



Ethnocentrism, taste and symbolic boundaries

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Abstract

Ethnocentrism is the most important determinant of the rise of the extreme-right in Flanders (Dutch speaking part of Belgium). This article compares the explanatory power of three middle-range theories (deprivation theory, detraditionalization theory and social participation or social capital theory) to the fruitfulness of more specifically cultural approaches that are sensitive to media influence or are based on the concept of symbolic boundaries. The data used were gathered from 6974 pupils and from one of their parents during the school year 1999–2000. Deprivation theory turns out to have no explanatory power, while social participation theory adds little to nothing to the explanation. Detraditionalization theory fares much better. The cultural approaches prove to be very fruitful. Pupils with a preference for the public media channels are less ethnocentric than those with a preference for the commercial channels. The strong observed relationships between taste patterns and ethnocentrism are consistent with explanations based on the concept of symbolic boundaries.

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1. Introduction

This article explores the causes and concomitants of racism or ethnocentrism among young people. It focuses on specifically cultural explanations, drawing on the notion of symbolic boundaries and exploring the role of tastes in attitude formation. The potential contribution of cultural sociology to the explanation of ethnocentrism has been woefully neglected, despite suggestive research (Bryson, 1996; Lizardo, 2005). Most prevailing explanations draw on deprivation and social participation or social capital theory. Yet, as our empirical analysis will show, these offer much less powerful explanations than culturally informed theory.

Ethnocentrism and racism became issues in Flanders (Dutch speaking part of Belgium) when they turned out to be the main determinants or covariates of the rise of the extreme-right (Billiet and Loosveldt, 1998; Lubbers et al., 2000). The literature distinguishes different forms of racism

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and ethnocentrism, among other things racism as the belief in the innate superiority of one's race, new racism (Barker, 1981; Pettigrew, 1979), symbolic racism (Kinder and Sears, 1981), and ethnocentrism (Felling et al., 1986). Kleinpenning and Hagendoorn (1993) and Verberk (1999) found such concepts to be distinct, but quite strongly related. Symbolic racism, new racism as well as ethnocentrism, all entail belief in the cultural superiority of the ethnic majority and measure the extent people feel threatened by minorities. The operational measure we use combines those two elements. It focuses primarily on the perceived threat posed by the presence of an outgroup, but expresses also the sense of cultural superiority of the ingroup (the operational definition is given in Appendix A).²

Before reporting the analysis we first elaborate the cultural explanations, then briefly recall the main propositions of deprivation and social participation theory, and subsequently summarise the theoretical arguments under the form of hypotheses. These are tested on the basis of quantitative survey analysis, based on data concerning 6974 secondary school pupils and one of their parents (for technical details about the survey, see De Groof et al., 2001). Many of the cultural theories elaborated upon are often, some almost exclusively, used in theoretical discourse and qualitative analysis. Our purpose is not to press those theories into an empiricist straitjacket, but to illustrate their fruitfulness in quantitative empirical research.

2. Cultural theories

2.1. *Symbolic and social boundaries and the construction of identity and actor*

Ethnocentrism can be theorized as a basis of identity, that not only excludes the outgroup that is the focus of the ethnocentric sentiments, but is also used as a means to distinguish oneself from other groups that are either more or less tolerant. Viewed in this way ethnocentrism is part of a signifying practice used by boundary creators: it is one of the cultural materials used to define and draw the symbolic boundaries of the group one wants to belong to or one wants to be associated with (Lamont and Fournier, 1992). A symbolic boundary is understood here as a distinction expressed in terms of attitudes, tastes and practices, used for both social and cultural inclusion and exclusion. In contrast to Bryson (1996) or Lizardo (2005) who use political tolerance (inter-group relations and racism or subjective world citizenship) to predict patterns of taste, we think that taste should be used to explain political attitudes, including ethnocentrism. In her conclusions Bryson (1996) does suggest that political intolerance and cultural dislike are two forms of the same phenomenon. Yet, in drawing symbolic boundaries, taste in music and other elements of popular culture are used more intensively by young people than political attitudes (Jackson, 2002). Political socialization seems to take place and stabilize attitudes in later adolescence (Alwin et al., 1991; Vollebergh et al., 2001), while cultural socialization is said to take place earlier (Nagel and Ganzeboom, 2002). We therefore expect that taste will be used to draw symbolic boundaries and will form the basis to which political attitudes are added in order to complete and round out the identity. The drawing of cultural boundaries does in fact not only contribute to (feelings of) identity, but also to the constitution of an actor or a "real being" whose feelings, thoughts and actions can be oriented by sets of integrated tastes and attitudes. That expectation is the rationale for looking at the 'effects' of tastes on ethnocentrism.

The role of taste in drawing symbolic boundaries is explained in different ways, but most authors using the concept contend that people adopt cultural elements from the group they (want

² Feelings of ethnocentrism in Belgium are directed primarily towards minorities of Moroccan and Turkish descent.

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