing Israel as a focal state in which ethnic categories form the basis for differential citizenship have tended to reproduce ubiquitous 'identities' in reifying terms, replicating a wider literature in depicting Israel as the state of an ancient ethnic collective in its historic homeland (see, for example, Klier, 1997; Smith, 1981, p.15; Walzer, 2001). They pay attention to the evolving meaning and status of Jewishness and Zionism (Shimoni, 1995), but essentialism regarding Jewish identity still prevails. Even scholars disputing the democratic legitimacy of Israel (Ghanem, 1998) or criticising the etatist frames of scholars (Rabinowitz, 2001, pp. 64-5) have paid insufficient attention to the doing of ethnicity; an analysis which needs to commence by approaching it as a social construction.¹ The constructivist turn within studies of ethnicity and nationalism, featuring salient advice from Brubaker and colleagues (2000) to avoid reification even through terms like identity, provides us with a blazing torch to illuminate earlier debates over Israel's structure and democratic status. I argue that participants in these debates missed the most important point: we need to understand reification before we can understand institutional categorisation, discrimination and legitimation. Only once we have a handle on reification, and the processes to which it gives rise, can we engage with dissent against ethnic privilege and categorisation, its capacity for transformation, and thus its potential impact on the state's stability.

Accordingly, in this article, I employ the term ethnocratisation to describe the processes carried out by nationalist activists who, in thrall to a particular kind of nationalist discourse, establish states which favour the category to which they see themselves as belonging, at the expense of those deemed Others (Triandafyllidou, 1998). Using the Israeli case, I elaborate the reification and institutionalisation of categories, and demonstrate how groupist accounting for this can distort what we see, especially when it comes to the task of

conceptual classification and demarcation. By paying attention to how participants in the state-building project employ a *ressentiment* ethnic nationalist discourse, we can move beyond seeing their role as ensuring ethnic privilege; understanding that they create both the 'ethnic' and the 'privilege'. This enables us to consider the price of ongoing enmity for those categorised as the privileged ethnic majority, since such individuals experience ongoing violence at the hands of those constructed as their Other. We can then consider the capacity of such individuals to destabilise ethnocratiser states, which are more commonly framed as vulnerable only to resistance from Others, and even then, questionably. Individuals categorised as the privileged majority might challenge this privilege and point out the ongoing enmity it earns them. More radically, they might challenge categorisation itself, undermining the *ressentiment* discourse. Researchers cannot assess such potential and therefore explore internal Jewish-Israeli dissent against the Zionist project without an appropriate lens and terminology.

I make the case for such a lens and terminology in this article, suggesting that with the ethnocratiser state in the form of Israel as our focus, we can understand both the doing, and the potential undoing, of ethnicity. Using a non-groupist terminology enables us to eschew presenting groups as real and self-evident, and thereby to stand outside and observe their discursive construction without also being party to it. This opens up possibilities for analysing internal dissent and also for considering conflict resolution. Presenting 'groups' as real and self-evident is a problem when we engage with political action, because when we seek to analyse those who are trying to employ transformational discourses and identifications, we need to be able to engage with their capacity or potential to transgress certain types of belonging and to fashion new ones. If we ourselves are not attuned to these possibilities, we cannot adequately describe or analyse them.

The point of using such a non-groupist approach is not to downgrade the significance and social meaning of ethnic categories for participants. Constructivist scholars recognise the salience of ‘group identities’ and this is precisely why we want to avoid being swept up in similar common-sense framings in our own work. The fact that participants in ‘ethnic conflicts’ frame their identifications, lives and social meanings this way gives ethnic categories meaning, and determines behaviour and outcomes. This is, of course, the very reason that scholars engage in the study of ethnic politics and conflict! Thus, refusing to be party to reinscribing and reproducing ethnic categories at an analytical level is – far from being a refusal to recognise their centrality to human life – a prophylactic against being constrained by them intellectually or in the realm of political possibility.

So What Kind Of State Are We Talking About, Exactly?

This article examines a type of state that demarcates its population at an institutional level into ethnic categories. The state applies labels and hierarchically orders categories, awarding one cohort more privilege than the other. The privileged cohort outnumbers the non-privileged, so that elections can occur without disrupting the system of classification and discrimination. Scholars have advanced two labels for such states, with Israel as the central case: ‘ethnocracy’ and ‘ethnic democracy’ (Dowty, 1999; Gavison, 1999; Ghanem, 2009; Ghanem, Rouhana, & Yiftachel, 1998; Smooha, 1997). The key players in the debate over which term should be employed agree upon many of the characteristics of the ‘beast’ they seek to describe (Dowty, 1999, p.1; Gavison, 1999, p.3); at stake is the normative connotation of the label. Are states which offer citizenship to all residents, but national rights only to some, democratic? Is tyranny of the majority democratic? (Sa'di, 2004, p.141) And how should we understand the special features of the Israeli case – the occupied territories on the one hand and the content of the Zionist rights claim to Palestine on the other? Scholars have sufficiently explored these questions, but it is worth revisiting how they have used the terms

ethnocracy and ethnic democracy to see the points of agreement between them, and thereby identify the key problem with how they frame their analyses.

Regardless of which term the scholars employ, they generally depict the phenomenon under study as resulting from the capture of or creation of the state by a particular ethnic group, and that group's subsequent employment of the state to advance its interests at the expense of resident non-members (Ghanem, 2009, p.463). Scholars have picked up on this seizure or monopolisation of power even without employing the terms ethnocracy or ethnic democracy. Conversi (2009) argues that 'Western state-building has been associated with power seizure by specific ethnic groups.' (57) O'Leary (2001) uses '*Staatsvolk*' to depict the 'national or ethnic people, who are demographically and electorally dominant'; who 'own the state' and can 'control it on their own through simple democratic numbers.' (O'Leary, p.285) Kaufmann (2009) calls this 'dominant ethnicity': 'the phenomenon whereby *a particular ethnic group exercises dominance within a nation.*' (36, his italics)

Some scholars explicitly use the term ethnocracy to label states in which what they see as one ethnic group monopolises the state to advance its interests (see, for example, Wimmer, 2004). Mazrui (1975) uses it to describe the Ugandan regime; Toshchenko applies it to the post-Soviet Central Asian republics (Arutyunyan, 2004), whilst Brown (1994) and Fong (2008) apply the term to Burma. Yiftachel is perhaps the most well-published academic on the subject (1997, 1999, 2006), describing what he calls regime systems which 'enhance a rule by, and for, a specific ethnos.' (2006, p.32)

Yiftachel applies the term ethnocracy to the State of Israel, but other academics have instead advanced the ethnic democracy label. Some have gone so far as to assert that Israel fits the model of liberal democracy, albeit with 'flaws' (Neuberger, 2003), but sociologist Smooha (1997) has instead constructed a model of ethnic democracy with Israel as archetype.

Classifying ethnic democracy alongside other recognised types of democracy (consociational and liberal), Smootha has applied his model to Israel (2002a) and post-Communist Europe (2002b, 2005). Whilst arguing that both the model and its Israeli archetype are not ideal on a normative level (2002c), he nevertheless maintains that ethnic democracy is defensible (2002a, pp.481-2), placing it on a continuum between consociational democracy and authoritarianism, with the potential to move in either direction (2002a , p.480; 2005, p.34). At the heart of Smootha's ethnic democracy is an understanding that although the state awards special privileges to the so-called dominant nation – in Israel's case, Jews – all citizens enjoy individual citizenship rights, satisfying a minimalist definition of democracy (Dowty, 1999, pp.3-4; Smootha, 2002a, p.497; 2005, p.22).

Those rejecting Smootha's assessment have tended to cleave to the alternative label offered by ethnocracy. Despite concurring that this specific beast deserves its own category and might be located on a continuum (Ghanem, 2009, p.464), the critical scholars adamantly reject the label of democracy (Ghanem et al., 1998). Employing a 'maximalist' rather than 'minimalist' definition, the critical scholars argue that the theoretical state in question – and Israel in practice – contravenes equality and hence does not qualify as democratic (Ghanem, 1998, p.443; Ghanem et al., 1998; Jamal, 2002, pp.424-8). In the Israeli context, they draw attention to how the Occupied Territories operate within the state, arguing that the lack of citizenship rights for Palestinians means that we cannot understand Israel as a whole to be democratic (Ghanem et al., 1998, p2, 6; Yiftachel, 1999, pp.376-7). The critical scholars also draw attention to how the roles played by international Zionist organisations in Israeli bureaucracy defy the notion of a *demos* (Ghanem et al., 1998, p.2, 6; Yiftachel, 1999, pp.376-7). Like Smootha (1997) with his 'Israeli archetype,' some scholars have formulated ethnocracy as a model applicable to other cases including Estonia, Sri Lanka and Australia

prior to 1967 (Yiftachel, 2006, pp.20-32); Malaysia, Russia, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Slovakia (Ghanem, 2009, p.464).

The debate between the two camps heats up when each side purports to dissect the ideological underpinnings of the other. Smootha's ethnic democracy camp are accused of trying to legitimise a state of affairs from which they personally benefit (Ghanem et al., 1998, pp.8-9; Jamal, 2002, p.412; Rouhana, 1998, p.285; 2006, pp.69-70; Sa'di, 2000, pp.5-6). In turn, they accuse their opponents of applying a far-too-ambitious definition of democracy in order to 'flunk' Israel (Dowty, 1999, pp.2-3; Gavison, 1999, esp. p.4). Legal scholar Ruth Gavison goes so far as to rule out the possibility of anyone entering these debates without a political agenda (1999, p.5).

Regardless of which side we take, however, both available terms are problematic from a constructivist perspective. In representing the state as 'captured' by the 'dominant ethnic group' (Ghanem, 2009, p.463), both ethnic democracy and ethnocracy assert the prior objective existence of ethnic groups. Brubaker (2011), who uses a terminology of 'nationalizing states' and 'titular nations' when he writes about these kinds of cases, cautions us to consider the detrimental effects of invoking ethnic groups (and hence ethnic violence or ethnic conflicts). Actors on the ground frame events in such language, sometimes lulling even those of us who purport to be constructivists into a conceptual stupor, wherein we find ourselves employing these '*categories of ethnopolitical practice*' as '*categories of social analysis.*' (Brubaker, 2004, p.10, his italics) Brubaker pejoratively terms this tendency 'groupism.' (p.8) The alternative is to conceptualise

ethnicity, race and nation... not as substances or things or entities or organisms or collective individuals ... but rather in relational, processual, dynamic, eventful, and disaggregated terms.... It means

taking as a basic analytical category not the “group” as an entity but groupness as a contextually fluctuating conceptual variable. (p.11)

Employing such an approach enables a scholar to ‘avoid unintentionally *doubling* or *reinforcing* the reification of ethnic groups in ethnopolitical practice with a reification of such groups in social analysis.’ (p.10, his italics) Since both ethnocracy and ethnic democracy depict rule by self-evident ethnic group, examining reification and institutionalisation can direct us towards an alternative, non-groupist label. The benefit of using such a label is that terms used by scholars actually translate out into the world of political action. A case in point is Yiftachel’s ‘ethnocracy’, which activists have used in their own descriptions of Israel’s history and structure (Attwell, 2015). If we have evidence that the terms and analyses that scholars employ impact participants’ undertaking of political struggle, then we have a responsibility to consider whether these terms might actually reproduce and reinscribe categories whose absence might generate other possibilities for social identification and hence conflict resolution. This is not to say that a mere language change is sufficient for this purpose, but rather that if we don’t consider how a language change can shift our own thinking, we also preclude that possibility for the participants in conflicts who are our research subjects.

***Ressentiment* Discourses And Ethnocratisation**

In order to arrive at this new terminology, we need to track the process by which people come to see themselves as ethnic actors and mobilise to form a state that reflects this primary identification. We can understand ethnocratisation as a process that commences with political activists constructing a *ressentiment* nationalist discourse, employing ethnic categories to demarcate the Us from the Other. The term *ressentiment*, originally used by Nietzsche to describe hatred and envy of one’s perceived oppressors (Morelli, 1998); was

subsequently applied to nationalism by Greenfeld and Chirot (1992; 1994). *Ressentiment* describes the tendency of certain nationalist discourses to depict their Others in demonised terms whilst elevating the virtue of the Us. Greenfeld and Chirot (1992; 1994) argue that *ressentiment* contributed to the development of early ethnic nationalist discourses in Russia and Germany, with what I call culture-makers ‘transvaluat[ing] the values’ of the civic nationalist discourses they encountered in England and France. (Greenfeld and Chirot 1994, p.92-94; p.97-101; Greenfeld 1992)

However, Greenfeld and Chirot’s convincing formulation of *ressentiment* as the causal agent of ethnic nationalism fails to explain the rise of Jewish nationalism, or Zionism, in Central and Eastern Europe. Here, the wider context was ethnic nationalism rather than civic nationalism. As Jewish individuals were discursively reconfigured from members of an alien religion to members of an alien nation (Greenfeld & Chirot, 1994, p.100; Rabkin, 2010, p.17), Zionists responded with an ethnic nationalist discourse that mimicked the traits of the discourses inspiring them (Sand, 2009). They mobilised the Jewish category with which they were Othered as the basis for their own nationalism. We can understand this as transvaluation, but not of types of nationalism, as Greenfeld and Chirot (1994) suggest. Rather, the development of Zionism involved what Wimmer calls normative inversion (2004, p.1037); a maintenance of categories and a reversal of their moral meanings. Since ethnic categories appear to offer a suitable means of knowing both who the Us is, and elevating Our virtue *vis a vis* Others, the maintenance and inversion of these categories through *ressentiment* discourses appears logical.

This logic has a wider appeal; *ressentiment* discourses gain traction because they effectively mobilise other individuals sharing experiences of real or perceived victimhood. Others perceived as the cause of one’s woes are stereotyped as Evil, but *all* Others can potentially be demonised, simply by virtue of being Not Us (D. Brown, 2008, p.779;

Greenfeld, 2006, pp.142-3). Thus, individuals Othered based on ethnic categories may employ these labels within their own *ressentiment* responses. The tragic element in the Zionist case, of course, is the transplanting of this script from Europe to Palestine with a new cast of characters, as Zionists brought their project of ethnic reification and state-building to Palestine. They came to read non-Jewish native Others there as violent anti-Semites (Rose, 2005, pp.130-1), precluding rational analysis of their resistance to Zionist colonisation.² Not surprisingly, the Arab / Palestinian nationalist discourse employed *ressentiment* ethnic tropes in response, thus generating what is commonly understood to be an ‘ethnic conflict’.³ Drawing from the basis of Zionists’ experiences in Europe, it was in the context of this conflict in Palestine that the state of Israel was conceived explicitly to favour Jews *vis a vis* Others.

The point to take from this crude outline is that such a state would be the logical (though not necessarily attainable) conclusion of a *ressentiment* ethnic nationalist discourse. It makes complete sense that people embroiled in such conflicts, holding tight to such categories, would, if possible, set up states that institutionalised and awarded protection and privilege to the one to which they saw themselves as belonging. In such a context, it would be seen as essential to not only differentiate the Us from the Other, but also to remain permanently separated. Analysis of this process challenges our thinking about the concept of self-determination, insofar as its logical conclusion should be letting ‘ethnic groups’ decide how to live and interact with those defined as non-members. When the ‘self’ signified by self-determination is not only an ‘ethnic’ self but also a ‘collective’ self (or selves), privileging this aspect of identity without regard for its constructed nature precludes us from considering the ensuing processes of conflict as contingent on that very moment – and act – of privileging. Accordingly, the question of self-determination changes from ‘what does the

group want?’ to ‘how have individuals’ preferences been shaped by the social processes of identity construction?’ and ‘what can, or should, we do about this at a policy level?’

Political activists who seize or bring about a state in the circumstances outlined above set out to enact their desired privilege and separation, perceiving that they can utilise the state as a tool for redressing perceived injustices. These first ethnocratisers construct, embed and subsequently enhance a state structure that they see as buttress for, and defender of, what they imagine to be their ethnic nation. Although they are political actors and therefore canny in the realms of propaganda and mobilisation, they are captive to the *ressentiment* ethnic nationalist discourse and hence passionately embroiled in their project. The *ressentiment* ethnic nationalist discourse both perpetuates a wound inflicted by Others, and simultaneously nurtures this wound with a depiction of the noble Us (W. Brown, 1995). Activists’ participation in the so-called national project delivers them from shame and humiliation; the strength of the state offers both revenge and perceived protection.

Thus, it is not an ethnic group that captures or creates the state, but rather a particular way of seeing that becomes hegemonic; a particular approach to identification becomes taken-for-granted. Individuals who subscribe to this way of seeing contribute to the building of institutions and the operation of policies, leading the ethnic groups or nations they perceive as innate to become the basis for organising society. Political activists in thrall to *ressentiment* discourses create institutional practices that determine how the state relates to its citizenry.

The state becomes the agent of this *ressentiment* discourse, reproducing and disseminating it. The discourse remains salient because the institutional practices brought about by the first ethnocratisers generate political conflict between the state and those who identify with its mission on one hand and those Othered by state policies on the other. This

conflict then requires explanation; the discourse offers a cogent explanation as to why differential treatment remains a necessary “defence.” Thus, the discourse that served as the basis for the state’s ethnocratisation justifies its continuation. The state’s job becomes one of disseminating this discourse in perpetuity, legitimising the differential treatment of citizens or subjects. Thus, rather than understanding the state as agent of an ethnic group, which existing formulations of ethnocracy / ethnic democracy invite, we should instead interpret it as agent of *ressentiment* ethnic nationalist discourse.

We can understand the state to operationalise *ressentiment* ethnic nationalist discourse by undertaking discriminatory containerisation. Containerisation involves the creation of categories and the continual process of convincing citizens and subjects that they belong inside them. Containerisation can be seen in any number of states which formally institutionalise ethnic categories, such as consociational democracies which can be seen to do so on an equalizing basis (Wimmer, 2008, pp.1037-8) or states which award limited special rights to what are depicted as first nations. Discriminatory containerisation involves the placement of said containers in different spaces of privilege; both the containerisation and the differential placement of the containers perpetuate conflict. Scholars have paid ample attention to the differential placement of containers in conflict generation (Ghanem, 1998, p.430), but given scant recognition to the fact that the objects of placement are indeed containers, rather than groups. My aim is to draw attention to the containers, whose existence continues even as their contents shift.

Thus, containers precede content in this process. While the state’s job is to convince the population that the containers exist purely for the purpose of demarcating the “stuff” inside from other “stuff”, the container – the boundary – is paramount (Barth, 1969). The state’s job is to maintain the static labels on containers’ outsides as it creates groups, institutionalises them, represents them as self-evident and privileges or de-privileges them. It

does not obscure the discrimination, which is plain for all to see, and justified ideologically. It obscures the containerisation itself – the very act of reifying and institutionalising ethnic categories.

Despite the effectiveness of this process, however, ethnic categories can never be the fixed entities that they purport to be, and hence can never really do the job for which they are mobilised. A *ressentiment* discourse demands the classification of the Good Us and the Evil Other based on lasting, reliable categories; ethnic categories, being discursive, are not fully fit for the job (Lentin, 2010, p.157). Moreover, the contents of containers changes over time, hence categories are vulnerable to dissolution; in non-conflict situations, so-called ethnic markers lose salience. Effort, therefore, must go into both the practice of containerisation and maintaining the fiction of fixed contents.

The actual fluidity of contents appears in the Israeli case with the definition of (privileged) Jewishness expanded to include individuals not religiously defined as Jews, and partners (provided they are not non-Jews from the occupied territories – see Peled 2007, 338-40). Vibrant debates about ‘who is a Jew’ (Handelman, 1994, pp.446-449; Shafir & Peled, 1998, p.413) have occurred alongside wider ongoing renegotiations, including questions about whether privilege based on categorisation is a good thing (Davis, 2003; Halper, 2008; Yiftachel, 2006). But transformations within categories and what Barth (1969) depicts as the permeability of boundaries should not blind us to the ongoing institutional maintenance of their existence.

In the Israeli case, the emphasis on the boundary between Jew and Arab has actually informed the elasticity of the content, but not category, of Jewishness. Boundary maintenance played a significant role in the broadening of the legal meaning of Jewishness for citizenship entitlement to individuals with a single Jewish grandparent. This vastly increased the

reservoir from which Jewish immigration could be drawn, staving off the demographic threat to Jewish domination (Lustick, 1999, pp.425-8; Peled, 2007, p.349). Thus, it was precisely the need to maintain the boundary that provoked the expansion, even if the unintended effect was the creation of a new sub-container within the Jewish one, for the subsequent category of non- and doubtful Jews (see also Al-Haj, 2002; Shafir & Peled, 1998, p.413).

Within their allocated containers, privileged individuals encounter state policies, practices and procedures, internalising the label as taken-for-granted and accepting the legitimation provided for their own hegemony. Those deemed Other encounter these same 'instruments' (Brubaker, 2011, p.1797) with the converse effect – they experience a system that they deem illegitimate because it is discriminatory and exclusive. Institutionalisation of categories of victor and vanquished at the hands of the state thus affirms two *ressentiment* discourses, reproduced through legal categories and thus life experiences.

It follows that rather than installing the privilege of the ruling 'ethnic group,' such states work to the detriment of all. The state does not work for those depicted as national members, but rather for an ideology; a way of seeing oneself as national being and Virtuous Victim. Discriminatory containerisation creates ongoing conflict, which participants can only explain using a *ressentiment* depiction of the Other as deserving mistreatment. This mistreatment variously takes the form of support for legal and political subjugation and military domination, or conversely, violent resistance. Either way, from either side, the demonised Other appears a legitimate target for one's own violence, depicted as the self-defence of a Virtuous nation in perpetual conflict.

Conceptual Classification

In the above elaboration, I have brought ethnocratism to the fore, and I now suggest we adopt the term ethnocratiser state. Unlike ethnocracy or ethnic democracy,

ethnocratiser state does not reproduce reification of ethnic categories because it highlights that very process occurring. Additionally, ethnocratisation does not freeze institutions into a single moment, but reflects how state elites respond to evolving stimuli to maintain the project.

We can use this term and approach to revisit the classificatory project undertaken by the ethnic democracy and ethnocracy scholars, whose debates I introduce above. The scholars have sought to categorise ethnocratiser states in relation to other ideal-types; this article enhances this conceptual differentiation by directly considering the processes of institutionalising ethnic categories and awarding them differential privilege. Hence, a non-groupist approach to ethnocratiser states informs the project of conceptually classifying such states as well as providing a fresh perspective from which to consider their future development. (I explore this at the article's conclusion.)

The existing literature locates ethnocratiser states on a continuum between overt authoritarianism and democracy. Reformulating this with non-groupist language, and with reference to Israel, I demonstrate how efforts to differentiate ethnocratiser states from other types have contributed to the reification of categories. Distinguishing ethnocratiser states from overt authoritarianism requires care, as the framing of cohort proportions can distort, obscure and contribute to the process of reification. At the other end of the continuum, distinguishing ethnocratiser states from ordinary liberal democracies requires focus on the different ways of doing ethnicity in each type, without assuming it is done by, or to, groups.

Authoritarian Rule, Democracy and Demography

In the existing literature, a defining feature of ethnocratiser states is the numerical domination of the central ethnic nation (Ghanem, 2009, p.463; Smooha, 2002a, pp.478-9). To reframe this in non-groupist language, individuals deemed by the state to belong to the

privileged nation outnumber designated non-members, enabling the awarding of privilege under the guise of democratic rule.

Accordingly, scholars have made a distinction between ethnocratiser states and explicitly authoritarian regimes (such as *Herrenvolk* democracies) in which a smaller cohort dominates a larger one, and hence elections would disrupt its ethnic rule (Smootha, 2002a, p.480). Participants in the classificatory project accept this distinction as legitimate. Meanwhile, debate derives from the fact that, unlike in *Herrenvolk* democracies, elections occur, yet some critics still regard the states as undemocratic because elections are conducted along ethnic lines and the state denies the minority any special rights or veto (Ghanem et al., 1998, p.4).

The distinction between *Herrenvolk* democracies and ethnocratiser states might be one of circumstance (relative population sizes) and tactic (authoritarian rule used only when 'democratic' domination is not possible). However, most theorists recognise that ethnic rule operates differently in both contexts, with ethnocratiser states forced by their democratic facade to offer considerably more rights to the subjugated Other than outright authoritarianism would require (Smootha, 2002a, p.480; Yiftachel, 2006). Even those who emphasise the ethnic rule common to both (Ghanem, 1998) make a distinction between states where domination is achieved via electoral process, and those where it is achieved via authoritarian subjugation (Ghanem, 1998; 2009, p.463).

However, in the very act of demarcating so-called majority-dominated states from authoritarian or *Herrenvolk* forms, we are in danger of falling into groupist terminology. The larger number of X people than Y people only occurs within the context of the state legally embedding these categories. Stripping away the groupist language of minorities and majorities, X and Y merely become labels invoked by discourses. Outside of the ethnocratiser

state's structures, these labels might still mobilise individuals, but it is not self-evident that they are the basis for organising society. It is therefore only because the first ethnocratisers take categories seriously that they also come to take the proportions of what they see as X and Y people seriously. As a result, these proportions are subject to violent and repressive adjustment through practices like ethnic cleansing or ongoing exclusion with the aim of provoking voluntary migration. Such practices remain a policy option within ethnocratiser states, whose fragile claim to democratic legitimation is only possible when the Us outnumbers the Other.

These policy responses are evident in the ways that early Zionists thought about the future state of Israel. Theodor Herzl wrote that the penniless population of Palestine must somehow be spirited over the border (see the citation of van der Hoeven Leonhard, in Piterberg, 2008, p.39). The 1948 War of Independence / *Nakba* ['catastrophe'] and its aftermath provided an opportunity to permanently exclude refugees and even citizens, thereby reducing the state's non-Jewish population (Piterberg, 2001, p.56; Sa'di, 2004, p.142). Since then, a suite of policies making the lives of non-Jews uncomfortable (Peled, 2007, p.357), and an accompanying discourse of 'transfer' (Peled, 2007, pp.347-50; Yiftachel & Gordon, 2002), have legitimised the project of protecting the state's 'Jewish and democratic' character by seeking to reduce the numbers of 'Arabs' in her official borders (Peled, 2007, p.345; Sa'di, 2004, pp.142-3).

On this basis, when we observe that the privileged 'ethnic nation' is numerically dominant in ethnocratiser states, we should emphasise that this numerical dominance is neither a factual accident nor a pre-existing state of affairs. Rather, (at least) two discourses must have already emerged through which individuals speak about themselves in ethnic terms and understand their Other to be a barrier to happiness, prosperity, statehood or even life itself. Only in the context of these two discourses does the question of demographic

proportions even arise. This very question may produce answers such as ethnic cleansing, repression and exclusion. Such policy responses offer the promise of hegemony via numerical dominance, rather than the more unpalatable option of hegemony via authoritarianism or – worse – ending up as the subjugated Other. By understanding the given proportions of cohorts as constructions of discourse, rather than a natural occurrence, we can properly focus on how ‘the numbers’ are played before, during and after the establishment of ethnocratiser states, and consider the consequences of this process for participants. Bringing this non-groupist analysis to questions around ‘majorities’ and ‘minorities’ can potentially inform how actors themselves see their situation. Seeing Israel as an ‘ethnocratiser state’ – in which the very project has been ethnic construction, privilege and domination – rather than as an ‘ethnocracy’ in which a larger group has dominated a smaller one, engages with aspects of Zionist history such as violence and ethnic cleansing. These might otherwise not be as fully integrated into one’s thinking about the state’s type, even if one is aware of this history (see, for example, the engagement with these in the conceptualisation of Yiftachel, 2006).

Demarcation from Liberal Democratic “Ethnic Core” States

At the other end the continuum, while most scholars have argued that we should distinguish ethnocratiser states from ordinary liberal democracies (Smootha, 2002b, p.425; Yiftachel, 2006, p.21), this claim might prompt questions about whether the politics of ethnicity in the former and the latter are really that different. If we start by identifying what we mean by the liberal democratic states to which ethnocratiser states might (erroneously) be likened, we find arguments such as that offered by Yiftachel, who argues that ‘most nation states advance a project of ethnic domination,’ (2006, p.21).⁴ Smith (1999) makes a similar proposition when he argues that all nations are formed around an ethnic core (see also Wimmer, 2008, p.1032, on France). These arguments invoke the (groupist) idea that we might, in many or most states, find a dominant group at the centre and marginalised ones

outside it. Some might then argue that this situation is not markedly different from an ethnocratiser state. I disagree with both elements of this proposition, and with the groupist language framing them. In offering a non-groupist formulation of so-called ‘ethnic core’ states, the crucial differences between such states and ethnocratiser states become apparent.

If we reframe the concept of liberal democratic ‘ethnic core’ states in non-groupist language, we would note that in some states, individuals with religious, linguistic or physical differences from people around them may identify as minorities. This may be accentuated when business and education are conducted with languages and cultural norms shared by a larger proportion of the population, or when individuals who identify as minorities are treated differently by some of their fellow citizens. However, these individuals are not objectively minorities because they might learn the dominant language, adopt the cultural norms and thrive in mainstream society, effectively escaping marginal status.

In elucidating the status of so-called minorities in so-called ‘ethnic core’ states, we can see the crucial difference between liberal democratic states and ethnocratiser states. Liberal democracies work towards a project of universal citizenship (Yiftachel, 2006, p.21), which is not necessarily benign; in fact it can be brutal. States might encourage or enforce the use of a single language in public life; they might only recognise one set of religious holidays and cultural practices, and critics could even accuse them of forcible assimilation and cultural destruction of those who identify as minorities. They may also not provide sufficient resources to incorporate those from outside the central culture, resulting in a dispossessed underclass. Nevertheless, as a matter of policy these states do not *deliberately* exclude those within. However oppressive the so-called civic project may prove – however much it might ask one to give up in order to belong, and however inadequately it may resource such a transformation – it still permits all members of society the option of integration (Yiftachel, 2006, p.21).

By contrast, ethnocratiser states feature the ‘deliberate undermining of the political demos’ so as to exclude sectors of it. They ‘use the rhetoric of the nation-state but do not allow minorities any feasible path of inclusion’ (Yiftachel, 2006, p.21). ‘The state is constructed so as to *prevent* the integration of minorities’ who remain ever Othered, given a second-class status and no option of trading it in and moving up in the social order. (Yiftachel, 2006, p.21).⁵ Thus while ethnicity undoubtedly is ‘done’ within both ‘ordinary liberal democracies’ and ethnocratiser states, the state’s role in this ‘doing’ differs vastly. Analysing this ‘doing’ from an explicitly non-groupist perspective enables us to distinguish ethnocratiser states effectively from the liberal democratic model.

Such an act of distinguishing brings to the fore the alternative to ethnic nationalism – civic nationalism – which can be more effectively mobilised as a nationalist discourse within ‘ordinary liberal democracies’. I have alluded above to the potential failures of this discourse to be translated and implemented in a way that ensures real equality and social justice; failures which have been evidenced in numerous real world examples (Spencer & Wollman, 2005). However, civic nationalism as an aspirational discourse – as somewhere to go from ethnic nationalism and ‘ethnic’ conflict – has much to offer in a case such as Israel, where a watering-down of ethnic identification would open up alternative possibilities for state structure. While both the Israeli Jewish and Palestinian nationalist discourses are currently a long way from embracing civic nationalism, it presents itself within, for example, Israeli post-Zionist yearnings for a state of its citizens (Attwell, 2015). While such a state would demonstrate the limitations of ‘ethnic core’ liberal democracy in still having a culturally Jewish frame of reference, Israel’s current cohort of non-Jewish citizens would enjoy greater equality and have a more feasible path of integration into a state no longer constituted by their absence. This would limit some of the factors contributing to the current political conflict. The point is that both scholars and participants would need to be able to engage with

de-identification for this even to be a possibility. A non-groupist framing of the existing state provides a starting point for such thinking.

Concluding Remarks: Implications Of A Non-Groupist Conceptualisation

Constructivist scholars seek to explain the world without falling into perceptual traps. In the ‘ethnocracy’ vs. ‘ethnic democracy’ debates that began the process of describing and explaining the state of Israel, these traps at least partly ensnare some of the participants, who pay inadequate attention to the processes by which labels used in discourses become purveyors of legal meaning. When academics of all moral persuasions present the contents of containers as indistinct from the containers themselves – when they present groups as real and self-evident – they become party to the ethnocratiser state’s work. Such academics are not merely being groupist; they are actually employing the logic of the *ressentiment* discourse behind ethnocratisation in an attempt to explain its consequences. This is problematic analytically, because we are at risk of black-boxing the very phenomenon we seek to understand. If we regard ethnocratisation as an outcome generated by ‘ethnic groups’ as actors, this limits how we might unpack the social processes occurring and the methods for resolution that might flow from this exercise. Presenting ‘groups’ as real and self-evident is also a problem when we engage with political action, because when we seek to analyse those who are trying to employ transformational discourses and identifications, we need to be able to engage with their capacity or potential to transgress certain types of belonging and to fashion new ones, such as through civic nationalism.

Accordingly, understanding ethnocratiser states such as Israel requires analysis of the processes behind their construction. Focusing on the individuals involved and their participation in a *ressentiment* ethnic nationalist discourse helps us to see the fallacy in

understanding their role as merely ensuring ethnic privilege. Rather, we should understand them as creators of both the 'ethnic' and the 'privilege'.

Once we take this view, we can challenge some of the assumptions about ethnocratiser states. Key amongst these assumptions has been that, as state of and for a certain nation, those deemed to belong to this nation benefit from such an arrangement. Whilst it is certainly true that such individuals enjoy greater privileges than those demarcated as Other, both constructed nations become locked into a state of apparently perpetual enmity. Literatures on ethnic democracy (Smootha, 2002a, p.481) and ethnocracy (Yiftachel, 2005, p.127) recognise (to varying degrees) that the institutionalisation of privilege creates ongoing conflict, with one 'nation' seeking access to that which is denied, and the other considering itself in need of protection from such advances. However, scholars have not sufficiently emphasised the institutionalisation of ethnicity itself in creating this conflict. Viewed from this perspective, the institutionalisation of ethnicity appears equally problematic for the privileged 'nation' as well as the de-privileged one, since individuals labelled as either category experience ongoing violence at the hands of those constructed as Other.

This then offers us different ways of imagining the evolution of such states. In the existing literature, ethnic democracy scholars foresee stability as the 'minority' mobilises to a limited extent around the democratic elements of ethnic democracy (Smootha, 1999; 2005, p.22; see also critique in Ghanem, Rouhana et al. 1998, p.4). Ethnocracy scholars counter that the dissonance between representations of democracy and the reality of ethnic rule will become points at which the repressed minority chip away, exposing the true nature of the regime and hence de-stabilising it (Yiftachel, 2006, p.39). However, both these predicted outcomes focus on the 'minority'; scholars pay little attention to how those deemed to belong to the privileged nation might influence these processes. It seems taken-for-granted that individuals categorised as such will continue to support their own privilege, emphasising the

democratic aspects of the current arrangement and averting their gazes from the more problematic features of this for the Other (Ghanem et al., 1998, pp.8-9; Rouhana, 2006, pp.69-70).

Nevertheless, a possibility remains that such individuals might destabilise ethnocratiser states. This can occur only if these individuals recognise that they, too, suffer through ongoing discriminatory containerisation. They might challenge their own privilege and point out the ongoing enmity it earns them. More radically, they might challenge categorisation itself, undermining the *ressentiment* discourse. However, in order for researchers to be able to assess such potential, we must have an appropriate lens and terminology. I analysed Israeli Jews who spoke cogently on these matters, but had to attune myself in order to ask the right questions (Attwell, 2013). Such possibilities open up when we reframe ethnocratiser states not as agent of ethnic group, but as agent of *ressentiment* discourse. Ozkirimli (2003) suggests that a constructivist academic approach inherently seeks to challenge and transform the world (p.343). If existing scholarship on ethnocratiser states reproduces or reinscribes ethnicity in spaces where it might be fruitful to do the opposite, then non-groupist constructivist scholarship may indeed open up new ways of seeing situations even – and especially – for the participants in ‘ethnic conflicts’.

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Notes

¹This terminology of 'doing' ethnicity borrows from West and Zimmerman's (1987) notion of 'doing' gender, and Deutsch's (2007) 'undoing gender' critique. It draws our attention to the performative, institutional and discursive means by which something that appears natural is, in fact created for and by participants, seemingly with their consent, but with the potential for resistance.

² Interestingly, it took the most militarised and extreme form of Zionism to recognise the rights claims of the Other, even if this recognition occurred in the process of denial (Shlaim 2000, pp.11-16).

³ Shohat (1999) and Behar (2007) describe how the Palestinian nationalist discourse unwittingly reproduced and reinforced the Zionist discourse's ethnicised framing and praxis in Palestine. Shohat (1999) explains that nationalists in the Arab world sought to end colonial rule by inventing 'third world nations... according to the definitions supplied by the often Eurocentric ideologies' (pp.8-9), unhelpfully leading anti-Zionists to articulate 'the idea of a homogenous 'Jewish Nation'' (p.13).

⁴ Yiftachel cites Brubaker (1996) here, but Brubaker actually frames this proposition in less groupist terms.

⁵ Yiftachel (2006) offers an extreme version of this logic in Sri Lanka, where the Sinhalese ethnocratiser state denies over one million long-term residents citizenship, labelling them 'Indian Tamils' as distinct from 'Sri Lankan Tamil' citizens of the state, who are also Othered by the regime (p.23).

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