РАЗДЕЛ VIII. СОЦИОЛОГИЯ

Sukhanova N.A.

Ethnicity and race as a challenging phenomenon of the present day reality

*The Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy
and Public Administration (RANEPA)
(Russia, Moscow)*

doi: 10.18411/gdsn-28-02-2019-09

idsp: scienceconf-28-02-2019-09

Abstract

The article deals with challenging issues of defining ethnicity and race, showing different approaches to the problem, including geographical factor. The phenomenon of multiracial personality was considered and the issue of the threat to national cultures was raised. The article contains views on the problem expressed by different scholars in their works.

This subject has been opened for general discussion for quite a number of years as the terms race and ethnicity seem to pose a mixture of approaches. Nevertheless the problem of how to treat the challenging issues is still very controversial. It could be accepted that the concept of race is understood, among others things, as a biological factor and a shared culture based on geographical territory. People of shared culture can enjoy similar values, climate, attitudes, and what is more be quite devoted to it. Geography certainly played a decisive role in uniting people, but there are such things as common language, common religion and statehood. As the time passed the approach to the term ethnicity has been changing, evolving more hues or sometimes attracting new understanding.

It is common knowledge that ethnicity cannot be shaped without taking into account climate peculiarities and living conditions in it. But the question is to be justifiably raised: does it really matter if the locals live in the marshal area or in the desert? Does the character of the human can be linked with the area of habitat and in the same way could be linked with the notion of ethnic group? The answer will not be straightforward. Within the array of race definitions we see the common approach to the matter bearing the reference to discriminatory practices, even rates of mortality. Among the guidelines of the U.S. National Institute of Health (NIH) we can find the notion saying that a patient can select more than one racial designation and can call himself (herself) multiracial. The present day statics in the West shows that immigrants can be identified as Western and non-Western. According to Franz Boas, local races among which “pure types” have disappeared, or are disappearing, are in danger of loosing their national culture. Also he admitted in his works that these people of pure descent are not found in any part of Europe. It means an actor would be moving constantly, and based on the new reality of the territory he lives, he would accept new style of living or would be influenced by the phenomenon of the new environment. Today concerns are expressed so as to what extent a national character would be subjugated to changes as a result of interchangeable racial features introduced into the national traits. Though the notion of the type or national traits could also be subjected to criticism. According to Franz Boas, the hereditary characteristics are not racially determined. Rather they belong to family lines. What is more, Boas writes, the form and size of the body are not entirely shaped by heredity. In the example of descendants from Europe, their children, grown in America, were much taller than their parents. Even more so, making his research on ethno national groups of people, Boas found out that average measurements of cranial size of immigrants were significantly different from those members who were born in the US. The question can be justifiably raised: is it because of better living conditions, better food, or geographical factor?

There is no need to dispute the fact that race as well as ethnicity both could be referred to social category. As it was mentioned above, historically, race would, in our minds, be understood as a phenomenon connected with oppression or prejudice. Races were classified by some of anthropologists as genetically distinct. The most amazing factor in research proved that the changes in race features were connected with geographical movement, or rather were influenced by them. Thus biologists Marcus Feldman and Richard Lewontin underlined the fact that 0.1% of genetic differences among the population were due to geographical differences. Sickle cell anemia, they thought, was connected to geographical ancestry, rather than to race, as in the areas of sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent and etc.

The notion of race is quite controversial and the teaching itself bears some research findings saying the differences in brain structure between whites and blacks shows the lesser degree of evolution of non-white peoples, as Tucker W. keynoted. Race implies geographical background, a person when asked about his (her) racial belonging, would tell you the origin of his ancestors. The result of any census will show a footprint of historical memory, when the group of people was discriminated, or forcibly moved or subjected to genocide. Sometimes new racial identities are added, as in the case with culturally Latino, but as the recent census showed, a new racial identity was added as Hispanic, as distinguished from non-Hispanic. The term ethnicity, so popular nowadays, keynotes the ethnic groups share the biological ancestry, same language and culture, as well as religion, beliefs and customs. The issue of home place, or territory of original birth place seems to be of great importance. Some of anthropologists think of geography as a determining factor in shaping what is called ethnic belonging.

The theory of geographical determinism, launched by Boas in his younger years, was later dismissed by himself as inconsistent. In a later period of his life he said that similarities or typical features cannot be explained by geographical factor, the phenomenon is much more complicated.

In Lev Gumilyov ideas, ethnos is a biological entity determined by its place in the natural environment. According to him, oscillations in solar radiation levels send extraordinary ability and powerful inspiration to the people living on certain territories. He determines his concept of ethnos linking it to its ancestral lands. He identified ethnos as a phenomenon determined by the community of origin, as result of the culture development on the basis of a common language and the result of the geographical environment. For him the role of Russia historically signified the defense of the people living on a flat land, unprotected practically either from the East or West, being at the same time the trade route from Europe through the Russ lands to Asia. The geographical layout forged the countrymen of the ancient Russ, they were becoming more powerful and made their borders stronger, bringing up their powerful leaders and making them perform their strategic role historically accessed as a unifying factor. Gumilyov L., pointing to the relation between ethnos and the landscape in his large-scale research, keynoted that this relation was given very little coverage. From ethnographic studies, which deal with the differences between peoples, he passes over to the physical type of the various branches of mankind, i.e. races, and he links ethnology with the Holocene paleogeography, i.e. the study of a certain period in the history when the human activity was the most distinguishable. He dwelled upon the issue of biosphere, or the biomass of all people taken together in the peak of their activity.

Now geographical factor, keynoted in the works of some anthropologists, has been gradually has fallen into oblivion, fading away at the present environment. The world is constantly moving, with the people finding alternative places of living, loosing ancestral ties with their predecessors, demonstrating shifts in ethnicities. Geopolitical debates in a region, information pulverized by mass media, search for a comfortable life, all this could elude ethnos from its natural familiar memory and drive it to the generally perceived atmosphere of general faceless vision of reality. The whole array of latest technologies will drive a wedge between cultural homogeneity and diversification of peculiarities. The notion of universality that appeared quite recently versus the traditional anthropological ideas gave rise to such theories as

Digital anthropology. One of the features that scholars Horst and Miller put forward, for example, is the principle of cultural relativism that, according to them, the principle has great relevance for anthropological studies in our time. The authors draw the attention to holism, saying that popular culture has been reductive in covering the digital culture. According to them the holistic entanglements between digital practice and institutionalized abstractions as economy, religion, kinship miss essential characteristic of the digital culture. They suggest that the digital age marks the latest chapter in a drive towards the abstracting value and meaning.

Nevertheless the question may be justifiably asked how to distinguish between race and ethnicity. At the start these two terms were intended to signify different notions: race being a biological quality and ethnicity a cultural phenomenon. Ethnicity in its classical meaning will incorporate rather complex nuclear of racial, cultural, and historical characteristics. Race can dramatically change the destinies of peoples in the present world, depending on biological concept it can even threaten the very existence of the group. Practically speaking, ethnicity could mean much stronger ties with the homeland. People that would signify the same single ethnicity must have the same shared biological ancestry, shared culture, shared homeland. The factor that would forge people together could be their fight to defend their common territory against invaders, while the race, as a determiner, would be a social factor, at the same time a distinguishing biological factor in a certain type of ethnicity. At the same time, the views on the issue may vary, such as Krieger N. called racial discrimination as biological expressions of race relations.

The instances of racial superiority and inferiority definitions were used in the past to justify colonialism, research in geographical environment and finding biological races belonging to different faraway areas were used to spread the ideas of prejudice, and discrimination as it was mentioned. The observation of European laws is highly recommended by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, which insists on collecting data about instances of ethnic groups subjected to xenophobia, anti-Semitism, acts of racism. Racial and ethnic groups though existing parallel with to each other are forming undeniable cluster. Variations in blood types and color of the skin all over the world make the co-existence of different ethnicities the challenge of to-day. Another issue is that ethnicity is sometimes used as an euphemism for race, or implying the term to sub-groups that are not defined as full-fledged races. The issue of assimilation of some groups of people, the idea popular in the US mainstream culture, arises concerns among the Native Americans, for instance, preoccupied by the idea that they could be deprived of the rights to the land, fishing and hunting within the territories where they were accustomed to live. This challenging idea must also requires scrupulous investigation.

1. Bromley, Y.U. Essays on the Theory of Ethnos. - M., Moscow state University named after Lomonosov M.V., 1983
2. Cornell, S., & Hartman, D. Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World. – Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press., 2007
3. European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI). - ECRI General Policy Recommendation Number 4. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. , 1998
4. Feldman, M. & Lewontin, R. Race, Ancestry and Medicine. – New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008
5. Franz Boas. Anthropology and Modern Life. – New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 2015.
6. Gumilyov, L.N. Ethnosphere: History of People and History of Nature. – M., 1993.
7. Krieger, N. Refiguring “Race”: Epidemiology, Racialized Biology, and Biological Expressions of race relations. – International Journal of Health Services, 1 (30), 2000
8. Miller, Daniel and Heather A. Horst. The Digital and the Human. New York: Berg Publications, 2012.
9. Tucker, W. The Science and Politics of Racial Research. – Champaign: University of Illinois Press.