Urban Update

COMPARATIVE URBAN STUDIES PROJECT

Ethnicity and Power in Contested Cities: the Historical Experience

A.C. Hepburn *University of Sunderland*

Cities are frequently seen as the cutting edge of human achievement, as cosmopolitan sites where new identities may develop and flourish. In this view, traditional barriers are eroded through proximity of living and working. But many modern cities are made up of communities that regard themselves or are regarded by others as distinct in terms of language, religious belief, skin color or culture. In this context, the question becomes "how have cities sought to mitigate their potential for dysfunctionality?" The rapidly growing British industrial cities of the nineteenth century, for instance, drew their populations mainly from nearby hinterlands, so that while the challenges of acculturation to urban living and the discipline of the factory may have been great, the challenge of acculturation to new neighbors was substantially reduced.

In other contexts, however, urban populations in the industrial and contemporary eras have been divided along ethnic lines in terms of residential and associational segregation, distinct occupational and industrial profiles, endogamy and, sometimes, mutual hostility to the extent of rioting and other forms of overt conflict. Such contexts are commonly referred to as "divided cities." But in some cases groups are not only rivals for power and resources, but are also in more fundamental conflict over the political and cultural identity or indeed dispute the very national identity and state location of the city. In such cases a more specific term is needed to differentiate them from other types of divided cities, such as Berlin during the Cold War era or North American cities where high levels of ethnic and, especially, racial segregation have existed over long periods of time. Some scholars have used the term "frontier city" to describe such contexts (Kotek, 1996b). Others, including the present writer, feel that this introduces a geographical dimension, which is not always appropriate, and prefer the term "contested city" (Klein, 2001; Hepburn, 2004). This is defined as a major urban center in which two or more ethnically conscious groups – divided by religion, language and/or culture and perceived history – co-exist in a situation where neither group will recognize the supremacy of the other.

This paper will explore the variety of ways in which such problems have arisen and are coped with by the state(s) concerned, by the international system and by the people of the cities in question. It also asks how such conflicts have been resolved, managed, or simply changed. Reference will be made to a number of contested cities in modern history, including Gdansk and Trieste, where external intervention has played a crucial role, and Brussels and Montreal which grapple, mainly through the agency of state and regional policies, with the complex and sometimes quite technical problems of sustaining two not-very-friendly language groups in cities which need to remain unitary for most purposes. Belfast and Jerusalem, both in different ways unresolved cases, are cities where violence has for a long time been recurrent or chronic even when it has not been savagely acute. Ahmedabad, in the Indian state of Gujarat, is a case where the question of national sovereignty was resolved more than half a century ago but which has become more bitterly divided between Hindu and Muslim in recent years than was the case at the time of Indian partition.

Pressures for Integration

Economic and spatial pressures in large urban settings might be expected to encourage integration. But one of the more remarkable features of urban ethnic conflict is the way that group boundaries have been preserved in the context of thousands of individual choices and life histories. Part of the explanation of course is the cultural and behavioural baggage that people bring to cities with them – histories, belief systems and languages being the main ones. Further differences may develop within the urban context, as additional group memories are accumulated. The multi-cultural cities of north America have in the main been characterised by patterns of "neighbourhood succession" over the past century or more, whereby ethnic communities have tended to move onwards and upwards, leaving their old neighbourhoods, with relatively little sentimentality or struggle, to incoming groups. In contested cities this is less

likely to happen, because neighbourhoods and landmarks acquire symbolic significance. In contemporary Northern Ireland, for instance, Protestants have clung tenaciously to tiny urban enclaves within what has become Catholic territory (Bollens, 2000). Even in the extreme case of Jerusalem, however, where many sites do indeed have long-standing historic significance, circumstantial as well as primordial factors have played an important role in establishing their contemporary salience. The Western Wall may have a 3000-year history, but since 1967 it has become a very different monument (Dumper, 1997; Wasserstein, 2001). In Montreal the municipal government has shifted the cultural centre of gravity in the city by sponsoring major public building in the eastern, French half of the city centre. Italian nationalists in Habsburg Trieste rejoiced when new road tunnels exposed the more Slavonic parts of the city to urban *italianitá*. Later they destroyed the Slovene National House and, as with the dominant Protestants in Belfast, would permit opposition cultural manifestations only in back streets and out-of-the-way neighbourhoods.

We also need to explore ways in which ethnic boundaries have resisted or succumbed to erosion as a result of individual choices. Language difference may, at first sight, appear to be an important and objective ethnic boundary marker. But in many of the cases studied there is evidence of a local dialect or *patois* with a high level of cross-communal currency. The *triestino, brusseleir*, Alsatian and Kaszubian dialects are some examples. More commonly, there have been long periods of time in many contested cities where the process of "language shift" has operated, driven by urbanization and social mobility. In such cases it was widely accepted that certain public activities would be conducted in one language, whereas private and domestic activities might be conducted in another. It was to discourage this that in Strasbourg after 1945 the French government famously ran a billboard campaign proclaiming that "C'est chic de parler français" (Gardner-Chloros, 1991). In cities like Trieste, Brussels, Montreal and

Danzig it was accepted that upward social mobility required members of minority groups to shift to the dominant language. It normally took a significant increase in the number of upwardly mobile migrants to reverse such a trend. If this point were reached, culturally focused nationalism would typically assert the equality – or often the superiority – of the non-dominant language. Language difference is, therefore, a rather less objective indicator of ethnic difference than might at first appear to be the case. Language shift and language maintenance are often communal strategies, the development or rejection of which has been determined by circumstances. Language difference has to develop an ideological underpinning, which it may or may not be able to do, before it can assume ethnic salience.

Religious difference in fact may provide a stronger barrier against erosion of ethnic difference by, for instance, reducing the likelihood of widespread intermarriage and strengthening pressure for separate schooling. It may strengthen this barrier whether the non-dominant group wishes it or not. In Ahmedabad, for example, that portion of the Muslim community which stayed on after the 1947 partition had provoked the exodus of many of their co-religionists to Pakistan, accepted, almost by definition, that their future lay as Indian citizens in the Republic of India. In recent years however the ascendancy of Hindu nationalism in Indian and, especially, Gujarati politics together with the deterioration of Indo–Pakistan relations, has meant that Muslims in Ahmedabad and elsewhere have been stigmatized as disloyal or as terrorists (www.geocities.com).

The Impact of Urbanism

What is the specific impact of the urban *milieu* on ethnic conflicts? Spolsky & Cooper (1991) argue that urbanization promotes both linguistic diversity and linguistic uniformity. Cities attract an ever-widening ethnic mix of peoples, as travel becomes easier and cheaper. Within the city occupational specialization and social stratification are greater, and so permit more linguistic diversity. Historically many

of the professions and trades of Ahmedabad were specific to either Muslims or Hindus so that the segregation of neighborhoods by occupation, which was typical of many Indian cities, in practice also came to mean *ethnic* segregation (www.boloji.com). On the other hand the urban environment puts people in closer physical proximity to others, while the extension of state and municipal activity encourages uniformity of language through education and other public services. There is a tension between the need to communicate, which pulls towards linguistic unification, and the instinct to protect sub-group identities, which tends to sustain ethnic languages and religions. Proximity does not necessarily help to improve ethnic relations. When the peasants come to the city or move into a new occupational stratum in sufficient numbers, they may be able to reverse or, if they are of the other persuasion, reinforce its patterns of ethnic supremacy. Where this does not happen they often send an enhanced ethnic awareness back to a rural homeland where ethnic identity was previously unchallenged and therefore taken for granted. A striking number of leaders of the Irish revolution of 1916-22, for example, including IRA leader Michael Collins, worked in white-collar jobs in Dublin or London, but hailed from peasant backgrounds in the ethnically homogeneous southwest of Ireland. An attitude survey conducted in the province of Quebec during the 1970s found that young Francophones in bilingual Hull, immediately across the river from Ottawa and therefore very close to Anglophone Ontario, had a considerably higher level of contact with English-language culture but a considerably less favorable opinion of Anglophones than did an equivalent group in Quebec City, deep in the heart of unilingual French Quebec (Laponce, 1987). Similarly, the evidence from Northern Ireland suggests that the close proximity of "the other side" in Belfast, relative to the rest of Northern Ireland, has produced more hostile rather than less hostile ethnic relations. On the other hand, what relevant evidence there is from Danzig and from inter-war Trieste suggests that these relatively harsh ethnic regimes, as

well as the more benign one in Brussels, were quite effective in converting incomers to the dominant language, with resistance more likely to be sustainable in outlying suburbs and villages.

The Importance of the Metropole

Since the nineteenth century cultural factors, rather than economic ties, physical geography or the requirements of military strategy, have come to define what western cities regard as their "hinterland." The relationship between contested cities and their hinterlands is important, and often mutually reinforcing. Ethnic groups in the modern world need a metropole, as a center and showpiece for their culture, and as a focus for urbanization. To the extent that urbanization in the modern world is inevitable, an ethnic group without a city is in trouble. Magyar Budapest was the largest center for urban Slovaks at the end of the nineteenth century, as was Italian Trieste for Slovenes: Bratislava and Ljubljana had to be invented – or at least developed – as regional capitals in double-quick time in 1918. In earlier times cities could, almost by definition, be outposts of a different culture, the leading edge of acculturation/assimilation. In some cases this was reversed by demographic pressure: German Prague, Anglo-Irish Dublin and Swedish Helsinki are examples of this. Elsewhere reversal was less straightforward, for reasons of demography, geography or state policy: Slovenes in Trieste were unable to compete demographically. In Danzig and Breslau [now Wroclaw] a combination of demographic and state power prevented any reversal, until it was achieved by massive external intervention in 1945.

In some contexts the ambivalent status of the contested city-metropole has continued. Sometimes it has been regarded as a threat, as the strike-force of the dominant culture, thereby generating an anti-urban ethos within the non-dominant community. In other contexts the metropole has been seen as a prize to be "captured" or "regained." In the case of Brussels – majority Dutch-speaking in 1850 but very predominantly French-speaking by 1950 – the nationalist movement of Flanders has been

determined not to relinquish its aspiration for linguistic reclamation, partly because of the city's Flemish past and partly because of its modern importance. This, notwithstanding the fact that alternative, if more modest, metropoles such as Antwerp were already in Flemish possession. Until half a century ago Quebec nationalism tended to reject urbanism altogether as an anglicizing and corrupting influence, but in the past half-century it has shown great determination to extend the French face of Montreal. Likewise, Palestinian nationalism will not give up its claim to some part of Jerusalem, because it has no alternative metropole available to it. Israel on the other hand, although it also has the considerably larger Jewish metropole of Tel Aviv, is not willing to concede any part of Jerusalem, because of its immense symbolic significance. Belfast's existence as a Protestant citadel has been of very great importance, both in the development of an Ulster Protestant sense of identity and in the practical sense that the British state has been unwilling to risk overruling the wishes of the majority in such a volatile city. Had the British Liberal Government in 1914, for instance, had confidence in its ability to impose home rule for Ireland without creating a blood bath in Belfast, there can be little doubt that home rule would have been implemented and a separate "Northern Ireland" would never have come into existence.

Modes of Resistance

What defense mechanisms do non-dominant groups develop in such contexts? Where prospects for the non-dominant group appear poor, a quietist strategy has been common. In French Montreal it was *la survivance*, for two centuries down to 1960; in Arab Palestine it was *sumud* ("steadfastness"), until the emergence of a more modern form of nationalism in the mid-1960s; the Belfast novelist Joseph Tomelty wrote in 1953 of "the awful fatalism of the Falls Road," the city's main Catholic neighborhood; the opportunistic ethnic identity of Jan Bronski in Gunter Grass's classic novel *The Tin Drum* (1959) is a similar response. In rural Flanders and in rural

Ireland in the late nineteenth century similarly stoic values, opposed to both emigration and urbanism, were urged, especially by the Catholic Church. In Brussels, the city-born Flemish working class was remarkably quiescent until galvanized by incomers from Flanders in the post-1945 era.

In Ahmedabad the quietist approach adopted by the dwindling Muslim minority after 1947 was not enough to divert the Hindu militancy which had been stimulated by issues originating elsewhere. The demolition in 1992 of a mosque at Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh, by a mob that believed it to be the site of an ancient Hindu temple has provoked violent conflicts in northern India ever since, including the attack on a trainload of Hindus returning from Ayodhya in 2002. Although this lethal incident occurred 75 miles from Ahmedabad it provoked massive anti-Muslim riots in the city. Smaller Muslim neighborhoods were overwhelmed and, as in Belfast in 1920-22 and 1969-71, the outcome has been a substantial intensification of ethnic segregation. The Belfast experience suggests that such experience creates a "ratchet effect," whereby segregation levels stabilize between bouts of acute conflict but seldom decline, so that the long-term segregation trend is always upwards. Again as in contemporary Belfast, there is a tendency for the non-dominant minority – Catholic or Muslim – to concentrate in parts of the older inner-city districts while the more powerful Protestant or Hindu group seeks security in newer suburbs.

Language shift has occurred on a significant scale in many contexts. David Laitin (1997) has made an interesting distinction between total dominance or "language hegemony," and the more limited "language standardisation/rationalisation." He suggests that the latter is quite commonly achieved, but without full hegemony the possibility of a reversal remains, as happened in both Prague and Helsinki in the later nineteenth-century. In the Brussels case it has been suggested that the similarity of the Brabant dialect of Dutch to Belgian French, coupled with the gap between the Flemish dialects and standard Dutch, means that upwardly-mobile Flemings in Brussels have found it easier to replace their local dialect with a standard form of French rather than standard Dutch. Probably the truth has less to do with such linguistic technicalities than with the fact that aspiring, upwardly mobile Brussels Flemings, at least before the mid-twentieth century, were simply more exposed to standard French than to standard Dutch. In Brussels it was the power, initially, of the central state – under popular pressure from Flanders – that created a framework for reversing the decline of Dutch in the city. In Quebec, provincial government has brought about a remarkable and apparently lasting transformation of ethnolinguistic trends in Montreal. Israeli central government has made control of the united city of Jerusalem a symbol of its authority. Along the German-Slav interface the retention of Danzig's (and Breslau's) Germanness in the late nineteenth century, at a time when Austrian-ruled cities like Prague were becoming increasing non-German in ethos, owed much to the authoritarian nationalist style of government emanating from Berlin, in contrast to the multi-national approach that emanated from Habsburg Vienna.

The harshest state approach to education policy, apart from the open brutality of the Fascist era, has been that of the German state in Danzig and elsewhere at the end of the nineteenth century, when German instruction was made compulsory and Polish banned throughout the school system. More frequently, dominant regimes have aimed simply to restrict minority education provision to elementary level and to rural areas. This arises from their vision of the city as an assimilative organ: rural people in minority areas might be permitted to obtain elementary education in their own language, but that should be the limit of concession. Where minority-language education did penetrate the city it tended to be restricted to minority suburban areas, as in Trieste. Where minority languages *have* thrived in the urban context, religious difference, especially Catholicism, has often been the key factor. Even where language difference has been salient, as with French in Montreal, it has in fact been *religious* difference and the existence of a Catholic Church organisational structure that has preserved separate

French-language education. Higher education in minority languages has tended to be resisted as potentially creating a channel which would perpetuate the non-assimilation of the elite of the non-dominant community, frequently cloaked in arguments about the minority language being of "inferior cultural value."

Where a city's division is an ethnolinguistic one, language laws have been used to reinforce or reverse patterns of language usage. Sometimes this is a matter of power and pride, where people who can perfectly well understand one language demand to be dealt with in another. But in other contexts it is a more serious matter of people not understanding what is said to them in hospitals, in government offices or in the armed forces. During the first half-century of its existence the Belgian state gave legal backing to the status of French as the sole official language of the country, even though the Flemings were a majority in the Belgian population. In the twentieth century, essentially since the extension of the franchise and the beginnings of Flanders' economic revival, language legislation in Belgium has worked in the opposite direction, to support and defend Dutch. In this, and in other cases, it is important to note the distinction between law and practice: many Belgian language laws were not effectively enforced by the state prior to the 1960s; in Helsinki language laws concerning the right to use Swedish in dealings with public services exist, but in the current social context many Swedes take the pragmatic view that their command of Finnish is likely to be better than officials' command of Swedish. Some language rights are therefore unasserted in Finland, where the issue may be losing its salience. In Montreal, on the other hand, social processes that favored English have been reversed since the mid-1970s by tough enforcement of language laws. In summary therefore, the role of the state has been a mixed one. In some contexts the regional state, especially, has made a powerful difference. In others it has been less effective, or has simple reinforced – or been superseded by – informal social processes.

International Forces

In cities such as Danzig/Gdansk and Breslau/Wroclaw social processes and state policies have counted for nothing in the face of massive international upheaval. Likewise Thessaloniki, an Ottoman city for many centuries, became Greek in 1912-13 as an outcome of the Balkan wars, even though no more than a quarter of the population was Greek. Short of genocide – which of course brutally and tragically ended the Jewish presence in many European cities – expulsion is the harshest means of attempting to resolve contested city issues. Had Slovene and Croat migration into late-nineteenth-century Trieste been both greater in volume and more resistant to *italianitá* at an earlier stage, *and* had the Italian Fascist state not then had more than two decades to reinforce *italianitá* by harsh measures, Trieste might have been a more plausibly Slav city during the weeks when Tito controlled it in 1945. It is possible that the western allies would then have been less determined to keep the city out of Yugoslavia (and later to take it into Italy) than they in fact were. Even though the Muslim minority of Ahmedabad no longer seeks to challenge the city's national status, international relations between India and Pakistan play a significant part in sustaining an acute level of ethnic conflict.

Summary

An historical case-study approach has been adopted here in order to bring out fully the differences as well as the similarities that exist between different examples of the phenomena being studied. This paper has set out to analyze the various factors which may affect the development of contested cities, using the broad themes of international intervention, various levels of state intervention, and a wider range of demographic, economic, social and cultural activities which have been summarized as social processes. If there is one central conclusion from these studies it is that socio-economic determinism and what used to be called "the uniqueness of the historical event" are not alternatives, but partners in a constantly changing

relationship. The social processes that are apparent in all these studies work in very similar ways, and are central to our understanding of historical change. In each case, however, there are factors – whether of location, human agency or chance – which interact with these processes to produce a particular and distinct outcome. ■

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