

Ethnolinguistic Nationality

Since the creation of the nation-state, states have mostly comprised of a single ethnolinguistic group or related ethnolinguistic groups. Some of these states, however, contain multiple ethnolinguistic groups or nations while prioritizing the state's original national and cultural origin. Some have argued that language, a central aspect of culture, is definitive of a national identity; thus, national territory could be defined by ethnolinguistic boundaries. In Catalonia, the northeastern most region of Spain, for example, approximately 5.5 million people speak Catalan and identify primarily as Catalan, not Spanish, yet Catalonia is not an independent state. With a population of 2.7 million people, a country such as Albania has far fewer inhabitants and speakers of its national language, Albanian, and yet it comprises a country. In 2017, many Catalans voted in favor of an independence referendum that would lead to the sovereign state of Catalonia (approximately 92% voted in favor, 8% voted against). However, Spanish authorities suppressed the Catalan independence movement, citing the priority of constitutional integrity by maintaining their current territories as predominant to the self-determination of the Catalan nation.

Proponents of ethnolinguistic self-determination believe that nations are primarily defined by the culture or cultures of their population, rather than an allegiance to a political entity. In addition to Catalan separatists, other contemporary examples of those in favor of ethnolinguistic nationality include Kurdish independentists, Corsican independentists, Palestinian independentists and many other groups of people for whom their nationality does not match their ethnolinguistic identity.

Critics point to how ethnolinguistic nationalism dangerously promotes discrimination against those who may not speak the language of the ethnic majority. Although there are marginalized groups who could benefit from this form of national liberation, nationalist groups such as the Nazi Party in Germany during World War II have also used these principles to suppress minority groups under the premise of liberation from an "oppressive minority." Furthermore, due to the high density of distinct ethnolinguistic groups in comparison to that of currently existing states (with hundreds if not thousands of languages defined in India alone), international politics could be torn apart by granulated ethnolinguistic boundaries. Ethnolinguistic groups also are not always completely distinct, forming vast continua, providing difficulty in defining these ethnic groups, such as those split along the border of India and Pakistan.

Discussion Questions

1. To what extent should ethnolinguistic identity be considered in determining nationality, or is national determination based on this type of identity unethical?

2. If some ethnolinguistic groups are able to form nation-states, how is fairness allotted to those groups who do not have their own independent state?
3. Should all states be created as nation states, or should multiethnic nations such as the United States, India, or China be able to contain their many ethnicities within their borders? How would a multiethnic model maintain equity for all its ethnicities, and how would a nation-state maintain itself without oppressing minorities or outright banning other national origins?

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