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THE 'NARCISSISM OF MINOR DIFFERENCES'-THEORY: CAN IT EXPLAIN ETHNIC CONFLICT?

Abstract: *In many ethnic conflicts and civil wars in the 20th century the cultural differences between the warring groups were very small. The bloody conflicts between Serbs, Croatians, and Bosnians during the breakup of Yugoslavia are a case in point. This observation has led some commentators to conclude that a lack of objective cultural markers between groups may itself be conducive to violence: When the members of two groups are difficult to tell apart, violence is inserted in order to create identity boundaries between them.*

One particular version of this theory goes under the name 'narcissism of minor differences'. This expression goes back to Sigmund Freud, who applied it both to individual psychology and in his philosophy of culture. The notion has been largely ignored by practicing psychotherapists, but over the last decades, however, it has been discovered by journalists and social scientists and applied to cases of collective rather than individual violence. The present article examines some of the articles and books that expound the 'the narcissism of minor differences'-concept in order to assess the explanatory strength and weaknesses of this theory.

Kay words*: 'Narcissism of minor differences'; ethnic conflict*; *cultural differences*; *violence*; *identity boundaries; psychology*; *philosophy of culture.*

In 1993 American political scientist Samuel Huntington published his famous article on 'The clash of civilizations?' in which he insisted that the most serious conflicts in the coming era will be between groups that are radically different from each other in terms of language, religion and culture (Huntington 1993). One might say Huntington was rather unfortunate with the timing as the next major conflict, reaching genocidal proportions, took place in Rwanda one year later between two groups that were generally regarded as extremely similar. The Hutu and the Tutsi are both Christian peoples, speak the same language and had lived intermingled for centuries in the same country. They intermarried and shared the same social and political culture. The main differences between them were their

body height and traditional economy – agriculture vs. livestock breeding. Based on these differences their colonial masters in the early 20th century separated them into two distinct ethnic groups (Gourevitch 1998: 47-55; Mann 2005: 432-34), but often it was impossible to tell a Hutu from a Tutsi by their appearance, you had to know who was what.

If Huntington's theory was wrong, perhaps the opposite claim is correct? In other words, a high degree of *similarities* between two groups predisposes them for conflict? For instance, the violent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia — the most massive killings in Europe since World War II — pitted against each other peoples that shared a lot of common cultural traits (Wachtel 1998). To be sure, Samuel Huntington would interpret this as a case of civilizational clash since the Serbs, the Croats, and the Bosnians adhere to three different religions. Indeed they do, but this fact can easily be misinterpreted. In the communist period, Yugoslavia had undergone considerable secularization, and for most Yugoslavs religious affiliation did not indicate which house of worship they themselves went to, but rather which religion their parents or grandparents had practiced. Moreover, the Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians spoke the same language, looked alike, dressed alike, watched the same movies, listened to the same music, and basically ate the same food. To be sure, some dishes were regarded as 'traditionally Bosnian' or 'typically Serbian', but members of all groups could well relish the food of all the other nations.

If one starts to look for cases of genocide and other forms of extreme violence involving groups with virtually the same cultural background, phenotypical similarities, and identical language, it is surprising how much one can come up with. Let me remind you of just a few. It has often been commented that Somalia is one of the few — if not the only — African country whose population is monoethnic, but this did not prevent it from descending into an inferno of internecine killings in the 1990s. Furthermore, no-one would characterize the civil wars in Zaire/Congo in the 1990s – involving millions of deaths – as a case of civilizational clash. There were no doubt tribal differences among the warring parties in the Congolese wars, but these differences did not straddle any racial or religious barrier.

In fact, one might include even the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jewish race on this list of genocides where the victims were

very similar to the perpetrators. To be sure, the Holocaust involved a clear-cut case of religious differences – Gentiles vs. Jews and most of the East European Jews exterminated by the Nazis had a lifestyle and culture very different from their executioners. Even so, it was the Nazis' encounter with highly urbanized and assimilated Jews in Germany and Austria that imbued them with their determination to kill as many Jews as possible. These German-speaking Jews often went to extreme lengths to adopt to the cultural practices of their 'indigenous' German neighbors. Many even brought a pine tree adorned with candle lights and colored glass balls into their living rooms during Hanukkah, or 'Weihnukkah', as it was sometimes derisively called. Moreover, their German was so impeccable that, as was the case with the Hutus and the Tutsis, it would have been impossible to use 'the Shibboleth criterion' to distinguish them from their German neighbours. They would love Goethe and Schiller just as much as they loved Heine, and probably prefer Beethoven to Mendelssohn.

Can we from these observations extract a general theory of cultural closeness leading to hostility and conflict between similar groups? Intrigued by this question I started to look for traces of such theories and came across the concept of 'narcissism of minor differences' (or NMD for short). As one might expect, it emanates from the writings of Sigmund Freud who returned to it on three different occasions, each time adding a new dimension to it. The concept originally stemmed from his observations of clients during psychotherapy, and hence referred to *individual* psychological disorder. Later Freud employed it also in his cultural analysis of European civilization and applied it to relations between ethnic and national *groups*.

According to Alvin Burstein the paradoxical claim that internecine conflict is especially related to small differences is not only broadly accepted, but often presented as an indisputable given. (Burstein 1999: 1) Some scholars who refer to the 'narcissism of minor differences'-concept do so without further commentary as if the term were self-explanatory (and sometimes use it quite out of context, see e.g. Horowitz and Matthews 1997). A few authors, however, have discussed the concept in some depth, and some make rather strong assertions on behalf of it. David Werman (1998: 457) for instance, claims that 'the narcissism of minor differences has a malignant potential to erupt in vast bloodbaths which have even

reached the level of genocide'. Watts (2001: 90) maintains that 'the narcissistic construal of minor as major […] is so often attached to what one might call a "drive to extinction" by a compelling need to eliminate and extinguish the other'. Watts uses this theory to explain excessive state reactions to local conflicts in Nigeria. More articles that employ this theory will be presented below. But let us first turn to the origin of the concept and see what Freud himself had to say on the matter.

Freud' concept of narcissism of minor difference

In Greek mythology, as will be recalled, Narcissus was a vain and beautiful hero whom the goddess Nemesis condemned to fall in love with his own image as reflected in a pond. Freud therefore used the term 'narcissism' as an expression of morbid self-love. By 'Narcissism of minor difference', then, Freud originally meant a special kind a morbid self-love that builds upon an exaggerated notion of how the person differs from people around him/her. When he applied it also to relations among groups, the term suggested that group members embrace their group with an excessive love because they see it as radically different from other groups, a claim that an outside observer would regard as spurious.

Freud first used the term 'narcissism of minor difference' in *The Taboo of Virginity* (1917). Here he built on an idea he allegedly had found in the writings of the British anthropologist Ernest Crawley:

> Crawley, in language which differs only slightly from the current terminology of psycho-analysis, declares that each individual is separated from others by a 'taboo of personal isolation', and that it is precisely the minor differences in people who are otherwise alike that form the basis of feelings of strangeness and hostility between them. It would be tempting to pursue this idea and to derive from this 'narcissism of minor differences' the hostility which in every human relationship we see fighting successfully against feelings of fellowship and overpowering the commandment that all men should love one another.(Freud 1917:199)

Burstein (1999:2) points out that Freud misquoted Crawley who had maintained that not only minor differences but *all* differences are problematic. In order to find the roots of the NMD idea, therefore, we don't have to go back to Crawley, but may stop at Freud.

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) Freud developed this concept somewhat further and applied it to attitudes between nations and between regional groups within nations. 'Closely related races keep one another at arm's length; the South German can not endure the North German, the Englishman casts every kind of aspersion on the Scot, the Spaniard despises the Portuguese.' However, in this book Freud did not claim that minor differences are *more* prone to lead to animosity and conflict than big ones. On the contrary, he immediately went on to suggest that greater differences may cause *even greater* hostility among groups: 'We are no longer astonished that greater differences should lead to almost insuperable repugnance, such as the Gallic people feel for the German, the Aryan for the Semite, and the white races for the colored.' (Freud 1921: 101)

The third and last time Freud referred to the term 'narcissism of minor difference' is in his controversial but highly influential book *Civilization and its Discontents.* Here he stated that

> It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness. I once discussed the phenomenon that it is precisely communities with adjoining territories, and related to each other as well, that are engaged in constant feuds and in ridiculing each other—like the Spaniards and the Portuguese, for instance, the North Germans and the South Germans, the English and the Scots and so on. I gave this phenomenon the name of the 'narcissism of minor differences' a name that does not do much to explain it. We can now see that it is a convenient and relatively harmless satisfaction of the inclination to aggression, by means of which cohesion between the members of the community is made easier. (Freud 1930: 114)

Here Freud clearly shows the main sociological function of NMD as he sees it: it increases cohesion within the group by directing aggression towards outsiders.

Civilization and its Discontents is based on a most pessimistic perception of human nature. Man is inherently an asocial and aggressive animal, and the purpose of civilization (or 'Kultur' as Freud called it in German) is to tame our aggressive inclinations and enable us to 'live and let live' rather than annihilate each other. The instinct of aggression cannot be entirely extinguished, but the remnants of it that civilization is unable to suppress, may be directed towards human beings beyond the pale. In that way aggression is prevented from tearing the group apart. As an example of how this is done, Freud sardonically remarked that the Jews throughout history 'have rendered most useful services to the civilizations of the countries that have been their hosts' (ibid.).

The above quotations represents the entire corpus of Freud's writings on NMD. The idea was never developed into a full-fledged theory, but remained a few scattered and isolated remarks that left a number of questions unanswered. For instance, on what level in Freud's three-storey structure of man's psyche did he believe that these socio-psychological processes take place: on the level of the subconscious, the consciousness, or in the super-ego? And just as importantly, did he believe that minor differences are able to *cause* animosity and conflicts, or is it only a case of *ex post* rationalization of hostility that exists prior to and independent of differences between individuals and groups? Werman (1988: 452) believes that latter, but how should we then interpret Freud's remark that 'We are no longer astonished that greater differences *should lead to* almost insuperable repugnance' (emphasis added)? And finally, if Freud believed that both big and small differences are related to group formation, wherein lies the specificity of the 'narcissism of *minor* differences'?

Civilization and its Discontents was written only three years before Hitler's rise to power and eight years before Freud had to flee from Germany. To the extent that Freud really saw NMD — including the Europeans' treatment of the Jews — as a 'relatively harmless satisfaction of the inclination to aggression', we might be allowed to see the publication of his book as just as badly timed as Huntington's article. Be that as it may, most later commentators seem to assume that Freud had stumbled across a socio-psychological mechanism that was more powerful than he himself suspected.

Modern usages of the NMD idea

Those who have written about NMD fall roughly into two professional categories: psychoanalysts and social scientists. The contributions of the first group dominated until around 1990-92, that is, until the outbreak of the wars of Yugoslav succession, when sociologists, social anthropologists, and political scientists took over. With their intimate knowledge of Freudianism the psychoanalysts will presumably be best placed to give a correct exegesis of the Freudian scriptures, while the social scientists might have a better insight into the dynamics of ethnic conflicts. Ideally, they may complement each other.

Psychiatrist David Werman notes that practitioners of psychoanalysis have paid relatively little attention to the notion of NMD, in spite of the fact that this phenomenon, he claims, may be observed almost daily in all walks of life. As an example he mentions an episode from his own practice as a psychoanalyst. A middle-aged professor of the humanities entered psychoanalysis due to, *inter alia,* difficulties in relations with his colleagues. 'Dr. M described a heated discussion he had had with one of his colleagues. It was evident that the initial disagreement was not of great importance, but … Dr. M. was not in the least aware of the triviality of the original argument.' (Werman, 1998: 456) Werman concluded that the patient suffered from a narcissism of minor differences.

One can easily sympathize with the doctor's frustration as he had to listen to his patience's outpourings and lack of understanding as to what are the really important issues in life. However, most of us will also no doubt have experienced this situation from the patient's side, for instance when we are trying to explain the importance of our research to an outsider. Sometimes we may be driven to the point of desperation when a layman not only fails to understand the significance of our great scientific undertaking, but even begins to question why society should provide financial support to research that, he alleges, has no relevance for 'the real life'. The point to be made here, then, is simply that what is major and what is minor depends entirely on the perspective, close up or far away. Surprisingly few who have written on NMD seem to have taken on board this elementary insight, most treat 'minor' and 'major' as absolutes. In the body

of literature examined in this article only one author (Michael Ignatieff, see below) acknowledges the relativity of these qualities.

A second psychoanalyst, Vamik Volkan (1986), links Freud's concept of NMD to the psychoanalytical theory of externalization, that is, the unconscious defense mechanism by which individuals project their own internal characteristics, particularly the bad ones, onto the outside world and onto other people. When they later come across a person with these characteristics, they no longer recognize them as their own. According to Volkan, such externalizations help a child attain a more cohesive self-representation and more consistent internalized object representation. 'When kept inside, unmended bad units threaten the integrity of the self, but when put "out there" at a safe distance, and when used for comparison with the good units kept inside, they enhance the sense of the self. Such "bad" suitable targets contain the precursors of *the concept of an enemy* shared by the group'. (Volkan, 1986: 185; emphasis in the original).

To illustrate this theory, Volkan refers to the conflict between Greeks and Turks on Cyprus. Greeks and Turks can distinguish each other at a glance just by noticing such seemingly insignificant details as different brands of cigarettes: Greeks usually prefer to smoke cigarettes in blue and white packages – the Greek national colors – while the Turks smoke cigarettes with *their* national colors – red and white. While this observation is somewhat amusing, it seems to me highly doubtful that such code signaling is what Freud had in mind when he wrote about NMD. These colors codes do not in any way constitute the basis for the identity difference between Greeks and Turks but is only a short-hand way of expressing it. It is no doubt true that the two island groups have a lot of traditions and customs in common, shared features that sometimes also differentiate them from their coethnics on the mainland. At the same time, there are plenty easily observable differences between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots with regard to language and religion, as well as to various cultural codes and culinary traditions related to religion (Yagcioglu 1996). Therefore, the islanders do not really have to take resort to cigarette brands to tell each other apart. We should not confuse 'minor cultural differences' with consciously constructed symbols.

If we then move on to the contributions of social scientists to the NMD debate, we first encounter an article by Turkish political

scientist Türkkaya Ataöv (1998). In a rebuttal to Samuel Huntington Ataöv points out that in today's world there are as many, if not more conflicts within civilizations as there are conflicts between them, for instance in Northern Ireland, Rwanda, and Pakistan. Ataöv also notes that 'the peoples of the newly independent republics of former Soviet Central Asia are largely Muslim and Turkic. Nevertheless, there are conflicts among them due to minor differences' (Ataöv 1998: 5). This is a strong version of the NMD thesis: here Ataöv is saying that the conflicts in Central Asia have arisen not only *in spite of the similarity* between the groups, but *due to* the minor differences between them. However, as he develops his thesis further, he reverses the causal order between conflict and difference:

> The interaction of neighbors may be good example. When relations are pleasant, their desirable parts come to the fore. When disagreements rise, differences get the upper hand, and minor differences are then magnified. Even if there are no minor differences, groups tend to create them. (ibid)

In this example it is clear that the hostility did not *stem* from the minor differences, instead, the conflicts are caused by something else. Members of different groups seize upon the minor differences in order to expand the identity gap between them and justify their mutual hostility. The minor differences, then, enter the picture as *ex post* rationalizations and not as original impetus. If the differences between the groups had been major rather than minor they would no doubt have served the purpose equally well. Ataöv's argument leaves the crucial question unanswered: if conflicts do not stem from (cultural) differences after all, what are they then caused by?

The theoretically most ambitious attempt to elaborate on and expand Freud's NMD notion into a full-fledged theory of conflict has been undertaken by Dutch anthropologist Anton Blok (1998). Blok makes a double claim: first, minor cultural differences are more important than major ones. Civil wars, for instance in Russia and the United States, are usually described as more merciless than other wars. The conflicts in post-Yugoslavia and Rwanda are cited as other examples. Second, not only do minor differences underlie a wide range of conflicts, but also the opposite is true: hierarchy and great differences make for relative stability and peace.

Blok, in a sense, is more Freudian than Freud himself. He believes that when Freud wrote that 'We are no longer astonished that greater differences should lead to almost insuperable repugnance', the great Austrian doctor came very close to undermining his own theory. This sentence, Blok thinks, shows that Freud failed to recognize the importance of his own discovery and reduced its heuristic value (Blok 1998: 35). Blok even suggests that Freud may have misunderstood the quintessence of his own discovery, and he volunteers to rectify this by revealing its true purport.

As it turns out, however, many of the examples Blok cites clearly show that other factors than NMD, such as status anxiety, economic interests, and competition for material resources play a greater role in conflicts than he himself is willing to admit. For instance, he refers to the Burakumin in Japan, a socially discriminated group that has sometimes been compared to the untouchables in India. The Burakumin are ethnically, physiologically, and linguistically indistinguishable from other Japanese but have historically been treated as secondary citizens, or worse. They were confined to the most contemptible professions – butchering and leatherwork – and had to live in separate quarters. This indeed seems to be a clear-cut case of social differentiation based on marginal distinctions. The Burakumin were officially emancipated in 1871 but this did not change the negative attitudes towards them. On the contrary, 'local farmers persecuted the Burakumin for fear of being reduced to the status of these former outcasts' (Blok 1998: 40). Status anxiety, then, is the crux of the matter.

A similar case, also cited by Blok, is anti-Black racism in the American South after the abolition. The most severe persecution, Blok points out, came 'from poor and lower middle class whites…(who) feared being put on par with the former slaves.' (ibid.) Again we see that status anxiety and fear of economic competition are the decisive factors rather than cultural distance *per se*. In any case, the phenotypical differences between poor Whites and poor Blacks in the United States are so evident that it is highly questionable whether this distinction may be regarded as 'minor'.

Blok concludes, quite sensibly, that 'the narcissism of minor differences does not automatically result in violence.'(Blok 1998: 49). In addition to demographic and ecological conditions, which Blok admits will often be very important, he points to the political

context as a critical factor. 'In all cases where a loss of differences resulted in extreme violence we find unstable states.' While Blok, as we saw, faulted Freud for having emasculated his own idea, he himself towards the end of his article makes considerably more modest claims on behalf of NMD than the assertions he started out with.

In an interesting article from 2005 Brett St Louis makes some of the same observations as Blok: status anxiety and fear of economic competition are crucially important when minor differences are socially and politically activated. St Louis discusses conflicts within the Black population in the United States between 'native-borns' and 'foreign-borns'. She starts by relating a minor episode from New York in 2004 when an Ethiopian immigrant was told that he could not benefit from a public health project to educate African Americans on prostate cancer. The project was part of an Affirmative Action program in which the concept of 'African Americans' was understood to mean 'descendants of Black slaves' only. The Ethiopian immigrant therefore did not qualify. That made him wonder: if he was not an African American, what was he then?

As it turns out, around 2 million Blacks in the United States are foreign-born, and together they make up around 5 percent of the total Black population in the country. In New York city, they constituted in 2000 no less than 30 percent. It may seem strange that these immigrants do not identify with native-born Blacks, but in fact many of them do not. Several hypotheses have been put forward to explain why this is the case. Black novelist Toni Morrison has argued that they prefer not to identify racially because they quickly realize that in the USA blackness is firmly positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy (St Louis 2005: 349). But, as the Ethiopian experienced, dissociation is strong in the other direction, too. Those African immigrants that might want to embrace blackness have no guarantee that they will be accepted.

As seen from a non-Black perspective, at least, the squabbles among American Blacks might seem like a textbook case of identity differentiation based on very minor distinctions. Brett St Louis believes that Freud's notion of NMD 'provides a useful framework for understanding the qualitative aspects of this tension between racial sameness and ethnonational difference' (St Louis 2005: 347). In her own approach, however, she relies heavily on an analysis of

socio-economic competition between these groups that owes little to Freud's original idea. The most important explanation for this conflict, as St Louis sees it, is the fear among native-born Blacks that the immigrants may eclipse them socially and on the labor market. In the American Black community there is a widespread perception that the immigrants are aggressive competitors for social resources and opportunities. Statistical data show that foreign-born and native-born Blacks in the USA have very similar income levels, but due to the greater competitiveness and ambitions of the immigrants this may well change. It has for instance been pointed out that two thirds of the Black students at Harvard are either African or Caribbean immigrants or children of African or Caribbean immigrants. Brett St Louis, then, concludes that 'for an analysis of narcissism and differentiation, it is important to address various motivations such as fear, failure, defensiveness, protection and affirmation, as well as material and symbolic processes.' (St Louis 2005: 348)

The author who has done most to familiarize a modern audience with the concept of NMD is no doubt Canadian journalist and war correspondent Michael Ignatieff. Ignatieff has also provided what in my view amounts to the most sober and balanced assessment of Freud's notion. He has, however, presented his ideas in two different versions, a longer and a shorter one (Ignatieff 1998 and Ignatieff 1999). The former contains a number of caveats and nuances that are missing in the latter. This longer version is in many ways more defensible because it tries to defend far less.

An experience four o'clock in the morning in a Serbian command post in Eastern Slavonia in the Serbian-Croatian war in 1993 prompted Ignatieff to explore the Freudian concept of NMD. He had observed that it was very difficult to distinguish between a Croatian and a Serbian by their looks or habits, even for the parties themselves.

> The Serbs and Croats drive the same cars; they've probably worked in the same German factories as gastarbeiters; they long to build exactly the same type of Swiss chalets on the outskirts of town and raise the same vegetables in the same back gardens. Modernization – to use a big, ugly word – has drawn their styles of life together. They have probably more in common than their peasant grandparents did, especially since their grandparents were believers.(Ignatieff 1999: 95)

Ignatieff ask a middle aged Serbian reservist in the command post to explain the difference between a Croat and a Serb. The soldier first gives a very simple answer, 'They smoke Croatian cigarettes while we smoke Serbian ones'. Cigarettes, then, clearly serve the same function as symbolic boundary marker as on Cyprus. However, realizing that his answer is somewhat simplistic, the reservist gives another explanation: 'Those Croats, they think they're better than us. Think they're fancy Europeans and everything. I'll tell you something: We're all just Balkan rubbish'.(Ignatieff 1999: 91-92)

This answer makes the journalist ponder: Firstly, he concludes that identity is relational. A Serb defines himself in relation to Croats and vice versa. Secondly, Ignatieff observes that while globalism brings us closer together, it also drives us apart. It destroys boundaries of identities and frontiers between states, and 'we react by insisting ever more assiduously on the margins of difference that remains... The facts of difference themselves are neutral. It is narcissism that turns difference into a mirror.'(Ignatieff 1999: 96)

Ignatieff formulates the notion of NMD as a paradox: 'the smaller the real differences between two groups, the larger such differences are likely to loom in their imagination.' This, indeed, is what most people would normally understand with the phrase 'narcissism of minor differences'. However, even as Ignatieff writes this sentence, he realizes that it is a claim that does not stand up to closer scrutiny, and hastens to add: 'my use of terminology is suspect, dubious, question-begging – major difference/minor difference; objective versus subjective; real versus imagined; difference as perceived from within versus difference perceived from without.' Ignatieff does not, however, in the shorter article discuss the limitations of his terminology, but those who consult his longer version, will find the discussion there.

Here, Ignatieff first tears apart the insight that identity is relational. To claim that differences are relational, he now concludes, is an empty tautology. It amounts to saying that we are not what we are not. Secondly, he attacks the crucial concept of minor-ness: 'what looks like a minor difference when seen from the outside may feel like a major difference when seen from the inside' (Ignatieff 1998: 50). And indeed, he observes, already Freud himself muddied the distinction between major and minor. As Ignatieff looks at the matter

now, he believes that it is a mistake to assume that some human differences like gender or race are more major than others, for instance than class or ethnicity. Gender and racial differences are minor relative to the overwhelming genetic commonality of mankind, but are major when used as markers of power and status. In this perspective, *power and status* rather than culture are foregrounded. 'No human difference matters much until it becomes a privilege.' (ibid.)

What remains, then, of Freud's original notion? Ignatieff is not prepared to jettison it completely and insists that it helps us to see that 'the level of hostility and intolerance between groups bears no relation to the size of their cultural, historical, or physical differences, as measured by a dispassionate outside observer.' (ibid.) This may very well be correct, but it is neither what most people will associate with the notion of 'narcissism of minor differences' nor what Freud himself meant by it.

As we saw, Anton Blok believed that NMD loses its heuristic potential if the distinction between minor and major differences is blurred. Ignatieff does not agree. He admits that NMD may not *explain* anything, it is not an explanatory theory. Still, it has 'a certain heuristic usefulness'. Its virtue is that it does not take ethnic antagonism as a given. 'It draws our attention to the projective and fantastic quality of ethnic identities, to their particular inauthenticity. It suggests that it is precisely their inauthenticity that triggers violent reactions of defense.' (Ignatieff 1998: 56) It may be the case that Ignatieff reads as much into Freud's idea as out of it. But what he reads into it, is often both well-formulated and thought-provoking.

A Conclusion and a suggestion for an alternative analytical framework

This survey of the available literature on the 'narcissism of minor differences'-concept has led us – or has led me at least– to lower the expectations for the utility of this idea. We have seen that many of the authors who try to make use of it, either are engulfed in inner inconsistencies, or end up by pointing to factors other than NMD as just as important or even more important when they explain particular conflicts. Among such other factors we have encountered status anxiety, power relations, the political context, and economic

competition. Anton Blok is probably wrong when he surmises that Freud failed to develop NMD into an elaborate theory because he did not realize its full potential. A much more likely explanation for the undeveloped state of this idea in Freud's writings is that he recognized its strictly limited usefulness.

The NMD-idea may be challenged on both philosophical, logical, and empirical grounds. Firstly, the very concept of 'minor differences' presupposes that a clearly defined hierarchy of differences made be agreed upon, with big ones on top, medium-sized differences in the middle, and small ones at the bottom. Clearly, this is not possible. As Paul Simon sings, 'one man's ceiling is another man's floor.' But even if we for the sake of the argument accept that such an hierarchy can be identified, we run into almost insurmountable difficulties if we should try to use it empirically. We would soon discover that whichever differences we decide are 'most major' or 'most minor', some massive violent conflicts exhibit many of them while the same differences are more or less absent in other equally serious conflicts. Rwanda is not the only example of genocide in Africa; European colonial powers have killed Africans just as ferociously as Hutus and Tutsis have attacked each other. The extermination of the aborigines in Australia and the Native Americans in the United States are also cases of genocides with 'major' differences between the groups (Mann 2005). Even if Huntington is wrong when he identifies fault lines between civilizations are particularly conflict-prone, we must nevertheless conclude that *some* serious conflicts do indeed unfold along those lines.

Finally, when carried to its logical end point, the strong version of NMD that Ignatieff toys with and rejects but Blok seems to endorse, leads straight into sheer mysticism. If it were true that 'the smaller the real differences between two groups, the larger such differences are likely to loom in their imagination', then differences that are so small that *no-one* is able to detect them, would be the ones most likely to produce conflict. This theory would be a social science version of homeopathy, the quasi-medical theory according to which the power of a chemical ingredient increases the more it is diluted in pure water. While many people believe this to be the case, chemically and medically this is simply impossible.

Where does this leave us? Firstly, we will have to go back to and examine all the other factors other than NMD that the various

authors surveyed here employ as auxiliary explanations, as it were. This list includes all the usual suspects: status anxiety, power relations, the political context, and economic competition. At the same time, like Ignatieff I am reluctant to abandon Freud's idea completely. As we saw, the idea was elaborated in several stages, of which the treatment in *Civilization and its Discontent* was the last one. While Blok maintains that this book 'adds little to what (Freud) already said', I believe that precisely the formulation of the NMD-idea in this text contains some insights of lasting value. It is here that Freud most clearly formulates the idea that the sociological function of NMD is to boost in-group cohesion. Through it aggression is directed outward rather than inward. The notion of a common enemy without enhances the collective identity of the group. This crucial insight anticipates modern identity theory that sees the boundary between groups as the seedbed of identity formation.(see e.g. Barth 1969; Hylland Eriksen 1993)

Behind the question of 'what causes conflicts among groups?' looms the larger question of 'what causes groups to coalesce'? As Rogers Brubaker has pointed out, too much social science literature treats ethnic groups as objective givens, with clearly identifiable boundaries.(Brubaker, 2004) Instead, group-ness is a contested quality, and several conflicting group identities often compete for the allegiance of people who live in the same area. In Yugoslavia this was certainly the case: the notion of Yugoslav-ness existed not only in official rhetoric but was also reflected in the self-understanding of many of the citizens. The notion that the differences among the Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians were minor compared to what they had in common was not only something outsiders told them, but something that many people in the region felt themselves. As Andrew Baruch Wachtel has remarked with particular reference to the Yugoslav conflicts, 'No matter how similar a group of people appears to be on the surface, there is sure to be some level at which differences appears… Conversely, no matter how heterogeneous a group of people might appear to an observer, there is a level at which its members could choose to see each other as belonging to one nation.' (Wachtel 1998: 2)

This means that some conflicts are structured as clashes between two competing identity claims, one of which insists that

certain cultural differences in a certain population are minor, while the other maintains that they are major. In order to understand why some such conflicts turn violent while others do not we must not look for any objectively given differences but for differences in *perceptions and how perceptions are publicly represented*. This means that we much turn our attention to public rhetoric and discourse.

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Pol Kolsto

TEORIJA O 'NARCIZMU MALIH RAZLIKA': MOŽE LI SE NJOME OBJASNITI ETNIČKI KONFLIKT?

Sažetak

U mnogim etničkim konfliktima i građanskim ratovima u XX veku kulturne razlike između sukobljenih strana su bile veoma male. Krvavi sukobi Srba, Hrvata i Bošnjaka tokom raspada Jugoslavije su jedan takav slučaj. Ovaj uvid je neke istraživače vodio zaključku da nedostatak objektivnih kulturnih markera između grupa može pogodovati izbijanju nasilja: kada se članovi dve grupe teško razlikuju, pribegava se nasilju da bi se stvorile identitetske granice među njima. Jedna posebna verzija ove teorije poznata je pod imenom 'narcizam malih razlika'. Taj izraz potiče od Sigmunda Frojda koji ga je primenjivao kako u individualnoj psihologiji, tako i u svojoj filozofiji kulture. Ovaj koncept su u velikoj meri ignorisali psihoterapeuti-praktičari, ali su ga tokom poslednjih decenija otkrili novinari i društveni naučnici i više primenjivali u objašnjenju kolektivnog nego individualnog nasilja. U ovom radu ispitani su neke od studija i knjiga u kojima se koristi koncept 'narcizma malih razlika' da bi se ocenila snaga i slabosti te teorije.

Ključne reči: 'Narcizam malih razlika'; etnički sukobi; kulturne razlike; nasilje, identitetske granice; psihologija; filozofija kulture.