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James R. McDonald

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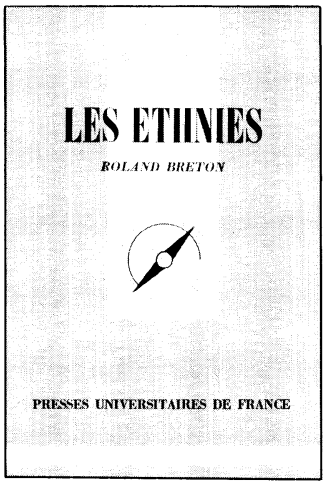

Ethnicity is much in vogue in our times. On every continent, nationalist and secessionist ambitions based on ethnic differences are stressing, and in many cases tearing, the fabric of traditional societies, many of which have long complacently assumed themselves to be contented, multi-cultural states. If the world had become inured to the separatist-inspired violence in Northern Ireland, the Basque provinces, or several parts of Africa, it has been rudely reminded of the potential for ethnic mischief by current events in Southeast Europe and the former Soviet Union. How little we know! Shortly before his untimely death, George Hoffman, undoubtedly the keenest observer of Eastern Europe among American geographers, reacted angrily to even a casual suggestion that post-Tito Yugoslavia might eventually disintegrate into its pre-existing component states.

But what is ethnicity, exactly? In this revised version of a classic monograph first published a decade ago, Roland Breton offers some thoughtful clues to a complex and controversial topic. The very title reflects the uncertainty and caution with which the subject must be approached: "ethnies" appears in no standard dictionary, and Breton spends considerable time exploring the origin of the word and its relation to such other concepts as "peoples", "tribes", "nations", "ethnic groups", and similar terms in several languages. The essential problem is that the entire notion of ethnicity is entangled with uncomfortable overtones of racism and other divisive ideas that have caused the world much misery.

To put the discussion on a rational basis, Breton, whose impeccable credentials include numerous publications on language and culture — notably focused on India — suggests two definitions. In the narrow sense, "ethnie" designates a group of individuals sharing the same maternal language. In a larger sense, the word defines a group linked by a complex of common anthropological, linguistic, political, and historical characteristics — in short a culture. In either case, language looms large as a basis of ethnic definition, a conclusion abundantly justified by a survey of the world's current ethnic trouble spots.

The bulk of the book is devoted to chapters on the scientific classification of "ethnies", their traits and characteristics, and their evolutionary dynamics. A sketchy survey of ethnic groups in the modern world — including a surprisingly naïve review of the former Soviet Union — is followed by a hopeful 10-point "bill of rights" for ethnic groups within larger societies. In a brief conclusion, Breton notes that "it is time to realize that the richness of humanity... is entirely in its diversity, which is not a vain luxury, but the measure of its uninterrupted creativity". The «Que sais-je?» series is one of the wonders of publishing. With a list of titles now approaching 2 700, a marvelously eclectic taste in subject matter, and a consistently high standard of editorial quality, it is rare to find a francophone library without at least a few numbers (it is also translated into several other languages). The strengths of the series remain what they have traditionally been: comparable size and arrangement, no matter what the topic, intellectual integrity and measure for the long-running success of the venture. Similarly, weaknesses are also predictable: limited notes and bibliography, the use of inexpensive paper (by now recycled, one hopes), and a small format that makes the complex maps so beloved of French cartographers almost impossible to decipher.

Withal, this book is a rational, and thus valuable, contribution to the growing literature on the nature and consequences of ethnic differences and tensions. Roland Breton is a thoughtful and dispassionate guide through the dangerous landscapes of ethnicity, which may well hold more unpleasant surprises for the world. Classic geopolitical theory holds that when superpowers are exhibiting threatening behavior, ethnic groups tend to subsume their differences in the "national" interest. With the end of the "cold war", and the removal of big-power conflict as a realistic threat, local concerns and ethnic-nationalistic sentiments again rise to the surface. We have by no means seen the end of this process: the concept of world as "melting pot" is probably more utopian than ever.

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