

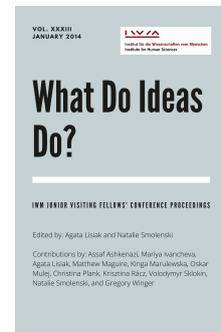
Vernacular Multiculturalism: Hungarian Youth in Vojvodina

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Abstract: The paper combines the scholarly literature on multiculturalism, youth and ethnic identification in the context of postmodern identity politics. The aim of the paper is to discuss the applicability and the shortcomings of these three bodies of literature with regard to the case study of Hungarian youth in Vojvodina, Serbia. The paper presents the main points of the above-mentioned three theories in the context of the case study focusing on the ambiguity between on one hand fluid identities as explained by postmodern theories of identification and on the other hand the still very present ethno-national communal focus of young people. What this means for the case of Hungarian youth in Vojvodina is that while in official discourses of multiculturalism ethnic communities are seen and presented as actively interacting, in practice, social contacts often are reduced to individuals sharing ethnic belonging. After linking the implications of the outlined theoretical debates with some key topics that have emerged from the interviews with young Hungarian people in a community in Serbia, the paper calls for an analytical framework that can account for the gap between the theory and practice of multiculturalism that can explain the process of identity construction among the informants of the research.

1. Introduction

When we speak about identity formation, especially the identity formation of young people in an environment that is “understood as . . . [a] shifting space in which two *cultures* encounter one another” (Krupat 5), we might expect to find multiple, fragmented and strategic ethnic identifications. Yet, what we often encounter on the ground in Vojvodina is that the ethnic identification of minority young people is still relatively solid, and ethnic homogeneity is salient. To explore the construction of ethnicity and its relative prominence among Hungarian youth in Serbia, I first state the purposes and approach of the study and provide a brief socio-historical context. Then, I present some key theoretical

debates about the study of multiculturalism, ethnic identification and youth relevant for this enquiry. The last part of the paper is devoted to some key topics that have emerged from my preliminary empirical research[1] and links them back to the outlined debates.

Although the term ‘multiculturalism’ is often used to denote the relationship between people of different types of cultures, i.e. relating to majorities and minorities of different spheres of life, such as sexual, gender, subcultures related to a particular lifestyle or music, etc., in this paper I use ‘multiculturalism’ only to refer to the interactions between people of different ethnic membership, i.e. as a synonym for ‘multiethnicity’, or as Zygmunt Bauman suggests in a more critical fashion, ‘multicommunitarianism’ (*Community*).

Vojvodina, the northernmost province of Serbia, at least nominally autonomous regarding certain economic and policy-making competences, offers an insightful case study for questions of multiculturalism and the discrepancy between its public discourses about and everyday practices of multiculturalism. A textbook example of multiculturalism, it used to be highly ethnically heterogeneous—first as part of the Habsburg, the Austro-Hungarian and the Hungarian territories until the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, and then during the periods of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and of Yugoslavia. Today in Serbia there are officially more than twenty national minorities. Most of them are autochthonous and live in Vojvodina; the most numerous are Hungarians, Roma, Romanians, Slovaks, Croats and Rusyns (Göncz and Vörös; Ilić). Studies exploring the applicability of multicultural models occurring other countries in the context of Vojvodina exist (Devic), as do those that take a legal perspective on the region (Korhec; Várady), alongside with those that present evidence of strained ethnically-framed cleavages (Bieber and Winterhagen). It is a fact that Vojvodina has seen much less explicit conflicts between ethnic groups than for instance Kosovo, the former Serbian province with the same status of autonomous province within Yugoslavia; yet, I argue that the meaning of multiculturalism in the region is far from unproblematic. Despite this, even when ethnic conflicts in Vojvodina are addressed, the notion of multiculturalism is never challenged, nor is its meaning explored. ‘Multiculturalism’ is, rather, a taken-for-granted phrase in the discourse of both academia and politics in the region, without questioning what it means for the people living their everyday lives in the environment described as multicultural.

Therefore, in my research I am interested in the how ethnicity, and thereby the myth of multiculturalism, is constructed from below, i.e. how it is lived and experienced in the daily lives of Hungarian young people in Vojvodina. Accepting the fact that ethnicity is constructed as common knowledge and interested in how it is constructed (Brubaker et al.), I take a bottom-up ethnographic approach to investigate how the discourses and practices of the younger generation in the small community of Mali Idoš/Kishegyes in Vojvodina engage in self-identification processes and negotiate their representations of the majority society and culture as well as multiculturalism. Instead of considering multiculturalism either normatively as an ideal to be strived for or descriptively as a social situation inherent in the region, I focus on social actors’ interpretations of it. In this sense, like Geertz (*Interpretation of Cultures*), what I look for in my research is the system of

conceptions expressed via discourse and action by which they construct their knowledge about other ethnic groups, as well as establish and reinforce their attitudes towards multiculturalism.

2. Multiculturalism

Even though the majority of states in the world are multicultural, and despite the fact that there seems to be no alternative position to it either in politics or in academia (Barry), the Western political tradition pretends that the ideal-type of one common descent/language/culture is valid (Kymlicka) – even if only because of the fact that it is practically impossible to include all minorities in a state’s languages, symbols, holidays, etc. According to Brian Barry, no country has actually departed very far from the 19th century nationalist conception “that people can flourish only within their ancestral culture” (263) that determines their moral universe and that is the bases of their common rights. Despite, or precisely because of, this,

‘(m)ulticulturalism’ is the most common answer given these days by the learned and opinion-making classes to the world’s uncertainty about the kinds of values that deserve to be cherished and cultivated, and the directions that should be pursued with rugged determination. That answer is in fact becoming the canon of ‘political correctness’; more, it turns into an axiom that no longer needs to be spelled out, into the prolegomena to all further deliberation, the cornerstone of *doxa*: not a knowledge itself, but the unthought, tacit assumption of all leading-to-knowledge thinking (Bauman, *Community* 124).

Just like in its everyday interpretation, multiculturalism is ridden with ambiguities and contradictions in the scholarly arena. Yet however broad or varied their meanings, all conceptualizations of multiculturalism can be categorized into three main types (Feischmidt; Lukšić-Hacin):

(1) Descriptions of interethnic relations of two or more ethnicities that live within one state.

(2) Identity politics or political programs that strive for the emancipation and integration of national minorities, immigrant populations or indigenous peoples (Kymlicka). Usually tolerance towards minority cultures and their social inclusion into the dominant society is their aim. In its orientation it can be a program whose understanding of multiculturalism is conservative, liberal or critical (Goldberg).

(3) A theoretical category related to the quality of the relationship between various ethnicities living in the same geographical location.

“Administered in doses of any strength you like, multiculturalism poses as many problems as it solves” (Barry 328). Thus, for as many typologies and categories of multiculturalism that exist, the criticisms of the concept and its usages are probably even more numerous. Some of these critiques apply to the case study I investigate in my research. Namely, the immense body of literature on multiculturalism deals mostly with multiculturalism in Western contexts and focuses on immigrant cultures rather than on

national minorities. It mostly analyzes how immigrants encounter “social facts” (Durkheim) that are new to them and how the host society deals with the immigrants’ social facts that are in turn new to them (Hasan). However, as Romy Hasan argues, countries with several nations and countries with immigrants cannot be theorized in the same way (*Multiculturalism*). In addition, texts that do deal with national minorities (e.g. the French Canadians or the Finnish minority in Sweden) address the question of multiculturalism from a perspective that is, in terms of both historical context and legal regulation, very different from and hardly applicable to the situation of the Hungarian minority in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. Probably the only work investigating multiethnicity in the former Yugoslavia is the research on Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hronesová; Majstorović and Turjačanin). Even though in the cases of both the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina and in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina it is not possible to analyze multiculturalism in terms of ‘newcomers’ and ‘host society’, the social environment of a post-war state also is difficult to compare with the Vojvodina region. Therefore, what I propose instead is looking at the specific social and political conditions out of which Vojvodinians’ experience of multiculturalism, ethnic identification and interethnic communication arises.

In addition to these ambiguities and shortcomings of its political and analytical deployment, multiculturalism may also re-subordinate marginal groups (Iverson). Even if in its policies it strives for heterogeneity, this heterogeneity presupposes *tolerating* the different (Goldberg); “Majority and minority are not quantitative characteristics but refer to the relative position of the parties involved in relations of economic, political and institutional power” (Patton 68). Even more problematic than this, however, may be the assumption of self-evident power differentials itself: most of the definitions, categorizations and explorations of multiculturalism construct ethnicities to be majorities or minorities, dominant or subordinate. What theories of multiculturalism, be they descriptive, normative and theoretical, therefore fail to explain are social situations in which members of an ethnic group which is a minority on state level but a majority on local level do not always have the minority experience ascribed to them. This is the case of young people in Kishegyes, Serbia, who in their social contacts—mainly restricted to their ethnic group—have discourses and practices that cannot be accounted for within the classical distinction of minority and majority.

3. Theories of the ethnic identity

Since the publication of Fredrick Barth’s *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* in 1969, in which he claims that the boundaries that enclose an ethnic group are the defining elements of the group rather than the cultural elements that these boundaries enclose, all major theorists of ethnic identification have subscribed to the constructivist view of ethnic identification (Anderson; Hobsbawm). However, it is not only their social construction that is emphasized in postmodern theories of ethnicity, but also their diversity, fluidity, hybridity, and instability—in short, their processual nature (Bhabha, *Location of Culture*; Hall, “New Ethnicities”; Sanders). Ethnicity ceases to be something that one is, but rather

something that one does (Gözl). Ethnic identification is therefore based on the subjective perception of what differentiates one group from another, rather than on what the groups are objectively like.

Acknowledging the constructed nature of ethnic identification, Geertz reminds us, however, that ethnic attachments are very real and seem to remain cultural givens (*Interpretation of Cultures*). “Just because the cultural stuff is imagined, doesn’t mean that is imaginary” (Jenkins 123). Homi Bhabha, while emphasizing the hybrid nature of postmodern identification, insists on the fact that “racism, community, blood, and borders haunt the new international and have gained remarkable ideological and affective power” (“Irremovable Strangeness” 34). Fredrick Barth also noticed that “discrete categories are maintained *despite* changing participation, and membership in the course of individual life histories” (9-10). When speaking about minorities, although acknowledging the possibility for cultural hybridity, Kymlicka also highlights the difficulties and rarity of moving between cultures, and argues that the desire of national groups to retain their membership remains strong (*Multicultural Citizenship*). The task in my research is thus to reflect on some of the key factors that make the prominence of ethnic ties strong in the case of the minority youth discussed.

Instead of merely acknowledging the constructed nature of ethnic identities, it is necessary to explain how they are being constructed. In challenging the use of the concept of ‘identity’, Brubaker and Cooper claim that often constructivist language is used to describe essentialist messages. What they call “soft constructivism” allows allegedly existing identities to continue dominating the field of social sciences, perpetuating the proliferation and analytical vagueness of all types of identities, including ethnic (1). They propose to differentiate between identity as a category of practice and as a category of analysis, two meanings which are frequently conflated. What this means for the case study of Hungarian youth in Vojvodina is that instead of merely taking the situational and contextual character of their ethnic identification for granted, an exploration into how their identities are being negotiated and in what situation they are strategic is needed. To be more precise, what needs to be pointed out are the social contexts in which interethnic communication takes place; the forms that communication takes; the circumstances under which it does not happen; and the main obstacles to such communication.

In order to be able to speak about ethnicity, there must be communication between members of at least two groups on an everyday level, and these groups must differentiate themselves based on symbols of cultural difference (Feischmidt). (Ethnic) identity formation is always already determined by how one sees the Other (Brubaker and Cooper; Lindstrom; Petrunic). It serves the purpose of shaping the image of the self by contrasting it with the Other (Petrović 13). As Charles Taylor notes, “My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others” (34). In multinational societies where ethnicity is one of the key factors of identification, the Other is most often an ethnic other. The type of situation we can see in the case of Vojvodina therefore unsurprisingly leads to implicit and explicit conflicts between minority and majority groups as well as between different understandings of multiculturalism. It requires a complex description of identity-building processes and interethnic relations. In more specific terms, what needs

to be analyzed is how these young people relate to their peers of a different ethnicity and what are the situations in which they do so. What my research has brought to the fore is the importance of language in interethnic communication and the changing strategies of interacting with ethnic others – who continue being defined in terms of difference.

4. Youth

Just as the tendency in the identity politics of modernity was to construct solid identities, the focus of postmodernity is “how to avoid fixation and keep the options open” (Bauman, “From Pilgrim to Tourist” 19). Postmodern theories about youth emphasize the self-reflexivity and fluidity of belonging to a youth subculture, be it ethnic, class-related or gathered around a political ideology (Bennett and Kahn Harris; Bovone; Chaney; Martin; Stahl; Sweetman). Youth groups are seen as “ad hoc and strategic associations” (Stahl 53) rather than structures with permanent membership; youth cultures are less an inheritance than a resource (Martin); and style and taste are more important than ideology. Images become the central category of cultural membership, and the “increasing proliferation of youth styles since the 1980s” (Bennett and Kahn Harris 2) has created new and alternative forms of lifestyles, identification and youth. Bauman describes this as a process in which

the network of dependencies is fast acquiring a worldwide scope – a process which is not being matched by a similar extension of viable institutions of political control and by the emergence of anything like a truly global culture (*Community* 97).

With these globalizing trends and the weakening of collective traditions, the individualization of family- and work-related values and the appropriation of consumer values have become just as characteristic of East European young people as their Western peers. Simultaneously, on the other hand, “community is sought as a shelter from the gathering tides of global turbulence” (142). Yet especially in post-socialist Europe, a global culture that would enable fluid group membership and negotiated identities does not match the everyday realities of young people. Also, the processes of individualization are becoming economically more and more difficult and insecure, which has led to a new “domestication” of youth (Ule). Thus for most people,

the suggestion that the collectivity in which they seek shelter and from which they expect protection has a more solid foundation than notoriously capricious and volatile individual choices is exactly the kind of news they want to hear (Bauman, *Community* 100).

Taking a middle ground between these two approaches to understanding youth, one trend that has marked the fields of social sciences has focused on the existence of racial and ethnic differences in the experience of youth (Chao and Otsuki-Clutter; Chhuon; Costigan and Hua; Wenshya Lee and Hébert). Drawing on examples of youth in general and minority youth in particular from all over the globe, these authors point out the relevance of ethnic categories even in the era of the postmodern proliferation of identities and a new conception of identity politics.

Youth is not a global structural monolith; different (ethnic) groups of young people have distinctive lifestyles and attitudes that are not only transmitted through generations but also changed and countered. Also, members of an (ethnic) culture have distinctive relationships to their group and to other groups. In multiethnic societies, these relations are crucial to understand both the synchronic and diachronic web of meanings upon which interethnic relationships are built. In cases of minority ethnic groups, young people have various opportunities to act on their ethnic identities in strategic ways, but they are also often expected to be the safeguards of tradition and accused of betrayal if they place their personal interests not in the ethnic group but elsewhere—i.e., they are denied the “right to exit” (Kymlicka) from their ethnic community.

Existing studies on multiculturalism and ethnic identification in Vojvodina often see ethnic groups as homogenous and static and tend to focus on elderly people, because they are seen as ‘carriers’ of ethnic culture and tradition. For these reasons, young people and their experience of multiculturalism are often left out of the analysis because they do not fit properly into the view of homogenous and mosaic-like ethnic cultures in which tradition is passed down from one generation to another. Conversely, the approach I take in this paper sees ethnic identification of youth as a construction affected from various directions and one that is never finished but always a process (Brubaker and Cooper), acknowledging that individuals have an active role in the creation of their identities (Hall).

5. Discourses and Practices of Multiculturalism: Hungarian Youth in Vojvodina

In this section, I provide an overview of the most common themes which emerged from my interviews with almost 30 young Hungarian people from Kishegyes/Mali Idoš, a village in Serbia of around 6,000 inhabitants where Hungarians comprise an absolute majority. In general, contact between minority and majority youth is restricted to a few domains of life and strictly-bounded spaces such as the schoolyard; school corridors; the yard and corridors of dormitories; physical education classes; bus rides from home to school and back; and certain bars. Most of Hungarian youths’ everyday communication with peers and adults happens in the “Hungarian world” (Brubaker et al.), while social interactions with members of other ethnic communities are characterized by “social distance” (Bogardus). In schools, the two ethnic groups live what can be characterized as parallel lives, giving the impression that they almost completely ignore the other group. The reason for this, according to informants, is most often not nationalist sentiment but a lack of knowledge of the Serbian language, which is taken for granted as the *lingua franca* of all minority-majority communication. For my informants, scarce contact with members of other ethnic groups is an unquestioned routine that is further normalized and even enhanced by the family, the school and, more often than not, in the course of entertainment and leisure activities.

What the analysis of interviews with young people from Kishegyes shows is that the majority-minority division is not that clear-cut as literature suggests. Even though Hungarians are considered and treated as a minority by the majority, most of the

informants carry out their activities and invest in social relationships seemingly oblivious to their minority status. As a result, their experience of minority status happens in terms rarely articulated as ethnic, but rather linguistic.

The knowledge or lack of knowledge of the state language determines life choices, career options and places of residence. The main benefit of knowing Serbian, the state language, seems to be the confidence to communicate in that language with members of that linguistic/ethnic community, opening avenues to ethnic mixing. However, the statement that one cannot speak Serbian can mean various things: that one completely lacks the knowledge of the language; that one has only basic knowledge of the language; that one is able to communicate in Serbian but does not have the confidence and/or the opportunity to do so; or that one is disinterested in the Serbian language and culture.

Because of their general lack of competence in the Serbian language or their lack of desire to speak it for one reason or another, many young people, especially those who want to enter universities, are oriented towards Hungary, which they see as their best option for further education. However, their relationship to the 'kin-state' and Hungarians from there is ambivalent. Even though several of my informants have plans for higher education in Hungary and have reported positive feelings about the country (again, the reason for this being the ability to speak and be understood fully without investing additional effort), an approximately equal number of informants have described themselves as belonging neither here nor there: being treated as Hungarians in Serbia and as Serbians in Hungary. This feeling of being outsiders both in their home country and in their 'mother' country does have a strong effect on developing a sense of marginalization and the experience of minority status in Serbia as well as in Hungary.

Another issue which has come to the forefront in the course of the interviews is the complex nature of the Other. Apart from the Serbs who in Kishegyes are mainly refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina who came to village in the 1990s, a new ethnic group of Muslim Kosovars has recently moved to the village and became an even greater ethnic Other. The new group, which distinguishes itself by the appearance and language of its members much more than do local Serbs, has somewhat mitigated the Hungarian-Serbian differences and conflicts and brought new distinctions to the forefront, particularly the Christian-Muslim dichotomy. Over the past several years, then, discourses of threat and otherness have been transferred from local Serbs to the new inhabitants of the village.

6. Concluding remarks

Based on these initial results of my research, instead of drawing general conclusions, I point out some of the challenges of conceptualizing ethnic identification of minority youth in a post-socialist setting. First, the lens through which social scientists who study ethnicity see the world is ethnically colored (Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*). The difficult task for those who study ethnicity is thus how to see elements of identification

other than ethnicity. In the case of the topic of this research, the methodological problem is how to account for the dynamics between ethnicity and age, but also factors such as gender, race, social class, subculture membership, etc.

Second, as mentioned in the section on multiculturalism and its critics, an oft-cited critique of multiculturalism is that it cannot account for diversity and change within a culture. In the case of Vojvodina, the metaphor for multiethnicity used is often that of the mosaic, in which traditional ethnic cultures peacefully coexist next to each other and in which single ethnic cultures are internally stable and homogeneous. A similar critique has been voiced with regard to classical anthropology: ethnographic works often present groups as homogeneous and static, not paying enough attention to intra-group variation and social change (Goldberg; McLaren). The challenge is therefore how to recognize, avoid and/or account for what Brubaker (*Ethnicity without Groups*) calls “groupism,” i.e., seeing groups as bounded and unchanging.

Third, given the immensity of literature on multiculturalism and ethnicity, it is difficult not to reiterate the majority-minority dichotomy but to conceptualize ‘minority’ experiences flexibly. The fact that a group is an ethnic minority on the state level does not necessarily mean that its members experience themselves as such in all situations, especially if this minority is a majority on the local level. This ambivalent minority/majority experience can be detected in how group members define themselves and in their attitudes towards members of other ethnic groups with whom they come into contact. The analytical issue in this case is how to account for their experiences and how to conceptualize majority-minority relations more flexibly.

Fourth, as the case study outlined above suggests, language can be the main carrier of ethnic identity, a fact that is sometimes not emphasized enough in existing studies on multiculturalism and ethnic relations in general and in Vojvodina specifically. I believe that contemporary sociocultural anthropology needs a more thorough theorization of the linguistic aspect of social interaction, i.e. how language affects interethnic relationships.

Last, it is not easy to separate the object from the subject of the research. “[H]alfie researchers can be ‘natives,’ yet they can also be ‘outsiders’ on some levels” (Subedi 588). To do anthropology at home—as part of the community under study for some reasons and not part of it for other reasons—often also means attempting to overturn the relationship between observer and the object of study. In other words, the researcher’s task in this case is to “make the mundane exotic and the exotic mundane, in order to render explicit what in both cases is taken for granted” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 68). As much as has been said about self-reflexivity, however, there is no straightforward method for how to actually engage in “reflexive sociology” (Bourdieu and Wacquant). Especially since, as Lila Abu-Lughod has noticed, no social scientist has been able to break through the “(mis)understanding” separating the “wholie,” purportedly standing outside the object of their research, and the “halfie,” supposedly standing inside it (141).

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