Difference and Sameness as Modes of Integration
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Difference and Sameness as Modes of Integration
Anthropological Perspectives on Ethnicity and Religion

Edited by Günther Schlee and Alexander Horstmann
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Introduction

Difference and Sameness as Modes of Integration

Günther Schlee

Some Research Questions

Refugees from war zones, forced migration for economic reasons, ecological disasters and the globalization of production chains, finance and trade, have led to a phenomenon, most prevalent in large cities, that is no longer called diversity but ‘superdiversity’ (Vertovec 2007). Political responses vary from the celebration of diversity to xenophobic backlash and the justification of violent attacks against migrants. Intermediate positions are frequent. Immigration and the resulting diversity are described in ambiguous terms and regarded as a cause of worry. With how much diversity can a ‘host’ society cope?

Many states in Africa and Asia, which have not gone through the homogenization processes characterizing (to varying degrees) historical developments in Western European nation-states, have mottos such as ‘unity in diversity’; and, in attempts to achieve this goal, they experiment with various models of federalism. These examples also ensure that the question of when and how integration depends on sameness, or when and how it requires difference or a combination of both will remain on the table for some time. As such questions play a role in many violent conflicts, they are matters not just of academic interest but of life and death.

In discussing modes of societal integration from different continents and historical periods, contributors to this volume describe social orders that are based on diversity, rather than merely tolerating or coping with it. However, other forms of integration require assimilation resulting in sameness along a core dimension of social identity, or so their proponents claim.

The theme of coming to terms with diversity looms large in discourses of day-to-day politics (e.g. debates about the integration of refugee, ‘parallel cultures’,
secularism and politicized religion); but it also has a philosophical dimension, or implications for our ideas about being human and about the conditions required for realizing our full human potential. Do we have innate mechanisms for recognizing strangers and rejecting or mistrusting them? Are monolingualism, consistent systems of values and cultural homogeneity the best conditions for our intellectual and emotional development? Or are we adapted to diversity from the earliest stages of the development of our species onwards? According to Levinson (2006), we have an ‘interaction engine’. When we meet speakers of another language or people who use signs other than speech, such as the hearing-impaired, we start looking for clues for decoding communicative behaviour immediately, and, if we do not find a code, we develop one spontaneously through interaction. Large states with just one national language seem to be exceptional, when viewed on a larger historical scale. In rural Africa, even illiterate people tend to speak a handful of languages, which may even be unrelated to one another. This may be closer to the normal state of humankind. Why else should we all have the capacity to learn more than one language? The environment in response to which such a capacity developed must have been polyglot. How has this problem been dealt with so far?

Somewhat paradoxically, both difference and sameness are frequently used to explain societal cohesion and forms of political integration. Much has been written about the often violent homogenization processes that led to the emergence of modern nation-states, starting in Europe. In the classic example, France, religious minorities like the Albigensians and the Huguenots had to be massacred or expelled, because they impeded attempts to create a homogeneous nation by religious criteria. Even in the nineteenth century, the transformation of ‘Peasants into Frenchmen’ (Weber 1976) was still underway, and the homogenization massacres of the twentieth century may trump even the forced conversions and burnings at the stake of suspected dissenters in the early modern period. Some modern nation-states have come into being through unification, that is, by integrating smaller units into a larger whole, while others have come into being through the disintegration of larger entities. Irrespective of these different histories, however, modern nation-states seem to require a higher degree of cultural sameness than other political entities, including some of earlier periods.

The kind of homogeneity that is required by the homogenizing agency changes from place to place and from one historical period to another. Religious prosecution of ‘heretics’ has, of course, a long tradition in Europe and beyond; and, later, unifying the language was an important part of the ‘nation’ state project. Some of us might recall their grandparents telling stories about how they were beaten at school for speaking Breton or Low German or some other language that had not made it to an official status. However, homogenization of some traits combines easily with differentiation of other traits. For example, people who have the idea that they and their co-citizens should all adhere to the
same religion and speak the same language might still advocate strongly differentiated gender roles. In fact, these convictions seem to combine frequently in conservative mind sets. Whatever the content of homogenizing efforts, however, all homogenizing policies seem to share one general point: that, for successful integration, the people to be integrated need to be the same along important lines of classification.

It should be noted that the concept ‘integration’ in this volume, especially in combination with adjectives like ‘successful’ (which have a normative ring: one should be integrated, one should integrate oneself), is sociocentric. It takes up a political discourse and a sociological perspective (in asking ‘what keeps society together?’). We should not forget that, for many people who are not regarded as well integrated by others, this lack of integration is no problem at all. Some people love to sit alone in their gardens, others prefer a dog for company, and yet others spend their days and nights in front of a computer screen, communicating, but with whom? Real people, invented persons, machines? In this volume, the focus is not on individual psychological configurations, and we do not adopt a normative perspective on integration. It is not a ‘must’ to integrate into your local community, or any other community, if you are happy otherwise. It is not even a ‘must’ to be happy. We take up a political and a sociological discourse on integration, and our discussion remains immanent to the social domain, although we are well aware that one can look at human beings from many other perspectives than sociocentric and sociological ones.

In comparative perspective, Alexander Horstmann and I theorized some time ago (Horstmann and Schlee 2001) that a principle diametrically opposed to assimilation and homogenization, namely ‘integration through difference’, has obvious advantages, such as the reduction of competition. There seem to be conditions under which ethnically heterogeneous societies and political units can be internally peaceful and remain relatively stable over long periods of time.

There is a great deal of variation: in the recent processes of globalization of the nation-state model, some nation-states have incorporated significant levels of ethnic heterogeneity, while others have remained fairly homogeneous or, as late-comers among nation-states, are still struggling to achieve a higher degree of national unity along cultural lines.

While nation-states show great variation in their degree of ethnic heterogeneity, empires are always ethnically heterogeneous. In fact, ethnic heterogeneity is intrinsic to empires, in contrast to nation-states. I cannot really think of an empire with no ethnic or ethnicized distinction, at least between the rulers and the ruled; and very often empires comprise great ethnic diversity, which they tend to use for organizational purposes. Generally, the examination of different kinds of reasoning about sameness – or identity – and difference is the key to studying various forms of social and political integration, and this approach seems especially fitting in the comparative study of empires.
Theories that stress the importance of difference for social cohesion or systemic integration² implicitly or explicitly assume that sameness has disruptive effects, while those ascribing an integrative value to sameness assume the same disruptive effects for difference. We can thus arrange the arguments in a four-field table, with ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ on one axis and their integrative value (‘good’ or ‘bad’ for integration) on the other.

The alphabetical order of the capital letters in the four fields, which proceeds counter-clockwise, does not have a deeper meaning. It just produces a kind of table of contents for the subsequent pages, i.e. it reflects the order of the following subchapters. In viewing this four-field table, one should keep in mind that, according to what has just been explained, some pairs of types are not mutually exclusive. A and C could have been collapsed into one, because people who think that sameness is good for integration also tend to think that difference is bad for it. A similar argument can be made about B and D. Still, many popular convictions stress one aspect or the other (e.g. they stress how bad differences are, without concluding that uniformity should be sought). Therefore, for present purposes, it makes sense to distinguish four different types of theory.

In the following, I consider popular assumptions in the same way as scholarly theories. When I mention those who have proposed sociological theories, I risk doing injustice to them by simplifying their positions. Durkheim, for example, has produced an extensive oeuvre rich in inspiration, and there is extensive secondary literature about him. If, here, I merely allude to his distinction between ‘mechanical’ and ‘organic solidarity’ (Durkheim 1998 [1893]), I am attempting neither to claim originality nor to do justice to Durkheim. I just do what most authors do when they refer to Durkheim, that is, I cite only those aspects of his works that seem useful with regard to my themes. My aim, in the following paragraphs, is not to make a contribution to the history of sociology or anthropology. All I want to achieve is a typology of arguments. In this typology, one can also include the perceptions of scholarly theories by a wider readership (i.e. vulgarizations of those theories) or any ideas that people have about sameness or difference, and their significance for integration, irrespective of the origin of these ideas. After an overview of such ideas, we shall ask ourselves how to move on from there.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Good for integration</th>
<th>Bad for integration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sameness</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 0.1 Four-field table
Sameness as a Mode of Integration (A)

Examples that fit into field A of our graph abound. That people need to become like us in order to belong to us is so widespread an assumption that one could easily fill a book by listing its occurrences. In the field of sociological theories, those concerning ‘assimilation’ and ‘acculturation’ find their place here (Park 1930; Redfield, Linton and Herskovits 1936). Similarly, theories of socialization seek to explain how young people learn a culture, that is, the norms and values of their seniors and peers, whom they then come to resemble. The concept of culture itself seems to imply internal homogeneity and external distinction, and that is what sceptics criticize. In one definition, culture is the sum of what one needs to learn to become a competent member of a particular group, the bearers of that culture. Note that ‘culture’ in this sentence is used in two slightly different senses. In its first occurrence, it refers to a kind of competence, namely acquired knowledge and skills, as distinct from the genetically inherited ones (or the learned, rather than the genetic, components of complex forms of behaviour); and, in its second occurrence, it is the defining criterion of a bounded group of people, ‘a’ culture. Where there is one culture there are also many cultures, and that is where the critics come in. Many people dislike the conception of cultures as distinct, quantifiable units, and there are good arguments for this critical position. Nevertheless, many critics of ‘culture(s)’, in this sense, find the term hard to avoid.

What is uncontested is that sharing a ‘culture’ presupposes the acquisition of a form of sameness, including ways of organizing difference. (A simple example for sameness in the organization of difference would be that an uncle is different, even maintaining a different structural position from his nephew, but the two might share a way of organizing their difference, i.e. ideas about how uncles should treat nephews and vice versa.) You acquire culture by learning⁴ – no problem so far. And then you become like the other bearers of this culture – and here the problems arise, as the singular of the particular, i.e. a specific culture, implies the plurality of bounded units, i.e. cultures, which are hard to pin down in empirical reality.

Cultural relativism,⁴ in its extreme form (which may be a caricature created by its critics), assumes a world of mutually non-comprehensible (‘incommensurable’) but internally homogeneous ‘cultures’. If one were to take this assumption seriously, full humanity would have to be mediated by successful socialization into one such culture, resulting in full membership in it, which would, in turn, entail incomprehension of other cultures. The counter-argument – that one would have to overcome one’s restriction to one such culture (to the extent that such mutually unintelligible cultures exist) in order to become fully human in a more universal sense – is also possible.

If one observes debates in the media about the integration of migrants in (post-)industrial societies, one can distinguish between arguments for the
rejection and the acceptance of migrants. Arguments for rejection stress real or imagined religious or cultural differences. Arguments in favour of immigration often accept a degree of difference, sometimes even valuing it as a potential enrichment of the society in question. Usually, however, arguments in favour of accepting immigrants include requirements that the immigrants become like members of the ‘host’ society in a number of ways. Acquisition of the national language is one such requirement, while others include accepting core values (minimal consensus) such as democracy and tolerance of other groups, or, going beyond that, postulating that people have to identify with and to be proud of a constitutional order that transcends the cultures and religions of particular groups (constitutional patriotism) would be another such requirement. The underlying assumption in all cases is that a degree of sameness is a prerequisite of integration (see Pautz 2005 for a critical review of such a debate, the ‘Leitkultur’ debate in Germany).

**Difference as a Mode of Integration (B)**

The obvious starting point for a discussion of difference and its role in society is Durkheim’s ‘organic solidarity’. He juxtaposes the ‘mechanical’ solidarity of ‘segmentary’ societies with the ‘organic’ solidarity of ‘advanced’ societies. The former is based on similarities or sameness, the latter on differences. While ‘mechanical’ is a metaphor which can be easily traced to physics and technology, both ‘segmentary’ and ‘organic’ are biological metaphors. If you cut a worm in the middle, both halves may crawl away in different directions. The cut may heal; indeed, the products of the cut heal in two separate places as two separate worms recover from a stressful separation. This is possible because a worm consists of segments that are all alike. Each of them contains everything that is essential to wormishness. If you do the same thing with a mammal, with heart and lungs ending up in one half, the guts and the liver in the other, both parts die. The reason for this is that organs do not replace each other; rather, they differ and stand in a complementary relationship to each other. The human body is one of the oldest metaphors (the other one being the ship) for state and society. We use this metaphor constantly. Anthropologists speak of ‘corporate’ groups. ‘Corporations’, ‘corporate America’, the ‘organs’ of the state, the ‘body politic’, et cetera, are very much part of common English. The metaphor was there long before Durkheim, but it is Durkheim’s merit to have spelt it out and thought it through.

The functioning of vital organs is a condition of the survival of complex organisms. Individual organisms are units for selection (though, admittedly, not the only ones) and healthy organisms characterized by a well ‘organized’ interplay of organs live longer and have more offspring than those whose internal interplay does not unroll so smoothly. The evolution of complex organisms, which in spite
of their complexity function remarkably well, is therefore not a surprise from an evolutionary perspective. Humility, of course, demands that we acknowledge immediately that many things in the biosphere are still far beyond human engineering capacities and that admiration and curiosity are the appropriate attitudes toward our fellow organisms. What I mean to say is that, in principle, the emergence of complex forms does not present a problem to the evolutionary paradigm. (As long, of course, as the complex forms have some advantage for survival and reproduction. Comparison between organisms living at the same time shows that simple forms may also do quite well and sometimes live on while complex organisms go extinct.) As entire organisms are units of selection, the functionality of each single organ in the context of the whole becomes an adaptive feature and enhances fitness (in the biological sense of number of surviving progeny). Selection here favours functionality. As we transfer the concepts of ‘part’, ‘whole’ and ‘functions’ to society, however, they very soon turn out to be quite problematic. What is the whole? Of what is a part a part? Why should a part care about being functional for the whole? Or, if no intentions are involved, by which mechanism is this achieved? What is the unit of selection in the evolution of society or societies?

Durkheim’s position may be called ‘proto-functionalist’ or ‘functionalist avant la lettre’. It is an answer to the question ‘what keeps society together?’ This may appear to be a difficult question, but it is not as difficult as the next one. The more difficult question is ‘how did that, which keeps society together, come about?’ Whatever it is that causes societal cohesion, it must have evolved. Have societies with more cohesion survived while the ones with more disruptive internal dynamics have ceased to exist? Has cohesion, whatever its mechanisms are, evolved through variation and selection among distinct societies? Apart from being loaded with the burden of having to define what ‘a society’ is and which ‘societies’ present different cases and units of selection, there are other reasons not to pursue this type of question.

So far all answers to this question, which takes entire systems as its starting point, have been unsatisfactory. To base an evolutionary model of cultural development on system selection is not very convincing because such processes would require enormous periods of time.

In the 1970s, ecologically oriented neo-functionalists tried to explain the functional interplay internal to ‘cultures’ and ‘societies’ by system selection. Their theory implied the following: those social orders that did not work well have disappeared. Members of the surviving societies are not aware of the functional aspects of their beliefs and practices. If they had been, this might even have been detrimental. A morality based on religion only works if people believe in religion and not just in its instrumentalities or functionality. People who explain religion by saying that it is good for society if people (preferably others) believe in it might not be the strongest believers and strongest holders of religion based moralities.