

Cultural Autonomy, core values and Europe's legacy: a response to Joshua A. Fishman

DANIELE CONVERSI

Abstract

In response to Joshua Fishman's article, this paper examines the fate of the principle of national cultural autonomy (NCA), first theorized within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and later revived within contemporary Europe. It posits that NCA can be more easily implemented in cases where culture is built around a set of shared core values and cultural elements, including language. Yet, an exclusive focus on language may not lead to a vibrant pluralistic society where various forms of culture coexist and interact.

Keywords: core values; cosmopolitanism; culture; cultural autonomy; ethno-nationalism; genocide; glotto-centrism; globalization; linguistic autonomy; national cultural autonomy (NCA); power-sharing; territoriality principle; totalitarianism.

1. Introduction

World War I was the root source of the most heinous mass crimes committed in the Twentieth century: the war spawned fascism, communism, environmental destruction, cultural homogenization, genocide and endless conflict and wars, culminating in World War II. As Joshua Fishman rightly points out, if World War I had not occurred, the principles of coexistence and pluralism could have survived intact, and even triumphed in some countries. Trends towards cultural homogenization had begun to emerge within the Ottoman lands and the Austro-Hungarian empire well before World War I. Both empires wrongly attempted to stem separatism through forced assimilation, implementing various degrees of Turkification and Germanization.

Most historians see 1914 as a watershed year. Eugene's Weber's milestone work indicated how the advent of a shared sense of Frenchness accompanied by the erasure of France's rich multicultural heritage could only occur after

1914 (Weber 1976). Indeed, war conditions allowed an unprecedented control by the central state, setting the basis for the rise of totalitarianism, well before this could become conceptually theorized and politically implemented under fascism.

Cultural homogenization and physical genocide should be studied in tandem, because movements of mass killing were often preceded by decades of centralist attempts to streamline and control internal populations while getting rid of minorities (Conversi 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2010). Moreover, throughout this period culture was considered to be an indissoluble attribute of ethnicity and nationhood, but it was a reified, simplified, standardized concept of culture, often limited to language.

2. National Cultural Autonomy (NCA) and its developments

The collapse of multinational states led to the obliteration of the principles of “National Cultural Autonomy” (NCA), theorized within the Austro-Hungarian Empire by Karl Renner, Otto Bauer and other Austro-Marxists (Bowring 2005). Varieties of Cultural Autonomy were also practiced within the Ottoman Empire until the advent of Turkish nationalism. The latter was largely a response to the carving up of the Ottoman lands by Western powers (Britain, Russia, France and, since 1911, Italy). World War I obliterated the principles of NCA as a widespread possibility, although this was applied amongst a few eastern European countries, notably Estonia, and only amongst some minorities. After World War II and the Cold War, it had to face the challenges of anti-colonialism and ethnic separatism.

Its recent revival met with mixed results, granting rights to a host to previously unprotected minorities, but leaving their fate hanging on a balance. Its embrace within the Russian federation, particularly among the Tatars, waxed and waned with only limited rights being granted (Bowring 2007). It has hence been applied in various European settings, as with the establishment of local “self-government” units amongst Hungary’s Roma (Dobos 2007). It has been unsuccessfully proposed in Rumania (Decker 2007), while elsewhere it had to compete with more strongly entrenched territoriality principles (Kymlicka 2007).

The concept of NCA combines a cultural and a political dimension, with some freedom to decide what is meant by “culture”. But the cultural portion is largely dependent on ethnic criteria of membership. In other words, political autonomy is most often adjudicated on the basis of a sense of putative common descent, rather than on the basis of really existing and tangible cultural elements.

3. NCA, ethnicity and culture

Whenever possible, I believe it is a good practice to distinguish between *ethnicity* and *culture* (Fenton 2010: 19–22). This distinction has sociological, historical, as well as broader methodological, implications. For instance, references to ethnicity are relatively rare within Catalan political and scholarly discourse, because, at least, in principle membership in the moral community takes place voluntarily through the active practice of speaking Catalan, rather than depending on putative common descent (Conversi 1990). As a consequence, the term “ethno-nationalism” has not gained widespread currency amongst Catalan historians, politicians and activists (Conversi 1997).¹

In contrast, references to ethnicity and ethno-nationalism are deemed to be acceptable amongst those studying, and participating in, Basque nationalism. At least until the 1960s, membership into the nation was established in various ways, not merely through language. Moreover, the past emphasis on ethnic descent was largely due to the cultural loss caused by assimilation into the dominant Castilian (Spanish) culture.²

A thriving shared culture can provide a tool to avoid an excessive reliance on ethnicity, particularly when immigrants are willing or likely to learn, and integrate into, the regional culture. This can take place through language acquisition where language acts as a core value, or other cultural elements.

4. Language and other core values

Most national movements and elites gravitate around chosen core values, including race, language, and religion (Smolicz 1997; Smolicz and Secombe 1999: Ch. 4). Language has been usually selected as a particularly cherished and loved element of nationhood (Fishman 1997), turning into the most widespread tool of mobilization for nationalist elites. Nations which could be identified with, and build their cultural core around a shared common language, were placed in an advantageous position in a modern world where it seemed to be the most stable element amongst the chaos of continuous and unpredictable cultural change (Conversi 1990, 1997). This trend has often penalized nations that were built around more complex cultural criteria. Moreover, the unique stress on language to the detriment of other elements has often led to the self-destruction of a variety of other cultural treasures in the name of nationalist modernization: this was the case, for instance, of the partial demise of Hungary's architectural and musical non-urban heritage during the process of Magyarization (Conversi 2007: 374–375).

While the argument for cultural autonomy remains susceptible to greater policy elaboration, there is the possibility that the notion risks becoming essentialized, so that a rich and variegated phenomenon like culture is conflated

to a part of itself. In the modern world, languages are often essentialized as the *sine qua non* of nationhood, therefore reducing a complex concept to only one of its elements.

Language is often privileged as a core value also because it can be more easily associated with ethnicity, descent and, hence, racial genealogies. This association has sometimes led to highly negative consequences. For instance, Pan-Aryanism was based on the belief that the linguistic diffusion of Indo-European languages originated from a common “proto-Indo-European” tongue and derived thus from a common Indo-Iranian ancestry. Indeed, Léon Poliakov noted the highly interchangeable use of the terms “language” and “race” in Aryanist discourse (Poliakov 1974: 100). Moreover, in some ethnic movements language was deliberately chosen as an “ethnic barrier, rather than as a tool of cultural integration” (Conversi 1997: 60).

Like ethnicity, culture is transmitted from generation to generation, but it is not limited to language, since it can be related to class, style, technical skills and professional specialization, while various aspects, like festivals and music, are not necessarily associated to a specific ethnic group and can serve as catalysts for transcending inter-ethnic barriers. This is admittedly a more materially-oriented vision than Clifford Geertz’s semiotic and Weberian description of culture as made of “webs of significance”, which justifies the interpretive approach to the study of culture as a “context” whose meaning needs to be sought and interpreted (Geertz 1973). Several musical revivals have transcended ethnic boundaries to become hallmark of broader inter-ethnic revivals: for instance, *bhangra* music was born as a largely rural Punjabi tradition, but it has since developed amongst Indians abroad into a highly fashionable and emblematic aspect of their diasporic predicament (Dudrah 2007).

Of the cases mentioned by Fishman, Navajo culture is only partially centered on language, and language itself is rather associated to the perpetuation of traditional ceremonies. Puerto Rico is an interesting case in which Puerto Rican culture transcends language by including a variety of areas, particularly music.

A second important question is whether projects of cultural autonomy that are fully and honestly implemented can avoid the double trap of centralist intolerance and ethnic separatism. For instance, most Puerto Ricans seem to be satisfied with the original status quo, but remain adamantly uncompromising on issues pertaining to the maintenance of Puerto Rican culture (Oquendo 2004, cited by Nimni 2010).

5. Europe and the USA

Another important issue raised by Fishman is whether and how most current and successful experiments with cultural autonomy tend to occur in Europe,

specifically in the 27 member states of the European Union or in perspective members. The common European institutions offer unique opportunities for the development of various forms of power-sharing, including cultural autonomy (Henders 2010).

In this respect, the USA has been largely left “behind”: the media-induced “paranoid” trend in mainstream political discourse (Hofstadter 1965; Knight 2002) undoubtedly affects inter-ethnic relations within the US. A deep suspicion of multiculturalism, including language rights, has long pervaded US media and political discourses. A still thriving “English-only” lobby (the Official English movement) has tried since several decades to push for an English Language Amendment to the US Constitution (Fishman 1989; Marshall 1986). In its wake, English has been adopted as the official language by over half of the USA’s 50 states, with Oklahoma being the latest one to join in 2010.

6. Conclusion

If the word “culture” is to be taken in its broader meaning, the notion of NCA can be more easily implemented where culture is firmly built around a set of shared cultural elements. Thus, linguistic autonomy can be built through the creation of a set of institutions entirely devoted to the maintenance and development of indigenous language skills.

But broader and less “glotto-centric” forms of NCA can lead to institutionalize efforts to maintain non-linguistics aspects of that culture, notably among linguistically assimilated communities. Yet, heavily assimilated groups are more likely to stress ethnicity and common descent, rather than any specific aspects of the “national” culture.

For some authors, globalization, despite its negative impact on international stability, may provide new windows of opportunities for implementing the principle of NCA on a global scale (Roach 2005). Cultural autonomy is in principle incompatible with the rabid patriotism and nationalism that brought the world on the verge of self-destruction. On the contrary, it is more compatible with cosmopolitan visions in which overarching norms and values encompass and embrace a plurality of cultural forms (Schwarzmantel 2005). To sum up, the ethnicity-culture distinction and the notion of core values may be useful to tackle practical issues related to the application of the notion of cultural autonomy, as discussed by Joshua Fishman in this issue.

Ikerbasque Foundation | University of the Basque Country

Correspondence address: daniele_conversi@ehu.es

Notes

1. The term “ethno-nationalism” was mostly used, defined and elaborated by Walker Connor (Connor 1994; Conversi 2004).
2. However, current trends (also related to the end of violence) point clearly to a stronger cultural component emerging in the Basque Country, including practical (as opposed to discursive) trends towards institutional pluralism and multiculturalism among immigrants.

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