

# RELATIVISM AND RATIONALISM IN SCIENCE AND POLITICS<sup>1</sup>

Prof Murray Faure

*Department of Political Sciences, University of South Africa*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The period after World War II witnessed a growing acceptance in some circles of ideas and practices associated with the doctrine of relativism. This is especially true for areas such as the philosophy of science, the sciences in general, and the domains of political life and public morality. While the theory of relativity as formulated by Albert Einstein differs considerably from that of relativism, there is, nevertheless, a measure of correspondence between these categories, as will be pointed out later. Like relativism, rationalism has a long history that reaches back many centuries to respected scholars who have used and defended it in a number of ways. The recent resurgence of interest in its tenets and role in the human quest for understanding is, at least partly, attributable to the increasing acceptance of relativism both as an axiological and as a cognitive category. Like relativism, rationalism is a complex concept with many meanings and applications. Related concepts such as rationality, reason, objectivity, scientific method and logic are often used in conjunction with, or as synonyms for rationalism, but more often than not they obfuscate rather than clarify the meaning of the latter. It is readily apparent that the concepts relativism and rationalism have become an integral part of the language of philosophy of science, the sciences, and the public discourse on issues of politics, culture and morality.

Just as the relativity theory has come to dominate quantum physics in the past century, relativism and rationalism have occupied the concerns of the philosophy of science. In the philosophy of science, philosophers have

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devoted much time and energy to explaining the significance of relativism and rationalism in the quest for comprehending the world and how it is to be organised politically and socially in accordance with these ideas. Of these, the views of Paul Feyerabend, Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos and Karl Popper, which will be referred to later on, are examples.

In political science relativism and rationalism have made inroads in many different formats. Arnold Brecht (cf. 1959) suggested scientific value relativism (value alternativism) as an axiology with which science could assess the value of means in terms of ends. Expositors of post-behaviouralism, critical theory and political philosophy challenged the objective rationality of logical positivist/empiricist political science. For many scholars, relevance to the needs of humanity, and not the 'myth of objectivity', became the driving force of intellectual inquiry. Work produced in the philosophy of science convinced many political scientists that paradigms (cf. Kuhn 1970) and research programmes (cf. Lakatos 1970) were, in effect, spatio/temporal frameworks that could not be transcended; historicism and its concomitant relativism were to be accepted as unavoidable and integral elements of science. The so-called critical rationalists (Popper and his followers), on the other hand, claimed that historicism could be refuted conclusively by logical argument (cf. Popper 1961). To them, the procedures of critical rationalism constituted the key to piecemeal social engineering and embodied the cognitive foundation of open societies that would ensure and secure the future of democracy (cf. Popper 1963). In a similar vein, the so-called rational choice model became extremely popular in the discipline, and it would not be inappropriate to suggest that the underlying tension between relativism and rationalism has indirectly shaped and driven much of the theoretical debate in modern political science.

These influences are also discernable in the areas of political life and public morality, especially those of relativism. The increased sensitivity with which governments deal with minorities, cultural diversity, ethnicity, language rights, group rights and human rights is by implication questioning the rationale of the old order, and signifies the search for a new one based on the acknowledgement of a changing morality, one with

relativistic undertones. The sexual revolution of the sixties, the so-called new morality, the alternative press, alternative music, the so-called counter-culture movement, the practice of abortion and euthanasia and the challenging of the doctrine of *ex cathedra* Catholicism are typical examples of the search for a new morality that questions the wisdom of old and entrenched privileges and practices.

In the most general sense, this article attempts to explore some of the very complex relations that obtain between the realms of the abstract and the concrete. More specifically, notions of relativism are explored and related to notions of rationalism. Related concepts such as relativity and rationality supplement the exploration of these relations. The implications of these relations for the understanding of politics, seem to be all-important in that they open up and tie together the concepts of space and time as cognitive categories. In a more recognisable form, space and time manifest themselves in the format of culture and history and these categories, it is argued, are as germane to the understanding of politics as they are to political action itself. It would be shortsighted to ignore their influence in an analysis of this nature. This article consciously explores a framework that deviates in many respects from the conventional modes of analyses found in the discipline. Not only does it incorporate concepts from the philosophy of natural science, it also uses a number of theoretical constructs - mainly for heuristic purposes - so as to tie together and analyse the explored categories. Thoughts expressed are therefore tentative, exploratory and experimental in nature.

The first section of the article briefly examines the concepts of relativism and rationalism along with a number of related concepts. The aim is to establish the generic difference(s) between these two categories. The second section illustrates the implications of relativism and rationalism in science and politics by briefly reviewing the work of authoritative scholars on the topics. The aim in this section is to establish whether the differential relationship identified in the first section obtains for the domains of philosophy, science and politics as explicated by scholars. The last section of the article assesses the role of relativism and rationalism in science and

politics by suggesting and utilising a number of theoretical constructs for this purpose.

## 2 THE TWO POSITIONS

Relativism can be described as a set of views that acknowledges the legitimacy, divergent nature and uniqueness of different ideas, practices and phenomena. It is especially relevant to what is right or wrong, good or bad, and true or false. The existence of an absolute and universal standard by means of which these scales of ethics, morality and truth can be judged, is rejected. A relativistic norm, dependent on and derived from personal beliefs and circumstances, cultural orientation and practices, and historical consciousness, is suggested as the way to deal with variations on these scales. Its origins are as ancient as the writings of Protagoras, the Greek Sophist of the fifth century BC, and as modern as the writings and practices of our own time.

What is right or wrong, good or bad is, of course, the concern of systems such as ethics, philosophy, religion, culture, education and law. The question whether something is true or false is similarly one of the central concerns of epistemology and science. What relativists in all these fields share, is the conviction that there is no absolute and universal standard by which to measure these judgements, be it 'God or man as the measure of all things', Immanuel Kant's 'law of universals', Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 'general will', or the principles of 'verificationism' and 'falsificationism'. Any standard, relativists believe, is relative to space and time, it is embedded in culture and history and these dimensions are so multifarious and forever changing that it is logically impossible to extract a single norm or measure from them. In a very real sense, culture and history represent the synchronic and diachronic realms of human existence and understanding. Culture is the temporal manifestation of history, while history is simultaneously recorded culture, both representing the underlying and overriding contexts for relativism as an epistemology and an axiology. This emphasis on unique experience explains why relativism is sometimes seen as having a strong correspondence with pragmatism and forms of evolutionism such as social Darwinism. In our time, the work of Paul

Feyerabend is generally regarded as one of the best expositions of the relativist position.

Unlike relativism, which does not base its rationale on any specific source of knowledge, rationalism in its philosophical use is a theory that bases its legitimacy and authority on exactly such a source. In philosophical terms, rationalism contends that the only source of truthful knowing is the knowledge that is gained by human reasoning. Reasoning and rational analysis only can yield logical truths as well as true substantive knowledge about the world, and in its purest form, rationalism contends that no recourse to empirical observation, personal experience or historical understanding is required for this purpose.

As an intellectual attitude to life and the universe, rationalism is not easy to pin down, though nothing may seem simpler. It has been used for opposing purposes in religious circles, and it has seen many different applications in science and philosophy. In the Middle Ages, St. Thomas Aquinas used rationalism to prove the existence of God 'rationally', while in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was associated with anti-religious movements called 'free thought', 'secularism' and 'agnosticism'. The religious claims of Christianity such as the Trinity, the incarnation, the resurrection and creation were to be tested by rational and logical criteria and, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, had to be rejected. It could be said that the rational questioning of these claims in a way stimulated the development of atheism. In philosophy, the work of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, all seventeenth century rationalists, is usually held as the cornerstone of modern rationalism. Their conviction was that true knowledge acquired by reason could be couched in a mathematical structure, and valid inferences could be logically deduced from such a scheme. Leibniz is usually regarded as the most extreme exponent, claiming that experience is a poor substitute for reason and that, in principle, all truths (both *a priori* and synthetic *a priori* truths) could be known through pure reason alone (cf. Barker 1968:37; Urmson 1976:245-246). During the twentieth century a number of philosophers have defended the rationalist position in some way or other. Though not a 'pure' rationalist, Popper (and his critical rationalism) is probably the best-known example.

What can be said about these seemingly opposing positions of relativism and rationalism? As outlined above, the most glaring difference is that relativism accords history and the sociological underpinnings of knowledge an all-important status, while rationalism denies it the same status. For relativism there is no single truth, but many truths that are forever changing in a world that does not, and cannot, have a determinate ontology - there is no compelling evidence to suggest that the world has a single determinate nature. Rationalism, on the other hand, presupposes that there is a category of knowledge derived from a particular source, - the only truthful way, and, while such knowledge is not necessarily immune to its own evolution, the category itself is not subject to the whims of historical and sociological experience. There is a 'rational key', so to speak, which is determinate and authoritative. Reason is its guiding principle and it can unlock understanding that can transcend the contradictions inherent in culture and history.

### 3 A RELATIVIST PERSPECTIVE

The philosopher Paul Feyerabend (1924-1994) is one of this century's best-known and most controversial expositors of relativism in science and politics. He has been described in many ways - as a defender (and later a critic) of Popper's critical rationalism; as brilliant but irresponsible; as a maverick; as a pluralist; as an anarchist; as the worst enemy of science; as a critic of the philosophy of science itself, and as a relativist. His thoughts cannot be summarised easily, since they changed considerably during his career. The only systematic pattern in this change is the progressive move away from the rationalist position toward a relativist one. He published extensively, and it could be said that his position is well-reflected in his tour de force, *Against method* (1975), and *Farewell to reason* (1987).

Feyerabend's first article (1947) dealt with modern physics, and in it he strongly subscribed to positivism. In 1958, in two papers, he argued against positivism from the falsificationist views of Popper. By the mid-sixties he had started to move away from Popper's falsificationist views and subscribed to theoretical pluralism - the notion that as many as possible alternative theories should be offered and defended in order to maximise the

probability of falsifying existing theories. The contextual theory of meaning which was developed in more detail later, is already evident in this pluralistic conception. In the early 1970s, he attacked Popper from a Kuhnian perspective and also published an essay in which he outlined an anarchistic theory of knowledge, which he claimed to have obtained from the liberalism in JS Mill's *On liberty* (1859) (cf. Preston 1997). *Against method's* main thesis is that there is no such a thing as scientific method; it ridicules all attempts to demonstrate such a form of rationality - '*the events, procedures and results that constitute the sciences have no common structure; there are no elements that occur in every scientific investigation but are missing elsewhere*' (1975:1). Shortly after, he expressly subscribed, in an article, to the idea of relativism. His book *Science in a free society* followed in 1978 and in it the political implications of epistemological anarchism are explored, while the philosophical position of relativism is re-endorsed. *Science as an art* (1984) relegates the entire history of science to change without progress, re-stating relativism in even stronger terms. *Farewell to reason* (1987) again explores the relativist theme, especially its 'Protagorean' account (cf. Preston 1997). Shortly before his death, Feyerabend displayed an uneasiness with relativism. *Killing time: the autobiography of Paul Feyerabend* was completed shortly before his death, and published in 1995.

Feyerabend's scepticism about the rationalist conception of science is well-captured by three questions (posed in a lecture at Sussex University, 1974): What's so great about knowledge? What's so great about science? and, What's so great about truth? Feyerabend's answers to these questions often came in the format of other questions, or of negation, telling us what science is not, rather than telling us what it is. Does science differ from witchcraft, cognitively speaking? Is it really the only way for us to organise our experience cognitively? For him the knowledge enterprise needed breathing space, not a crippling control by some tradition, and all sources of knowledge should be investigated on an equal footing. For Feyerabend rationalist and empiricist historiographical accounts of science were simply misleading. Pluralism, anarchism, aesthetic appeal and social bias were decisive factors in the history of science, but not acknowledged by those who controlled it. For Feyerabend the rule 'anything goes' depicted his

conception of science very well. He subscribed to Kuhn's notion of pre-paradigmatic science, as well as the 'irrationalist' overtones in paradigm switches. People had to be liberated from the rationalist stranglehold of concepts such as 'objectivity', 'rationality' and 'truth' (cf. Preston 1997).

In spite of his methodological anarchism, Feyerabend never endorsed political anarchism. In fact, there is not a strong parallel between his 'politics of philosophy and science' and his 'philosophy and science of politics'. His political thought is not as well-developed as his philosophical ideas, and could probably be summarised as a blend of liberalism and social democracy. For him, all intellectual traditions ought to have equal access to power; the separation of church and state should also be followed with regard to science and the state. As practised in Western societies, science has a privileged position with regard to political power, and it should be brought under democratic control. Scientific 'experts', in particular, should be viewed with scepticism and mistrust. His *Farewell to reason* questions the so-called free and diverse scientific practices that exist in Western societies. Underneath the surface of diversity, Feyerabend sensed a monolithic monotonous category of consensus that controlled the liberty of intellectual expression in an imperialistic and uniform manner. Relativism is the only guarantee to cultural diversity and the avoidance of totalitarianism. To this end, Feyerabend positively promoted the notion of argumentative evaluation (sensitivity to the beliefs of others) and, in a negative sense, criticised philosophers who dismissed diversity under the guise of 'Objectivity' and 'Reason' which were 'deified hangovers of autocratic times' (cf. Preston 1997). The 'true-for-them' and 'true-for-us' approach is, therefore, at the heart of his intellectual and cultural relativism. The world has an indeterminate plural quality, and the Homeric gods and the subatomic particles of modern microphysics are but different ways in which our 'Being' responds to an 'unknowable' world (cf. Preston 1997).

#### 4 A RATIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

Karl Popper (1902-1994) is generally regarded as one of this century's most famous and influential philosophers of science. His social and

political philosophy, based on his epistemology, is equally well-known. He views himself as a critical rationalist, a proponent of the hypothetico-deductive scientific method and an opponent of scepticism, historicism, conventionalism and relativism in science and politics. He vigorously opposes inductivism and historicism and, on the basis of his criticism of the latter, became the champion and defender of the so-called 'open society', as well as a critic of totalitarianism. Popper's thoughts cover a wide variety of fields, and there is an underlying systemic unity in his views on logic, epistemology, science, historical and social development and his normative political theory. In fact, it constitutes a cosmology, an attempt to understand the world of which we and our knowledge are but a part. The cornerstone to this is his views on critical rationalism. Some of his best-known works include *The logic of scientific discovery* (1959), *The poverty of historicism* (1961), *The open society and its enemies* (1963), *Conjectures and refutations* (1974), *Unended quest* (1976) and *Objective knowledge* (1979).

Popper rejects rationalism in the Cartesian sense as elevating reason to the highest source of knowledge. For him, such an approach is an unacceptable form of 'intellectualism'. However, rationalism does entail the critical application of reason to solving the problems of knowledge. For Popper, no source of knowledge is sacred - every source is subject to critical investigation (critical rationalism). Advancement of knowledge consists, mainly, in the modification of earlier knowledge, refuting conjectures where necessary. A scientist who opts for critical rationalism does so on the basis of an ethical choice. Such a choice requires a disposition to self-investigation and always carries the commitment to a type of Socratic modesty; the ignorance of the scientist is acknowledged and critical rationalism is always coupled with a willingness to learn from past mistakes (cf. Faure & Venter 1993:29-30).

Popper is more concerned with the correct application of scientific procedures (method) than with the results such procedures may produce (Ricci 1977:9). He rejects induction as the distinguishing criterion between science and metaphysics on ground of its non-logical nature, arguing that no number of successive confirming observations can exclude the

possibility that not 'all swans are white' (1959:27-28). As a new criterion for distinguishing between these categories, he proposes that it must be possible for a scientific system (hypothesis, proposition, theory) to be refuted by experience (1959:44). This does not render metaphysics meaningless; it simply excludes it from the domain of potentially falsifiable scientific knowledge. He also subscribes to the idea that all observational attempts at falsifying knowledge are 'theory-laden'; they are tainted with meaning (1959:93-94). The procedural key to this falsification is as follows: (1) The logical deductions of the theory are compared to the internal consistency of the theoretical system; (2) the logical form of the theory is scrutinised to establish whether there is empirical substance or whether it merely contains tautologies; (3) this is compared to other theories to establish whether there is any scientific advance; and (4) the theory is then empirically applied to establish whether it is reconcilable with the world of practice (1959:32-33). Popper further refines these procedures by introducing the notions of *corroboration* and *verisimilitude*, the former referring to the historical performance of a theory to withstand falsification attempts, and the latter to the relative (or comparative) truth content of a theory (1979:118-119). He also adds the idea of ontological pluralism, the existence of three separate but inter-connected worlds, World I representing physical objects; World II human consciousness; and World III the objective world of books and publications containing, *inter alia*, scientific theories. Worlds I and III can only interact through the intervention and mediation of World II (using the procedures outlined previously), which will ensure that knowledge can evolve, not unlike the Darwinist conception of biological evolution (cf. 1979:108, 145, 154, 155). This, in short, is the essence of Popper's epistemology of critical rationalism. It is in fact his *leitmotiv* when he writes: 'The central problem of epistemology has always been and still is the problem of the growth of knowledge. And the growth of knowledge can be studied best by studying the growth of scientific knowledge' (1959:15).

Popper extends his scientific epistemology to the social sciences, arguing that there is a methodological unity that binds all forms of science together. The logical fabric of social science is no different from that of natural science - the same logic structures the relations between *explanans* and

*explanandum* in all cases (1961:131). The social sciences should also be conducted in terms of methodological individualism, not a holism or a collectivism that uses non-empirical categories such as classes, societies and civilizations. For Popper individuals are the true study objects of social science (1961:136), but this does not imply that such a science should be based on the laws of psychology. In fact, his methodological individualism is anti-psychologist in nature, not on logical grounds, but on moral grounds because of the fear that knowledge of laws of the psyche would deprive individuals of their liberty (1961:158-159). Popper also rejects the notion that history could be manipulated through some or other conspiracy by a group of individuals. Such conspiracies do exist, of course, but their unintended and unforeseen consequences are beyond human control, and their significance should not be over-estimated (Popper 1973:330-331). Social science should explore the promising possibilities of rational models in fields such as decision-making in economics, and the extent to which actual behaviour deviates from rational prediction in the absence of sufficient knowledge (1961:140-142). By criticising and refuting theories, social science can aspire to the same objectivity as that of the natural sciences reflected in World III. The positivist/inductivist conception of objectivity is untenable, since it dehumanises science when it expects the scientist to strip himself of bias, which is itself biased. It is only through the procedures of critical rationalism that social science can aspire to objectivity - that is, Popper's objectivity (cf. Faure & Venter 1993:36-38).

Popper's political thought is based on his strategy of demonstrating that the presuppositions of totalitarianism are logically flawed. His rejection of historicism - the notion that there are discernible patterns in history which constitute the basis for large-scale 'utopian' engineering - is all-important in this respect, namely (1961:v-vi): (1) The course of the history of the human race is significantly influenced by any increase in the knowledge available to mankind; (2) There are no rational or scientific methods that can serve to predict the future increase in scientific knowledge; (3) On the above grounds the possibility of theoretical history, a historical social science comparable with theoretical physics, must be rejected. A scientific theory of historical development, as a basis for predicting history or the future, is not possible; and (4) The fundamental aim of historic methods,

then, seems to be based upon fallacies that must finally lead to the rejection of historicism. On these grounds, Popper attacks historicist thinkers of the 'closed' society (Plato, Hegel & Marx), and suggests that the historical indeterminist method of piecemeal social engineering is the best way to ensure an 'open' democratic society. In essence, Popper extrapolates the logical procedures of the scientific process to the realm of politics, suggesting that political policies and actions should be continually criticised and adapted where necessary in order to eliminate anomalies (cf. Faure & Venter 1993:38-43).

## 5 INSTRUMENTS OF ANALYSIS

The aim here is not a detailed analysis and assessment of the views of these two scholars, but rather to explore the broader cognitive and political implications of the two positions that they represent. This can best be accomplished by amplifying logical implications (outcomes) by utilising theoretical constructs. These constructs, which essentially represent the most rudimentary elements of relativity theory<sup>2</sup> have the advantage that they open up the cognitive variables that structure the respective positions. Exposing these variables in this manner enables one to explore and analyse politics within their parameters. The three constructs that will be used for this purpose can be labelled as: (1) absolute relativity; (2) relational relativity; and (3) relativity in terms of an absolute category. However, before proceeding, it is appropriate to summarise the basic differences between the two positions in as far as the two scholars shed light on the respective categories. The most fundamental differences are: (1) Feyerabend's relativist position places no restriction on any cognitive sources, whatever their nature. All are legitimate points of view whether contemporary or historical in origin. Popper's rationalist position holds no cognitive source sacred either, but insists that knowledge from all sources must be 'filtered' through the demarcation criterion, the rationalist key to

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<sup>2</sup> Relativity and relativism are related, but not interchangeable. Relativity is primarily a scientific concept, whereas relativism permeates science and social consciousness. The universal validity of the former has yet to be disproved, while the latter is more of an attitude, a pseudo-ideology whose ubiquitous nature is not always fully realised (Stankiewicz 1972: Proposition 30).

scientific understanding and political action; (2) In the relativist position, culture and history (space and time) are both important in that they represent legitimate and divergent dimensions of human experience. The rationalist position denies that these dimensions (especially history) have any significant or special meaning; it only becomes scientifically meaningful once knowledge from these dimensions is subjected to the procedures of critical rationalism; and (3) relativist politics is based on and thrives on pluralism, each entity having its own unique rationale. Rationalist politics, on the other hand, is also based on pluralism, but the plurality of entities is only guaranteed by the 'mediating' parameters of subjecting their contradictions to the tests of critical rationalism.

The theoretical constructs or instruments of analysis to be used here are the following:

### **5.1 Absolute relativity**

The most elementary form of relativity that can be conceived of by way of a theoretical construct is that of absolute relativity. It simply postulates that there are as many points of view or beliefs as there are observers or participants in a particular frame of reference, each of the views or beliefs differing from all the others. In a cognitive sense, absolute relativity can be equated with an epistemology of solipsism. Solipsism is a theory that locates reality entirely in the mind of the beholder. It specifically rejects the influence of involuntary experiences with the external world as having any value, be that through direct observation or through various processes brought about by interaction with others. Solipsism thus entails that knowledge of or a belief as to what is correct is fixed entirely by the individual's conscious awareness of what is valid knowledge. The implication of such a solipsistic situation is that the same phenomenon or category is viewed or understood entirely differently by two or more individuals. There is no possibility for the convergence of understanding or belief; there is no possibility for developing any mutually shared knowledge, except by coincidence. It leaves no room for the evolution of knowledge, whether through persuasion or experience, the spatio/temporal dimensions of existence.

## 5.2 Relational relativity

Relational relativity is sometimes referred to as 'common sense' relativity, or Galilean relativity. It is a central element of Einstein's special theory of relativity of which the first postulate states that: *'The physical laws of nature are the same in every inertial frame of reference'*. The concept 'inertia' derives from Newton's First Law of Motion being the property every object has which causes it either to remain stationary or move in a straight line at a constant speed, unless there is a force acting on it. An inertial frame of reference is a frame of reference in which this condition holds.

Translated into simple cognitive terms, this form of relativity tells us that different observations of the same phenomenon could produce differing but correct results, the differences being attributable to the 'inertial frame of reference' from which the observation is made. The classic example is the person who throws an object in a stationary railway carriage and observes it leaving him at 30kph, while an observer outside the carriage observes exactly the same result. However, when the carriage moves at 40kph, and the same event takes place, the person inside the carriage still observes the object travelling at 30kph, while the observer standing outside the carriage views the same object travelling at 70kph relative to his position. This could be called relational relativity, differences being attributable to differences in inertial frames of reference - that is, differences in space or time.

## 5.3 Relativity in terms of an absolute category

This is a consequence of relational relativity. Einstein's second postulate of special relativity applies the first postulate to the laws of electricity and magnetism and states that: *'The speed of light is the same in every inertial frame of reference'*. In its most rudimentary form it tells us that an absolute category (the speed of light) is not affected by any inertial frame of reference. In simple cognitive terms it implies that different observations from different vantage points (inertial frames of reference) will always yield the same result when an absolute category is observed. The corollary of this

is that, whereas space and time are nullified when dealing with an absolute category, space and time themselves could be transformed when the inertial frame of reference itself approximates the absolute speed of light.

These constructs need not be analysed any further here. As heuristic devices, they provide us with a sufficient set of cognitive relationships to explore the extreme implications of relativism and rationalism as intellectual orientations and their implications for inquiry and politics further.

## 6 ANALYSIS

It should be clear that the relativist position and Feyerabend's views coincide with the cognitive elements found in the first construct of absolute relativity. Similarly, the rationalist position and Popper's views on critical rationalism coincide with cognitive features of the third construct above; it is relativism in terms of an absolute category. Of course, these are no mutually exclusive categories when classification of views are attempted, but the logical features of the constructs themselves are distinctly exclusive. How can such a classification be explained and justified?

### 6.1 Absolute relativity - the impossibility of politics

Bearing in mind the relativist position, Feyerabend's views and the first construct, one can imagine a situation where a collection of individuals have fixed and divergent ideas about the world. One could describe their epistemology as that of solipsism, or absolute relativity. Where will such a situation lead, what will its outcome be like? We could reasonably infer that the situation is not characterised by any shared (or even partly shared) understanding of what constitutes political life. There is no ontology of what politics is, or should be. At best, there are as many ontologies of the world as there are participants in the situation. The interaction between participants in such a pluralistic situation cannot be anything other than highly personal and individualistic. Absolute relativity precludes the development of any common understanding of the world; there can be no shared rationality. The only form of 'rationality' that can exist in this

construct, is that of the individual, and such 'rationality' is totally dominated by the individual's own understanding of the world in terms of space and time - that is, his or her awareness in a synchronic and diachronic sense. It is reasonable to expect that participants' interests, fulfilling the individual telos, acting in terms of fixed and differing beliefs, will dominate the situation. Is all this the logical outcome of extreme relativism, albeit hypothetical? In fairness to Feyerabend, it must be noted that his relativism is one in which great care and sympathy should be displayed toward the views of others; his relativism is in fact a very tolerant orientation. Isn't this contradictory to the line of argument developed thus far? It is suggested here, however, that if everybody would pursue relativism to its extreme limits, the ensuing situation would not be unlike (in fact, it would be very similar to) the condition in the so-called state of nature found in the social contract theory. More specifically, extreme relativism would resemble the anarchical war-like condition of Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), and (very unlikely) that of the idyllic happiness of Rousseau's state of nature in his *du Contrat Social* (1762).

Relativist politics, including Feyerabend's version, will destroy the fabric of politics if pursued to its extreme logical limits. In real-world politics, it has no existence outside of the 'protective shield' of societies and communities which are more-or-less democratic in orientation. It can exist by virtue of and as a consequence of the latter, not as its precondition or end. If taken to extremes, it will not and cannot result in the withering away of (Feyerabend's) inhibiting elements of democracy; it will itself inevitably create these elements. Space and time as dimensions of human existence need to be shared voluntarily to a minimal degree for benevolent politics to take effect.

## **6.2 Relativity in terms of an absolute category - the redundancy of politics**

Rationalist politics, and Popper's critical rationalism in particular, display an uncanny resemblance to the basic cognitive relations contained in the third construct - relativity in terms of an absolute category. Much as the absolute category in the construct is unaffected by any inertial frame of

reference, Popper's critical rationalism contains the implicit pretence that it can transcend the meaning and contradictions in culture and history (space and time) by subjecting them to the inevitable outcome of his 'rationalist key'. This is his scientific method which is accessible to all, the only proviso being that its rules be followed diligently by all who use it. In principle, all users of the method, irrespective of their contextual perspective, should yield the same outcome when they apply the method to the same problem. By virtue of falsification, political contradictions will be exposed and piecemeal political action will rectify the matter.

Popper's politics are explicitly anti-historicist in orientation, denying that history (time itself) can have any special meaning or political significance. The historicist refutation is by means of a clinical instrument that by and in itself, contains no meaning, namely logic. Popper's dedication to pluralism, especially ontological pluralism (three Worlds) is superficially convincing, but ultimately deceptive. All that is required to uncover the true monistic character is simple retroductive argument which by way of regress singles out and exposes *the one ontology*. In effect, all Worlds (Popper's and those of others) must pass the test of critical rationalism, which is in essence Popper's true ontology, the one containing the set of procedural tests that serve as demarcation criterion of what is ultimately meaningful to science and politics. Popper's rationalist position is thus monistic, rational and logical to the extreme. His insistence to adhere to these rules is truly stoic, and Feyerabend's objection to this dogmatism is quite understandable; it even engenders sympathy.

What then if we push this position to its hypothetical extreme? What would ensue in a community where all participants are falsificationists that continually eliminate contradictions which are subsequently rectified by piecemeal political engineering? Potentially culture and history (space and time) would be dealt with in the same manner by all concerned, and individual action would be structured by the same logical procedures as public action. Politics as a form of social action driven by differences would make room for agreement, a large-scale uniform consensus on how to deal with everything. Exit politics as we know it - the withering away of

politics is replaced by not Marx's ideal society but Popper's ideal form of political action shared by everyone. Politics will become redundant.

### 6.3 Relational relativity - the inevitableness of politics

If this analysis of extreme relativism and rationalism is correct, then political life must manifest itself between the polar opposites of absolute relativity and relativity in terms of an absolute category. Situating politics within these extremes suggests that politics cannot be completely rational or relativistic, nor can it exist without a minimal measure of these. In this respect, the second construct described above (relational relativity) seems to be a useful heuristic device for suggesting the very complex nature of politics with regard to the two modes of thought.

Relational relativity suggests that relativism and rationalism can co-exist, albeit in the format of the same and different spatio/temporal frameworks. Cognitively, this suggests that similar and different consensual categories about the same facets of the world are postulated. The corollary in philosophy of science is, of course, the well-known notions of paradigms and research programmes suggested by Kuhn (1970), Lakatos (1970) and others. The major variations in these notions are the pre-paradigmatic, the multi-paradigmatic and the paradigmatic (normal science) conceptions of science. All these fall within the ambit of the construct of relational relativity and could be equated, albeit very roughly, with political epistemologies. Relational relativity in a pre-paradigmatic political dispensation would very strongly approximate the relativist overtones of absolute relativity described above. On the other hand, a paradigmatic political dispensation would lie closer to the rationalist overtones suggested by the third construct above. The former would be characterised by little consensual agreement of political rules and procedures, while the latter would operate in terms of such rules and procedures. In turn, the multi-paradigmatic conception of politics would represent a mix of the two conceptions. All three, however, would be congruent with the construct of relational relativity. In political terms relational relativity would suggest a situation with no absolutely fixed notion of the ontology of politics; there is simply not *an ontology* of politics, there are a number of them. Each of

these ontologies is driven and constituted by a sense of what is rational, as it is relatively determined by the frameworks (cultural and historical) from which the ontologies derive. It is precisely this that makes it relationally relative. Relational relativity in politics would thus incorporate rational as well as relativist elements, would entail personal as well as abstract notions of what the content and meaning of culture and history signify for the domain of politics. By its very nature, it would imply a qualified tolerance to the views of others in a complex and pluralist mix of the relative importance of culture and history as cognitive frameworks that constitute our understanding of the public domain.

The different categories described above could be generally summarised in the following way:

ABSOLUTE RELATIVITY	RELATIONAL RELATIVITY	RELATIVITY IN TERMS OF AN ABSOLUTE
Historicist	Semi-historicist	Anti-historicist
No ontology Many ontologies	No ontology A few ontologies	Superficially ontologically plural - in fact, one ontology
Pluralistic	Semi-pluralist	Monistic
Non-rational	Semi rational	Rational
Personal	Semi-personal & abstract	Abstract
Teleological	Logical and teleological	Logical
Tolerant/intolerant	Qualified tolerance	Intolerant
Importance of space and time	Relative importance of space and time	Domination of space & time by rational insight
Impossibility of politics	Inevitableness of politics	Redundancy of politics

## 7 CONCLUSION

To suggest that relativism and rationalism are locked in a simple inverse relationship (more of the one implies less of the other) is over-simplistic, as

has been pointed out. To accentuate the relation in this manner, however, reflects the adversarial nature of the relationship between the two modes of thinking:

Relativism and rationalism deny each other to a large extent. For the adherents of the former it is the route to individual liberation, for the adherents of the latter such an attitude is a licence to individual irresponsibility. The analysis has pointed out that rationalism prefers to put its faith in abstract thought, generalisations, procedural norms and the postulation of axioms, whereas relativism is more concerned with factual and concrete matters as they obtain to real-world experiences. From the analysis of the two expositors of relativism and rationalism, it is clear that the two positions have very different ideas about criticism and scepticism. The former tends to denounce existing values and norms in terms of immediate and prevailing circumstances, while the latter denounces such a view as being sceptical about any hierarchy of values whatsoever. For rationalism, circumstances should be gauged in terms of defensible norms and maxims, not the opposite. Rationalism objects to the claim of relativism being the vestige of true tolerance; for rationalists (like WJ Stankiewicz) the difference between tolerance and toleration is important, but neither should be confused with 'tolerationism'. While relativism prides itself on being egalitarian, rationalism rejects such an orientation as having dangerous consequences for the true significance of intellectual pursuit and political equality. For rationalism the egalitarian doctrine displays, in general, a servility to one's inferiors and a contempt for one's superiors, an attitude reflected in relativism's continual reference to 'people' rather than 'persons'. In general, rationalists decry the fact that relativism so easily finds a built-in obsolescence in intellectual and political ideas that have a justifiable utility. For relativism, its occupation with the immediate needs, current news and events, reflects a true and genuinely human understanding of culture and history. For relativism participation of the people is synonymous with popular sovereignty, while rationalists view it as a perversion of the doctrine of sovereignty (cf. Stankiewicz, 1972, Propositions 1-30).

The influence of relativism and rationalism on science and the politics of our time is important in that it shapes and reflects our world of thought and action. This influence is, more often than not, subtle, pervasive, and hence generally under-estimated. The two modes of thought, relativism and rationalism, carry within themselves the seeds of, respectively, anarchism and authoritarianism. However, we cannot do away with either of these modes of thinking without destroying the very substance of politics as we know it. Political life, among other influences, is constituted by a complex set of relations between these two orientations. In this respect, one's understanding of how the abstract realm of thought ties in with and relates to the concrete world of politics is all-important. The argument suggests that the dimensions of space and time (history and culture), as exemplified by the constructs, are important in this matrix. Our quest for understanding the world, the nature of politics between states, as well as the politics within states, depends to a large extent on the precarious balance between and implications of these dimensions of thought.

In this respect, it might be useful to explore intellectual instruments and insights beyond the restrictive boundaries of present-day political science further.

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## ETHNICITY IN NATION STATES: A PERSPECTIVE ON SOUTH AFRICA<sup>1</sup>

Prof. F.C. de Beer

*Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of South  
Africa*

### INTRODUCTION

Ethnicity has been called perhaps the greatest riddle or enigma encountered by social and cultural scientists of our time (Bekker 1993:1). That this enigma is even regarded as a cancer or virus within nation-states, is directly linked to the expectation of particularly sociologists, political scientists, historians and economists, that countries with culturally heterogeneous populations should be able to accommodate such differences peacefully within the same political entity (e.g. Kymlicka 1995:2). Because of industrialization, wars and migration, amongst others, most modern nation-states have to accommodate people of diverse cultural origin. The magnitude of the cultural diversity is apparent from the fact that the world's 184 independent states have to accommodate approximately 5 000 ethnic groups which speak 600 major languages (Kymlicka 1995:1). Only in 10% of these states do about 90% of the populations speak the same language.

Predictions that boundaries between different cultures within particular states would eventually disappear in a so-called 'melting pot' were not realised (Gleason 1996:479). On the contrary, world wide, people such as the Basques in Spain, the Sikhs in India, the Tamil-speakers in Sri-Lanka, the Ibo in Nigeria, the Kurds in Iraq and the Indians in the USA and Canada, initially showed an unwillingness to participate in, and later open

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of one which appeared in *South African Journal of Ethnology*, 21(1), March, 1998.

enmity towards attempts to get them to abandon their cultural identities and become part of the dominant culture.

This negative attitude towards cultural assimilation caught social scientists off guard, especially as this was not limited to states which only recently became exposed to modernization but also occurred in developed capitalistic states, for example in Northern Ireland where the Catholics are campaigning for the inclusion of Ulster into the Irish Republic, in Belgium (the power struggle between the Flemish and Walloons) and in Switzerland with the recent establishment of a separate canton for Catholics. Originally scientists dismissed such honouring of traditional cultural values as a hangover from the past '...nothing more than nostalgia' or, even worse, 'chauvinist tribalism' (Fishman 1985:490). When, however, especially in the nineteen sixties, it became clear that national unity in states did not automatically followed the introduction of democratic political systems and the adoption of Human Rights Charters, rather that ethnic conflict kept on occurring all over the world, scientists were forced to investigate both the resistance to assimilation and the conflict which flared up in certain states.

At first such clashes were explained as a consequence of growing economic inequality between the rich and the poor. It soon became clear, however, that a more fundamental dimension of social cohesion was involved. A conceptual instrument then had to be found to explain the phenomenon and so the term 'ethnicity', as we know it today, was born and applied. It originated from the Greek word *ethnos*, which referred to people who were different from or had a different lifestyle to the Greeks (Jenkins 1997:9). The concept *ethnos* is also used in New Testament Greek to refer to non-Jews and heathens. Chapman (1993:19) concludes that when the dream of cultural assimilation was not fulfilled and the process of acculturation appeared more complex than expected,

... the idea of 'ethnicity' (in default of the idea of 'race') was invoked to explain the failure. The novelty of 'ethnicity', however, lay not in the phenomena themselves so much as in a rather naively surprised recognition of their durability, and of course in the new name, 'ethnicity' that was given to them.

In both the Oxford and the Collins dictionaries (Sykes 1976:356; Hanks 1979:520) a close connection is made between ethnicity and race. Thus the concept of ethnicity has a strong underlying connotation of race, even in cases where there is no genetic differentiation. But a conceptual framework was established with its help which made differentiation between peoples in nation-states possible.

After initial hesitation, studies on ethnicity, especially by American scientists, gradually increased. There also occurred a gradual movement away from the melting pot idea to that of multicultural pluralism. Unfortunately the latter term became vague over time to include all kinds of differences. The end result was that any category of people, from feminists to those opposing nuclear weapons, was included in the concept of multicultural pluralism. It therefore has little scientific value.

Interest in ethnicity as a phenomenon was stimulated by three conferences held in Norway (1969), Puerto Rico (1970) and the USA (1975) and at present many journals in the USA and Europe cover one or another aspect of the phenomenon. Furthermore, schools of thought and specialised fields such as ethnoscience, ethnomedicine, ethnohistory, ethnomusicology and ethnobotany have developed.

If the study of ethnicity had a gradual start in the rest of the world, it suffered from delayed action in South Africa. An institution such as SABRA<sup>2</sup> did give attention to the cultural identity of the various ethnic groups in South Africa, but was perceived to be a forum for the previous government's apartheid policy. Because of this academics at mainly English medium universities considered the study of ethnicity virtually taboo. The avoidance of ethnicity as a field of study was, however, not limited to South Africa. According to Vail (1989:xii) no academic in the whole of Africa was prepared to contribute to his composite work on the history of Southern African societies in which ethnicity played an important role because participation could be seen 'as subversive to the goal of political

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<sup>2</sup> Suid-Afrikaanse Buro vir Rasse-aangeleenthede, founded in the nineteen forties.

nation-building'. The actuality and reality of ethnicity could, however, not be ignored *ad infinitum* in South Africa with its diversity of cultures. Since 1992 three congresses, all focusing on ethnicity, were held at the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), Bordeaux (France) and at Rhodes University (Grahamstown). From contributions at these multi-disciplinary congresses and from a thesis on Southern Ndebele ethnicity by Van Vuuren (1992) it became evident that ethnicity had to be addressed in South Africa with its diversity of cultures and people.

The Constitution of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, recognises the diversity of cultures in South Africa by providing for eleven official languages and for the development of the indigenous languages. Provision is also made for people to use their language of choice and to participate fully in the cultural life of their choice. It is clear that the ethnic and linguistic diversity of South Africa's people is recognised and provided for on a constitutional level. How these diverse, and potentially conflicting cultural sentiments and identities will be accommodated in a process of nation-building can be regarded as one of the great challenges facing South Africa. In the last section below, the application of some of these constitutional provisions by the present government is scrutinized.

South Africa, like the rest of the world, is continuously influenced by external forces. It has global links, with regard to economic affairs, diplomatic relations, information technology and communication sharing and networking as well as transport systems. In short, South Africa is part of the international world and therefore not an isolated entity but subject to influences of global forces. According to Jenkins (1997:43) '... a range of commentators agree that globalization has consequences, one way or another, for ethnicity as a social phenomenon'. What these consequences will be is not easy to anticipate. However, through their study of acculturation and ethnicity anthropologists should get an inkling of what the reactions of people in interethnic situations will be to globalization. The more people feel that their particular lifestyle or identity is threatened, the more we shall see some or other counter-movement. The more globalisation and economic dependence become a reality 'the more we do the human thing; the more we assert our distinctiveness, the more we want to hang on

to our language, the more we want to hang on to our roots and our culture' (Dryden & Vos 1994:69).

This article is primarily based on published sources on ethnicity. The abundance of books and articles on the phenomenon required a careful selection and reading of data for the present topic. In addition, a close scrutiny of the New Constitution of South Africa was also required. It is further impossible to discuss a phenomenon such as ethnicity in its entirety and complexity in one article. I focus mainly on the most important manifestations of ethnicity, the foundation on which it is built and its ties with other phenomena. I also make a provisional examination of how this phenomenon has been dealt with in South Africa.

## THE MANIFESTATION OF ETHNICITY

The resurgence of ethnicity world-wide may be attributed to the nation-state's neglect to take into account all the interests of all its citizens. Despite the adoption of Charters of Human Rights minority groups feel they do not enjoy equal rights with regard to their cultures, legal protection and access to the resources of the state (United Nations 1992:4; Khatami 1993:25). Nation-building programmes are often perceived as serving the interests of the dominant group or elite in the government corps at the expense of minority groups (Khatami 1993:228). In reaction, minority groups mobilize themselves to obtain (as they see it) a better deal. Such mobilization often results in tension, conflict and civil instability. Minority groups usually resist forced assimilation which often goes with nation-building programmes. This may lead to demands for greater territorial autonomy or self-government (compare the phenomenon of irredentism) and even to attempts at separation such as occurred when Eritrea seceded from Ethiopia in 1993.

The revival of ethnicity has been explained variously. In some cases it was simply equated with racism (also see Jenkins 1997:81-84 in this regard). The mere fact, however, that people with the same physical appearances are also involved in ethnic conflict proves that the revival of ethnicity cannot be reduced to racism. The conflict between the French and English-

speaking Canadians, between the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and the Sinhalese and Tamil-speakers in Sri-Lanka are some of the best known examples in this regard. Except perhaps for the Pan-African movement and the Black Power movement [compare for example the National Association for Advancement of Coloured People and the Black Caucus as well as the Klu Klux Klan] in America, which unite people for ideological reasons on racial grounds, there is little evidence that physical characteristics as such can collectively unite people to the extent that they can be regarded as a main cause for the revival of ethnicity. At the most, physical appearance can be regarded as a 'marker' or criterion of ethnicity as is the case with many Afrikaners in South Africa (whiteness) and the Tutsi, who distinguish themselves from the other ethnic components in Rwanda and Burundi on the grounds of their long body length and other physical features. Despite the controversy that the term 'race' has precipitated in anthropological and other circles (which has discouraged scientific studies of the phenomenon so that it has virtually disappeared from the anthropological agenda) one wholeheartedly agrees with Jenkins' suggestion that,

... the 'problem of race' is currently underplayed within anthropology and that adopting a social constructionist model of ethnicity neither requires nor entitles us to indulge in such a neglect (Jenkins 1997:49).

Marxist-oriented scholars whose theories are based on class inequality object to attempts at stratifying society in terms of ethnic groups. They condemn talk of the revival of ethnicity in the strongest language and consider it to be 'vile figments, lies and myths, ...manipulated by leading capitalist circles in order to fragment and weaken the international proletariat' (Fishman 1985:7). But, is the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and other Communist states in Eastern Europe merely a figment of the imagination or an hallucination? These countries once served as the model for Marxist theories. We have ample evidence that it was mainly ethnic forces which led to the disintegration of these nation-states.

Furthermore, is economic stratification the cause or result of a consciousness of an own identity amongst cultural groups in nation-states? Scientists who propagate cultural assimilation as the ultimate outcome of the process of acculturation in nation states, regard the revival of ethnicity merely as a reflection of class disparity which is a necessary development where unequal access to opportunities occurs. Such a view is too simplistic as Horowitz (1985:89) points out: 'ethnicity is often a more compelling and preemptive affiliation than social class is'.

It cannot be denied that some or other form of stratification does occur in some nation-states. In India a caste system operates whereby all Hindu, who make up 83% of the population, are divided into different castes on the basis of their relative purity. Some of these castes are subject to legal restrictions (marriage outside one's own caste is, for instance, forbidden), while the Brahma caste, on the other hand, enjoys many legal privileges. They are, for example, entitled to cheap labour and free services. This rigorous stratification has been maintained in Hindu society for many centuries without creating conflict. On the other hand, religious irreconcilability in particular, caused a struggle between Hindus and Muslims which led to the secession of Pakistan, which is a predominantly Muslim country, from India.

In Rwanda and Burundi the Tutsi pastoralists have subjected the Hutu horticulturists and the Twa to their authority for many centuries. Here, subjection and economic differentiation which are linked to pastoralism and horticulture and a system of slavery to which the Twa are subjected, have brought about a system of stratification which further strengthens existing ethnic differences. The fact that the Twa, who are on the lowest level of the stratification system, support the Tutsi in the ethnic struggle against the Hutu, falsifies reports that class distinction is the cause of the conflict in Rwanda and Burundi (Lewis 1985: 190).

From the above, and also from other examples world-wide it is apparent that the roots of ethnicity lie deeper than class stratification or membership of a particular race. Ethnicity is rather related to culture. For this reason it is not strange that anthropological explanations for the revival of

ethnicity usually start from a cultural perspective (Jenkins 1997:168). Three schools of thought have developed in this regard, namely, the primordial, the instrumental or contextual and the oppositional approaches.

The proponents of the primordial approach put special emphasis on the cultural and psychological factors which underlie ethnicity. According to them a common descent, an own history, language and religion cause sentiments to develop among people which explain the emotional nature of ethnicity. Epstein (1987: xi,xiv, 109) refers to this as the affective dimension of ethnicity which is expressed in ethnic friction and conflict when different ethnic groups find themselves in the same nation-state.

Although the primordial viewpoint is seen as too static and as a kind of *deus ex machina* used to explain ethnicity, it was further expanded by Van den Berghe (1983:222), who supports the socio-biological paradigm in anthropology. According to his point of view, there is a close connection between genetic factors and culture. Van den Berghe (1983:222-227,233) maintains that people are genetically programmed to reproduce successfully and in so doing to perpetuate their descent. In their tendency to favour family members rather than strangers lies the seed of the ethnocentric approach towards those who do not belong to their own cultural group. Van den Berghe uses ethnographic examples from Africa to support his theories and to answer critics of his point of view. These include the high premium placed on fertility and procreation in marriage and the stability of the lineage as well as the connection which exists between prosperity and the fertility of the Swazi king.

From my own research (De Beer 1979 and 1986), that of Wiid (1982:7) and the research of others amongst Bantu-speakers there is sufficient proof to confirm Van den Berghe's theories. The biggest shortcoming in his research is, however, that he does not place sufficient emphasis on the important role of enculturation in the cultivation of an ethnocentric attitude.

One should not deduce from the discussion of the primordial approach that ethnicity is a static phenomenon. It also has a transactional dimension to it which is reflected in its situational nature. Anthropologists using a

situational or an instrumental approach to ethnicity regard the primordial viewpoint with its emphasis on the affective dimension as archaic. They believe that modern people are not so strongly bound by own cultural values and concomitant psychological ties. For them ethnicity is merely an instrument to serve own economic and political interests, aimed at the maximization of own interests at the cost of those of others, especially those of smaller ethnic units within the culturally heterogeneous state.

In his work entitled *Creating ethnicity*, Roosens (1989) says that such an attitude is not strange in a world continually on guard for discrimination against minority groups, the acknowledgement and application of human rights and the redistribution of wealth. As a result of these factors the social climate in the world has changed to such an extent that it is better to rely on ethnic sentiments than, for example, to use trade unions and political parties to achieve a particular goal. For this reason Roosens refers to ethnic groups as '... pressure groups with a noble face' (1989:14). In this sense ethnicity is seen rather as a resource which can be manipulated in the interest of people.

There is also a third approach to ethnicity, namely the oppositional, which strives to bring about a synthesis between the primordial and instrumental viewpoints. According to the proponents of this approach, the emotional or affective component is indispensable for any manifestation of ethnicity. The manifestation of ethnic consciousness does not occur *nolens volens* but is brought about by particular circumstances with emotional impact, such as when an ethnic group perceives its identity as threatened or when it is actually threatened. The oppositional approach is naturally not new. Traces and attributes of it were already observed by well-known anthropologists such as Barth (1969), Epstein (1987), Glazer & Moynihan (1975) and Mönning (1980), especially with regard to the dualistic character and situational nature of ethnicity. In fact, we should remember that ethnicity '...arises out of and within interaction between groups' (Jenkins 1997:11).

The dualistic character of ethnicity refers to the common identity which binds members of an ethnic group to the exclusion of opposing groups. It therefore pertains to a subjective awareness of an own group as opposed

to other (outside) groups. According to Barth (1969:10), it encompasses the setting of boundaries between ethnic groups by means of which a we/they division or an own group/outside group division comes into being. In the we/they categorization, language plays an important role by the stereotyping of members of other groups and the frequent labelling of them in derogatory terms. It is especially when groups are in conflict with one another that they use ethnic terms of abuse towards one another. Together with these terms of abuse, the stereotypical image which the opposing groups have of each other naturally becomes important in drawing clearer boundaries between them. One of the most striking examples of this is certainly the stereotypical image which White Americans built up of the Indians as bloodthirsty barbarians on horses with a headdress of feathers and having tomahawks in their hands. The media, especially films, played an important role in spreading this negative image of Indians throughout the world.

The situational nature of ethnicity is related to the conscious mobilization of an own ethnic consciousness. This implies that ethnicity is sometimes only latently present and flares up when an ethnic group is threatened or when the members mobilise themselves to achieve a particular goal. The manifestation of identity can also change depending on which 'marker' or focus, such as origin, language, religion or music, would offer the greatest possibility of success in the particular circumstances. In this way Afrikaners have, since the end of the previous century, used the Afrikaans language, a historical event such as the Great Trek for the Ox-wagon Trek of 1938 and eventually the political vote as vehicles to try and realise the ideal of self-government.

When Finland was occupied by Russia at the end of the previous century, the well-known composer Jean Sibelius composed the magnificent symphonic work, 'Finlandia', to stimulate the national movement for freedom. In *The encyclopedia of music masterpieces*, David Ewing (1949:530) summarises the meaning of 'Finlandia' as follows:

Finlandia is the voice of the Finnish people...The reeds and strings...speak of the good life in which truth and self-respect and

freedom are the dominant forces. A monumental climax thunders the ultimate triumph of a struggling people to preserve its identity.

It is, however, not only the music of great composers which stimulates ethnic feelings but also resistance songs against foreign conquerors which are used to encourage rebellion. Ethnicity can also have a peaceful face such as when folksongs are sung at the Columbus feast in America or when folkdances are performed on the national days of a nation.

In the application of 'markers' of ethnicity such as language, historical events, or music, these phenomena are elevated to symbols to be used as instruments for specific purposes. It is not the symbol which is most important but the meaning attached to it. In this way, Milosevich, the Serb leader, used the meaning which Serbs attached to their Orthodox Christian religion, to mobilise them against the predominantly Catholic Croats and Muslims in Yugoslavia with whom they are constantly at war. The meaning attached to symbols therefore has psychological and symbolic power which is essential for mobilising ethnicity. In this process ceremonies, rites, processions, protest actions and gatherings are used as means to try and achieve desired aims.

It is clear that preference cannot be given to either the primordial or the instrumental approach. Without the primordial intrinsic manifestation of identity to which reference has already been made and which Coertze (1983:90) distinguishes as an own cultural, historical and geo-political tie, the ethnicity vehicle would be without fuel and could not be mobilised. It is therefore the primordial manifestations of identity which supply the high octane and emotional power to ethnicity. The oppositional approach which is related to both the aforementioned approaches thus gives us the most satisfactory image of the phenomenon of ethnicity in nation-states.

The question now is whether the exposition of the primordial, instrumental and oppositional dimensions of ethnicity give us the all embracing answer to the manifestation of the phenomenon world-wide. This threefold characterization still does not explain what the foundation is of the various manifestations of ethnicity. For this reason it is necessary to take a brief

look at the foundations of ethnicity which are closely related to the aforementioned binding elements of ethnic identity.

## FOUNDATIONS OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

Ethnic identity can only be understood if we focus on people who form its mainspring. According to Landmann (1971:203) humankind lives in a cultural world. People are compelled to create culture in association with other members of society in order to survive. We therefore have to look at the interaction between humans and at culture to find the foundation of ethnicity.

Humans differ from animals (who are guided by their instincts) in that they come into the world as incomplete beings with imperfect instincts. But, humans have exceptional intellectual gifts such as observation, reasoning, an imagination and the abilities to talk and learn. These gifts enable people to create a world of their own, namely culture. Human nature necessitates the creation of culture so that humans can physically survive in their geographical environment and live together with other people in an orderly manner and in harmony with the supernatural being(s) they worship. These creative actions encompass a number of cultural systems such as economic, military, health, social, political, educational, religious and legal systems as well as artistic creations and language.

The particular role played by language in culture i.e. organising people within a cultural context and expressing everything that forms part of culture, is self-evident. This includes the emotional aspect of people which is expressed by means of art forms such as music, literature, drama and sculpture. A person's emotional nature is, however, not only linked to artistic expression but can also be a powerful force behind the mobilising of people in an ethnic context for a particular purpose.

The said different cultural systems do not function separately but form an integrated whole. The basis of the integration is the deep seated values which come into being as members of a cultural group adapt in order to survive in the natural habitat. In this process of adaptation people develop

a shared view of reality and value judgments on how reality is related to their lives and what influence and meaning it has for their lives. In this way the value system or inner beliefs of a cultural group originate. Bidney (1954:400) distinguishes three categories of values, namely, logical (truth) values as human beings understand the real nature of phenomena by means of their brainpower, ethical or moral values which are connected to the acceptability of behaviour, in other words whether it is good or bad, and aesthetic values which are related to what is considered beautiful or ugly. Coertze (1979:8-9) adds a further category namely utility or pragmatic values which are related to the usefulness of phenomena and which are, as will be seen, closely related to the instrumental manifestation of ethnicity.

The deep seated value content of a culture can therefore be seen as the 'spectacles' or frame of reference through which and from which a cultural group views the world. It determines their view of life and the world. Such a world-view naturally differs from one cultural group to another and according to Kearney one of its characteristics is a basic distinction between the Self and the Other, in other words, the own group as opposed to the outside group. In his criticism of the postmodernistic cynism about the differences and distinctions between people Lindholm (1997:758) touches on the foundation of this distinction when he says that,

... human beings have a deeply rooted existential need to posit identities for themselves; to distinguish themselves from outsiders and simultaneously to find a kinship with those who are deemed closest. It is only through a process of manufacturing differentiation and resemblance that we constitute ourselves and others in a moral human community.

It is evident that the differentiation between the own group and the outside group is linked with the respective world-views. The dualistic character of ethnicity (the *we/they* categorising), i.e. its oppositional manifestation therefore springs from differences in world-view.

Cultural identity and the concomitant world-view related to it, are passed on in a cultural group from one generation to the next by means of

enculturation. Humankind therefore not only creates culture but is also the product of culture (Landmann 1971:220). Since enculturation is a subjective process, ethnocentric feelings are already found at an early age among the younger members of a cultural group. These feelings form the norm against which the customs of other groups are judged as right/wrong, good/bad, or energetic/lazy. Although there is room for an own interpretation in the following of cultural values, enough of the group's particular values and traditions are usually transmitted to maintain continuity between the various generations. The group values are also reinforced by the continuous reverting back to and re-interpretation of values and traditions during the revival of ethnic consciousness which, under modern conditions, should apparently have disappeared. The enculturation process also contributes to the forming of a historical consciousness in a cultural group by binding successive generations to each other. Such a historical consciousness also has its roots in a common origin to which ethnic groups frequently revert in order to confirm the authenticity of their identity.

Living together in the same area, develops a territorial consciousness among members of a cultural group. This is closely related to its history since a cultural group lives within its own homeland where its own history evolves so that its members become bound to this homeland through bonds of patriotism. It is this identification with an own territory and the emotional ties related to it which sometimes makes the own fatherland a factor in the stimulation of ethnic identity. In this regard the longing of the Southern Ndebele for an own homeland after having had to live for more than 100 years on White owned farms, and the struggle of the Kurds who are divided among five nation-states in the Middle East and Russia, to restore Kurdistan, are good examples.

The territorial consciousness of a cultural group cannot always be isolated from the own authority which exercises or exercised control over it. Among most cultural groups there are memories of and a longing for a golden era when their own and good leaders ruled. The respect for leaders and the brave deeds they performed for their people is frequently a result of this. Oral tradition and monuments erected for these leaders fulfil an important

role in keeping their memories alive in the minds of later generations. This respect for the own political authority and leaders as an expression of a political consciousness only becomes a reality when people are placed under foreign domination. In this regard Van den Berghe rightly says: 'People never like to be ruled by others, but they detest being ruled by foreigners' (1983:226).

It ought to be clear that a group of people who have lived together for a long time, intermarried and faced life's challenges together is eventually bound together by cultural, historical and geo-political bonds. The revival of ethnic consciousness world-wide appears to hint at a biological bond too as is evident from the high premium placed on common blood ties. This is especially strong in Africa. These binding factors can be studied from outside the group. The form that the bond takes within the consciousness of an own identity is, however, experienced from within and not rationally - only the manner in which it places and shifts emphasis in various time phases can be observed from outside the group. Such a group of people sharing a consciousness of an own identity considers it self as a unique entity which is more than just a cultural group; it can rightly be identified by the term ethnic group. These bonds often originated far back in the past but revive when members of ethnic groups in nation-states and, even in an urban context, are placed under pressure.

The current revival of ethnicity and the return of ethnic groups to their primary values are not new to anthropologists. Studies of acculturation have shown that this process gives rise to resistance movements. In anthropological terminology these are known as nativistic or revival movements. Important amongst the latter movements are the revival and maintenance of selected manifestations of identity or customs from the past in order to survive in the particular acculturating situation. Examples of this are the Ghost Dance of the American Indians of the USA, the oath ceremony of the Mau-Mau of Kenya and the Inkhatha movement among the Zulu in South Africa.

How are we to explain the instrumental application of primordial values. When we look at the deep-seated cultural values of an ethnic group we

realise that people have pragmatic, as well as logical, moral and aesthetic values. These reflect humankind's positive evaluation of certain phenomena because they are useful for survival or for other utilitarian or transactional purposes. Ethnicity could be useful not only, for example, to negotiate economic benefits or political and language rights, but also for secession to be freed from the suffocating effect of domination. The primordial and instrumental manifestations of ethnicity can therefore be explained only after an in-depth study of the cultural values characteristic of ethnic groups.

Not all people identify themselves with a particular ethnic identity. Some identify completely with their professions, sport, hobbies or some or other organisation so that it seems as if any ethnic sense of belonging has, for them, completely disappeared. However, as ethnicity increasingly revives and people identify more and more with ethnic ties, the following words of Petersen (1980:239) become more relevant: 'But what the son wanted to forget, the grandson wanted to remember'. The prediction of Karl Marx that ethnicity would disappear and that Marxism would be the solution for the world, has backfired with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and other states in Eastern Europe, which also shows that ideologies cannot keep people together *ad infinitum*.

About one third of the nation-states in the world is at present grappling with ethnic conflict within their boundaries which indicates that ethnicity can no longer be written off as a nuisance which will sooner or later disappear. Horowitz (1985:xii) points out that ethnic conflict has claimed more than ten million lives between the time of the Second World War and the middle eighties - about the same number that died in the First World War.

Since the International Labour Organization (ILO) of the United Nations, in accordance with Convention 169 of 1989, actively started promoting the right of indigenous groups to maintain their unique values within nation-states and even to strive for some form of self-government, and since the UN Declaration of 1993 as the Year of Indigenous Peoples (Levinson 1994:128), there has been a tremendous ethnic reaction. Three hundred

million indigenous people from seventy countries were represented at the United Nations Conference on indigenous people held in Geneva. This indicates that they are not satisfied with their present position in nation-states. We are obliged to take note of the implications of ethnicity for South Africa.

## ETHNICITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

It is clear that ethnicity is a reality to which South Africa, with its culturally heterogeneous population, cannot turn a blind eye. Various attempts which tie in with the discussed models of ethnicity, have been made since unification in 1910 to accommodate this cultural diversity peacefully. The primordial model undoubtedly reminds one of the premises on which the policy of separate development was built, namely the notion that every ethnic group has its own cultural identity which does not change easily and essentially in its interaction with other groups. It was further believed that if the dividing factors of cultural identities are further reinforced by physical differences, concrescence into a new unit - the melting-pot-idea - could not be a viable solution for South Africa. In these circumstances a policy of apartheid or separate development, recognising the identity of each ethnic group and allowing it to develop its identity in accordance with its own potential and needs in an own territory (Coertze 1976:11-24) was seen as a viable alternative.

The demise of apartheid gave impetus to a situational or instrumental approach to South Africa's complex ethnic situation. The advocates of such an approach blamed the policy of apartheid for the country's cultural heterogeneity and, especially, for people's consciousness of their own identity. These would have been something of the past, they argued, and, had it not been for the policy of apartheid, South Africa's people would have been a national unit long ago. The new situation in South Africa suddenly 'convinced' even advocates and staunch supporters of apartheid of the evils and negative effects of the old policy.

With the arrival of the 'new' South Africa reconciliation became one of the national aims of the government. This implies that inequalities and any

form of racism have to go. The we/they divisions between people which might trigger friction and conflict have to be broken down so that the population of South Africa will coalesce into one nation. The resurgence of ethnicity can, however, not be ignored by the architects of the 'new' South Africa. Cultural differences with their roots in primordial values are still a reality which can still ignite ethnic strife and conflict. To counter this possible threat to the unity of the country the idea of the rainbow nation or 'unity in diversity' was born.

Such a process of nation-building requires measures to manage and direct it so that conrescence into a new unit occurs with the least friction, and that the stability of the country is not threatened. Accordingly, the South African Constitution of 1996 recognizes South Africa's cultural heterogeneity. Article 6 of the Constitution makes provision for 11 official languages as well as the recognition and promotion of a few indigenous minority languages such as Indian, Khoi and also of Western languages such as German and Portuguese. In addition provision is made for people to use the language and practise the culture of their choice, provided that the practising of these language and cultural rights (see Articles 30 and 31) does not clash with the values and aspirations embodied in the Bill of Rights, i.e. equality, non-discrimination, non-racialism, non-sexism and freedom which are declared as national ideals. The constitution further provides for the recognition of Traditional Authorities, with a house of traditional authorities at provincial level, and, at the national level, a Council of Traditional Leaders. The right to self-determination (from which the Volkstaat Council stems) is also provided for (Article 235).

Will these provisions in the constitution be sufficient to keep the rainbow nation together? The recognition of cultural and language rights has already stimulated the revival of the cultural identity of the Griqua population to such an extent that they have been officially recognized as one of the indigenous groups of South Africa. Some of the old Khoi groups such as the Namaqua, Cochoqua and Koranna (Halford nd:10; Vorster & De Beer 1996:169-170), which fell into oblivion even during the time of apartheid, have come to the fore to be recognised as indigenous groups. In addition, Coloured people near Johannesburg have established a Coloured Resistance

Movement as a forum to fight for the rights of Coloured people who are dissatisfied with their position in the present political dispensation. From these examples it is obvious that cultural identity, rooted in primordial values, are still alive amongst certain groups in South Africa, and has even been stimulated by the new developments.

The reaction of whites varies from that of active participation in and support of the new political dispensation to that of withdrawal into a 'volkstaat' where they can determine their own destiny. In this regard Van den Berghe (1983:226) rightly says: 'People never liked to be ruled by others, but they detest being ruled by foreigners'. The establishment of CVE (Christian Volksown Education)-schools and Radio Pretoria with fast-growing support (especially among Afrikaners), also show that Afrikaner primordial values are still a reality and should be taken into account. In between there are people who are considering emigration as an option and those who are apathetic to the new political situation. Most of the latter have adopted a wait-and-see approach. There are also many people who support the new dispensation as a means to an end, such as furthering their financial interests, making a great variety of consumer goods available and establishing sports ties with other countries.

During and after the euphoria of the election of 1994 the illusion of the unity of the rainbow nation was particularly accentuated by the media and politicians. Sentiments specifically related to African values and expressed by means of the concept of *ubuntu*, suddenly became a very popular theme in public debates and in training courses for people in the public and private sectors. Further, when president Thabo Mbeki speaks of a cultural renaissance in Africa it obviously implies that African values should play a significant role in the process. Despite the tremendous influence of the forces of industrialization, urbanization, modernization and globalization it is evident that African values, albeit in a Pan-Africanist idiom, are still an important resource which is being used in South Africa's nation-building efforts. The cosmological or primordial values of Bantu-speaking people are therefore also employed as an instrument in the nation-building programme of the present government.

One should bear in mind that Bantu-speakers in particular, have been subjected to Western influence. They have adapted to the changing situation and selectively re-interpreted various cultural elements of the dominant Western culture, for example, in the acceptance of tombstones by Xhosa Christians in association with ancestral rituals. In this way foreign cultural elements are culturally selected, interpreted and integrated into the own system of cultural values and ideas to ensure cultural continuation and to prevent possible cultural disruption.

Recent research by Cook (1987), Van Niekerk (1992) and Esterhuysen (1992) shows that traditional African cosmological values continue to guide the lives of people in urban areas, despite the influence of nearly a century of processes of urbanization, industrialization and modernization. In spite of being converted to the Christian religion and in spite of general acceptance of modern medical services and practices, the belief in ancestor spirits, magical powers and traditional practitioners continues and has even become stronger. From a Western point of view these cultural domains are incompatible and mutually exclusive.

From the preceding discussion it is clear that no matter how the state contemplates to facilitate its nation-building plans, ethnicity in South Africa is, as elsewhere in the world, no myth but a reality. Careful management of the potentially explosive ethnic situation in South Africa is therefore required which could become a demanding undertaking in the unfolding of the present dispensation. In South Africa we do not have a dominant or cultural majority group to which lesser groups can be linked and which can assimilate them (McAllister 1997:75). Changing the identity of numerous groups of people whose ways of living differ comprehensively is not easy. After about 400 years, the Americans still have not succeeded in assimilating the Afro-Americans, who make up about 12% of the population, into the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) core group. In Sri Lanka where the Sinhalese-speakers make up over 70% and the Tamil-speakers approximately 11% of the population, the latter, who are Hindu, began a guerilla war to fight for an own state in the north of the country. This happened after Sinhalese was recognised as the only official language and Buddhism was declared the state religion. Today, constant

riots and guerilla activities, instigated by Tamil speakers, which have a destabilising effect in Sri Lanka, demonstrate the sad outcome of the policy of Singhalization (Toland 1993:85-88).

The South African government should be careful not to fall in the same ethnic trap as the rulers of Sri Lanka with regard to language policy. Although cultural and language rights are entrenched in the Constitution of South Africa, preference is increasingly given to English as 'language of communication'. It is obvious that English is being used as a catalyst in the promotion of the nation-building ideals of the government. Although English is not the home language of the majority of black people it appears from their reaction so far as if most of them have an instrumentalist approach to the language issue. However, it can almost be predicted that the Afrikaner, who has always placed a high premium on his language rights (cf. Wêreldspektrum 1983: 132-141) will not *ad infinitum* tolerate the violation of its language rights.

How ethnicity will be dealt with and managed in the government's evolving nation-building programme is not easy to predict in a situation as complex as that of South Africa. It is of crucial importance that the provisions in the Constitution, related to cultural diversity and self-determination, should not be used as a smoke-screen to conceal the nation-building aspirations of the government. It should rather be acknowledged that ethnicity involves group values and group pride which is fed from the deepest source of human existence, namely an own culture. Ethnicity is neither a figment of human imagination nor a temporary phenomenon that,

...show...signs of withering away. In itself this is neither a 'good thing' nor a 'bad thing'. It is ... just very human. It is hard to imagine the social world in their absence (Jenkins 1997:170).

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