



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Kaufmann, Eric P. (2008) Themed section on dominant groups. *Nations and Nationalism* 14 (4), pp. 739-742. ISSN 1354-5078.

Downloaded from: <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/2155/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>  
contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

or alternatively



## **BIROn** - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

---

Enabling open access to Birkbeck's published research output

### Themed section on dominant groups

#### **Journal Article**

<http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/2155>

Version: Submitted (Unrefereed)

#### **Citation:**

Kaufmann, E. (2008) Themed section on dominant groups – <i>Nations and Nationalism</i> 14(4), pp.739-742
--

© 2008 Wiley Blackwell

[Publisher version](#)

---

All articles available through Birkbeck ePrints are protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

---

[Deposit Guide](#)

Contact: [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk)

## Theme Section on Dominant Groups

Over the past few years, scholars of nationalism and ethnicity have increasingly turned their attention to matters of dominant group identity. In addition to the work of Oren Yiftachel on ethnocracy (1999), Andreas Wimmer on nationalist exclusion (2002) and myself on dominant ethnicity (Kaufmann 2004), there are the fresh investigations of several Quebecois scholars, Alain Gagnon, André Lecours and Geneviève Nootens, into dominant nationhood. (Gagnon, Lecours and Nootens 2007) What is encouraging is the pattern whereby an established subdiscipline, which builds on previous contributions, appears to be developing. 'Dominant group' is deliberately ambiguous phraseology: designed to encompass the 'harder' concepts of dominant ethnicity as well as dominant nationhood, dominant minorities as much as majorities.

Why the sudden interest? I would offer three reasons: first, the cracks in the established scholarly tradition of focusing on either national states, secessionist minority nations, or urban ethnic minorities. Dominant ethnicity falls between these stools, and is often conflated with nationalism or possibly ethnic nationalism. Rogers Brubaker's excellent (1996) work, for example, seems to grope for a new vocabulary when using terms like 'nationalising state' and 'homeland nationalism'. The inadequacy of this reflex to conceptually stretch the term 'nation' has been acutely exposed by the second reason for interest in this area, namely the separation of dominant ethnicity from the nation under liberal pressure. As post-1960s western liberal norms press nation-states from Canada to Estonia to become more inclusive 'civic' entities with colour-blind immigration and citizenship policies, the old dominant ethnies are increasingly cut adrift. An Anglo-Protestant Canadian can no more depend on the multicultural Canadian state-nation to narrate her ethnic identity than her cousins in Northern Ireland can rely on Gordon Brown's Britishness. The same might be true of a Jew in a hypothetical 'civic' state of Israel-Palestine. Israelopalestinianism as the new Zionism, anyone?

Yet today, the new 'inclusive' state still believes it can maintain the old fiction that the dominant ethnic group is somehow non-ethnic and therefore not part of the identity game. The nondescript appellation 'white' on European states' ethnic monitoring forms (even distinguished from 'white Irish' in the UK census!) represents a hangover from a previous era when one could assume that the dominant ethnic group and the nation were coterminous. By contrast, it now appears that dominant ethnicity is increasingly finding sites outside the nation - some nasty, some benign - to reproduce its collective memory and ethnic boundaries. Consequently, it has become difficult for scholars to follow the practice of government functionaries and blur the conceptual line between dominant ethnic group and nation.

The final reason for an awakened interest in dominant ethnicity concerns the collapse of communism in 1989 and the associated 'Third Wave' of democratisation, which has only recently crested due to problems of democratisation in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. This has sharpened the struggle for ethnic dominance in the developing world. The postcolonial world shows quite clearly that the equation of nation with dominant ethnies doesn't work. This is not to say there is no nationalism or ethnies-nation link, but the concepts of nation and dominant ethnic group remain distinct processes in many of these societies. Nations often draw upon ideologies like pan-Arabism, pan-

Africanism, Islamism or socialism, beneath which various ethnic antagonists vie for dominance.

The articles and debates collected here represent an attempt to consolidate and advance this debate. Whilst current developments accentuate the relevance of dominant ethnicity as a concept, and dominant group identity as a field of enquiry, there is always the danger of entropy, of falling back on established, albeit blunter, instruments like nation or state. As it stands, the fare on offer at leading nationalism conferences like ASEN (or the relevant sections of the AHA, APSA, ASA, IPSA or ISA) shows that many graduate students in the field rely exclusively on an earlier generation of concepts.

We begin this section with a paper by Oded and myself which traces a pattern of development from dominant minority to dominant majority ethnicity which we believe characterises a wide sweep of human history and geography. We see a resemblance between the aristocratic dominant ethnic minorities ('ethnic cores') of early modern western Europe and the dominant minorities of diverse states like Kenya, Syria and Iraq. Though oceans apart (in both saltwater and time), these cases exemplify a 'premodern' situation before the principle of majority rule has made its mark. The shift from premodern dominant minorities to modern dominant majorities can be seen in Iraq, with the ascent of a Shia majority and demise of a Sunni minority. But we claim that it can also be grasped in eighteenth century France as the French elite minority which carried a sense of French ethnic consciousness was replaced by a regime based on popular sovereignty which subsequently spread the sense of French ethnicity to a majority of the state's population. In this way, modern democratisation forced a dominant minority to become a dominant majority. Elsewhere in Europe, dominant minorities like the Baltic Russians or Czech Germans gave way to ethnic majorities like the Estonians and Czechs who sent their dominant ethnic minority overlords packing.

Next, David Brown reconsiders the commonplace that dominant ethnicity is necessarily malign. He identifies two faces of dominant ethnic majorities by examining the Thai case, notably the recent support of the ethnic Thai majority for anti-Muslim violence in the south of the country. We are used to thinking about the 'janus-faced' character of nationalism, but it is refreshing to see the same heuristic applied to dominant ethnic groups. In its confident mode, dominant ethnicity is generous toward minorities, taking pride in wider state achievements. Indeed, he argues that it may well be the case that dominant ethnic majorities are needed to advance the universal standards of liberal democracy and good governance. During times of perceived threat, by contrast, dominant ethnic groups react harshly against ethnic minorities. More broadly, the Thai case shows that if we wish to comprehend state violence against ethnic minorities, we must grasp the nettle of dominant ethnicity, not just the more realist activity of faceless bureaucrats or power-seeking elites.

Like Brown, Philip Resnick identifies alternate modes of dominant ethnicity. He moves the discussion even further inward than Brown to examine the self-consciousness of dominant nations and the dominant ethnies which anchor them. He deploys the literary metaphors of hubris and melancholy to identify the mindstates of dominant groups. Ontology is one of the most neglected aspects of dominant ethnicity since studies have heretofore focused principally on the 'outer' power relations of these entities. This paper shows that dominant nations like the anglophones of Canada view the entire nation-state (i.e. Canada, not merely 'English Canada') as their primary identity. Dominant ethnic

groups like British-Canadians, Castilians and Walloons likewise invest heavily in a 'greater' statewide identity. At one time, dominant groups were hubristic while minorities lamented their status as lost peoples. As minorities have become more assertive in claiming national identity and the imperial projects of the British, Spanish and Belgians have collapsed, dominant groups have exchanged their hubris for the melancholy which was once the preserve of minorities.

Finally, we conclude this section with a debate between Andreas Wimmer on the one hand, and Oded Haklai and myself on the other. To what extent does the debate over dominant ethnicity represent an advance over previous constructions? Can we conceive of early modern western Europe as dominated by ethnic minorities which then became majorities, or were premodern elites lacking in ethnic consciousness, in which case nations and their ethnic exclusivity emerge only as lineaments of modernity? How distinct are dominant ethnic processes in the postcolonial world from those of the West and East Asia? These are some of the issues which we will be addressing in this final aspect of the Themed Section on dominant group identity.

## REFERENCES

- Brubaker, R. 1996. *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gagnon, Alain, André Lecours et Geneviève Nootens ed. 2007. *Les Nationalismes Majoritaires Contemporaines: identite, memoire, pouvoir*. Montreal: Quebec Amerique.
- Kaufmann, Eric (ed.). 2004. *Rethinking Ethnicity: Majority Groups and Dominant Minorities*. London: Routledge.
- Wimmer, Andreas. 2002. *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict. Shadows of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yiftachel, Oren. 1999. "Ethnocracy: the Politics of Judaizing Israel/Palestine." *Constellations* 6 (3):364-90.