

tent one wishes to accommodate this diversity, he says, one would be considered a multiculturalist.

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Cora Govers and Hans Vermeulen, eds. *The Politics of Ethnic Consciousness*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997). xi, 377 pp., \$79.95 cloth.

Govers and Vermeulen's book seems to be a timely one, considering the resurgence of inter-ethnic strife that is causing so much misery in many parts of the world, especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war. The book, however, is not an expose on the politics of ethnic consciousness. Rather, it is a collection of case studies that address certain aspects of ethnic consciousness. Govers and Vermeulen provide the theoretical context for these studies in the introductory first chapter of the book. Indeed, the book can be usefully divided into two main parts, with the first chapter constituting one part and the rest of the chapters constituting the other.

In the first chapter, Govers and Vermeulen describe, albeit briefly, the changes or shifts in ethnic studies since the 1960s. The first is the shift to social organization of ethnic differences. They point out that those who focused on social organization, like Fredrik Barth for example, have been dubbed "situationalists". Their study of ethnicity became a study of ethnic politics, with ethnic groups regarded as political and economic interest groups.

The second shift occurred in the 1980s—a shift to ethnic consciousness that is characterized as "constructionist". Much of the first chapter is focused on this second shift. Govers and Vermeulen hasten to point out, however, that constructionism is neither a movement nor a school, but its central concern is ethnic identity itself.

Ethnicity, they say, was regarded as a pre-modern phenomenon in functionalist theory—one that was destined to disappear as a result of modernization. Ethnic minorities were expected to be assimilated by dominant majority cultures. Govers and Vermeulen attribute this to an air of confidence that prevailed within nation states up to the end of WWII.

The post-WWII era saw the reassertion of ethnicity, brought about by, among other things, anti-colonial struggle and the rejection of assimilation policies in that nation states. In the United States, Jews had rejected assimilation as early as the turn of the century. In the 1960s, African Americans not only rejected assimilation but also asserted their racial and cultural identity. Ethnicity became a matter of ascription *and*

self ascription according to Govers and Vermeulen. They define ethnic identity as one distinguished by “a belief in common origin, descent, history, and culture” (6). Ethnic markers such as religion, language and physical appearance (race) are the stuff of politics of ethnic consciousness. Govers and Vermeulen concede that racial markers are more difficult to pass. Indeed, they point out, that certain social scientists—mainly sociologists—caution against subsuming “race relations” under ethnicity.

Ethnic identities are often presented by ethnic ideologists as ancient and unchanging. Such presentations, according to Govers and Vermeulen, are socially constructed to serve social needs at a particular point in time. This is why social constructionism is a useful concept in the study of ethnicity. Most of the case studies reported in the rest of the chapters in the book illustrate aspects of constructionism. For example, the Sinhala-Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka has fostered ethnic solidarity on each side. Peter Kloos points out in his study that Sinhala used to refer to a royal dynasty, but now it has become a bona fide ethnic identity for the Sinhalese.

Another study in the volume shows how social construction of ethnic identities sometimes entails the invention of traditions or rewriting of history. An example of this is a “new” ethnic identity that is apparently being constructed in Kosovo and Macedonia. Ger Duijzings points out that Gypsies in those areas are now claiming an Egyptian ethnic identity—a claim that he thought amusing at first. Indeed, even the Egyptian cultural attaché thought so, too. However, whether or not these are truly Egyptians is beside the point. The fact is that they are acting like they are. Duijzings notes that they even established contacts with the Egyptian ambassador. The Egyptians, in turn, have been intrigued by the claim to the point of making a television documentary about these self identified “Egyptians”. How long this identity claim will endure is anybody’s guess, but it will likely depend on social conditions.

Govers and Vermeulen see constructionism as a useful concept in the study of ethnicity. However, they point out that other scholars regard it as a passing fashion. Nevertheless, the politics of ethnic consciousness is something that will always be around as long as inequalities exist between ethnic groups. The main weakness of this book is that it does not treat the politics of ethnic consciousness in sufficient theoretical depth. Whereas the various studies reported in the book are good illustrations of the concept, they are too detailed and too lengthy for the general reader.

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