

Research Group

“E Pluribus Unum?: Ethnic Identities in Processes of Transnational Integration in the Americas”

Bielefeld, Germany, October 2008 through July 2009

Project Phase I: “The Field of Identity Politics: Theoretical Foundations” (October - December 2008)

In order to elucidate – in the context of inter-American transnationalism – the role of ethnicity in the field of identity politics, the first project phase we will focus on the following two aspects:

Conceptualizing the Field of Identity Politics

- Constellations of social and cultural agents in ethnic negotiations and conflicts
- Articulations of identity discourses; the positioning of self and not-self
- Articulations of different horizons of interaction (from local to transnational and from individual to communal)
- Processes of translation between discourses, horizons of interaction, social agents
- Ways in which Bourdieu's notion of the field of identity politics can accommodate the narration, performance, or invention of ethnic identities

Transnationalism and Ethnic Identity

- Migration, ethnic diasporas, and translocal communities
- Invention, narration, and performance of new ethnicities
- De- and re-territorializations and the horizons of interaction of ethnic agents
- Ethnic representations in the wake of a revolution in media technology

Project Phase II: “Media and Ethnic Identity Politics” (January - March 2009)

The second phase will focus on the importance of media in the negotiations of ethnic identities in processes of transnational integration. We have to take into account that the access to media strongly influences the possibilities of social and cultural agents to position themselves in the field of identity politics. The revolution of media technology has profoundly changed the regimes of representation of ethnic identity politics in recent decades, and institutional media politics can certainly have a deep impact on these issues. On the one hand, one can observe relatively autonomous spaces for ethnic self-representation, where cultural agents communicate individual and group concerns to local, national or even transnational publics. On the other hand, culture industries produce discourses on ethnicity and multiculturalism so as to address demands for commodified and stereotyped imaginaries of ethnic groups and to further the integration of marginalized popular cultures. Thirdly, the reception of these discourses implies complex processes of cultural translation and strategies of resistance by ethnic groups and cultural producers. Last, the mise en scène of ethnicity by political agents in the media has become an important field of study, as strategies of ethnification play an increasing role in social conflicts.

We aim to establish a broad interdisciplinary forum for discussing topics like:

- access to media and ethnic self representation
- the media and strategies of cultural resistance
- regimes of representation in the culture industries
- cultural translation of ethnic imaginaries
- ethnicity in the media as part of political contentions

Guest speakers from the fields of media politics and cultural production will allow to link academic research with cultural politics and practices.

Project Phase III: Ethnicity in Urban Spaces (March - May 2009)

The third phase will focus on the conflicts and negotiations of ethnicity in urban processes of transnationalization. The diversity of ethnic practices in everyday life and of inter-ethnic contact zones will allow us to study urban transculturations of ethnicity. Such processes manifest themselves, for example, in urban rituals, festivities, and markets as well as in consumer goods, such as food, clothes, and music. Often they also lead to the formation of specific urban ethnicities.

Spatial relations are no longer shaped in a singular manner by the nation state or by the dialectical opposition between city and country, as new spaces of translocal interaction are emerging for ethnic groups. Ethnically informed spatial practices in cities can be observed particularly in monuments, architecture, and street names, but also in subaltern cultural representations such as graffiti.

We also aim to focus on the global competition between cities, which employs ethnicity as an important resource in city marketing. Key examples of this phenomenon include current tendencies in tourist-oriented marketing and the restoration of historic town centers in Latin America that commodify stereotyped representations of colonial ethnicity. On the other hand, urban social movements strategically employ ethnicity to gain autonomy and/or claim state or municipal social services. In this project phase following topics are of particular interest:

- ethnicity in urban semiotics,
- ethnicity as a resource in city marketing and planning,
- sociological approaches to the analysis of ethnic urban movements,
- inter-ethnic cultural practices in everyday life
- cultural geography of translocal urban spaces.

Invited guest speakers from the UNESCO Cultural Heritage Program and from urban social movements as well as artists addressing urban issues in their work will enrich the discussion with insights from identity politics put into practice. Moreover, an excursion of the participants in this work phase to Berlin will allow us to view the urban processes at work there with regard to ethnic politics.

Project Phase IV: “Ethnicity, Hybridity, and Plural Identities” (May - July 2009)

In the fourth phase, we will examine strategies of ethnic identification with reference to everyday practices, the cultural production of ethnic elites, and the impact of institutions. Narrative and performative constructions of ethnicity, hybridity, and plural identities will be studied in the context of institutional policies of multiculturalism. These constructions of ethnicity will be analyzed as creative practices ranging from (re-)productions of multicultural policies to forms of decolonization. Our focus will be on the creation and strategic use of cultural capital (Bourdieu) that influences the (self-)positioning of individuals and groups in the field of identity politics. In this context we shall examine language (bilingualism, multilingualism, linguistic hybridity, language politics), education (bilingual education, intercultural learning), the role of public intellectuals, political discourse and participation as both factors of everyday culture and topics negotiated in literature and the arts.

The issues to be examined with regard to the establishment, uses, and effects of ethnic identification include:

- areas of cultural resistance in the context of political and economic transnationalization,

- the ambivalence of ethnic and cultural hybridity that positions individuals and groups in between accommodation and subversion,
- the interconnectedness of ethnicity with other identity factors like gender, class, nationality, or political ideology,
- the shifting (self-)positionings resulting from the concept of plural identities,
- the “decolonization of knowledge” as an outcome of post-colonial reflections of ethnic positioning.