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Ethnic Conflict

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Glossary

- G0005 **Diaspora** An organized ethnic community of long-term residence away from the historical ethnic homeland.
- G0010 **Ethnicity** Group identity based on belief in a common past and future, a shared culture, and association to a specific place.
- G0015 **Ethno-Class** A social position based on a combination of ethnic identity and class affiliation.
- G0020 **Ethnocracy** A regime under which a dominant ethnic group appropriates the state apparatus and shapes most public policies.
- G0025 **Ethnonationalism** Political mobilization aimed at achieving, consolidating, or protecting ethnic territorial sovereignty.
- G0030 **National Self-Determination** The ability of a nation to shape its collective identity and determine its preferred form of government.
- G0035 **Spatiality** The articulation of a human phenomenon in spatial terms, both discursive and material.

Introduction

P0005 The world's political map has been profoundly shaped by ethnic identities and conflicts over space. This article reviews and critically analyzes the political geography of ethnicity, focusing on the modern epoch. The main perspective advanced here is that the construction and evolution of ethnic identities are closely related to spatial conflicts. Hence, the very nature of ethnicity cannot be fathomed without 'opening up' its underlying geographical and political foundations. The article also reviews the historical construction of ethnicity; its relations with systems of spatial power, especially the colonial, national and capitalist state; and recent transformations in the wake of accelerating urbanization and globalization.

Defining Ethnicity

P0010 Ethnicity gained prominence during the 1970s, with the growing interest in social diversity and justice, and has since become one of the central questions of

contemporary social science. Ethnicity is based on the Greek root 'ethnos', meaning 'blood connection', as distinct from the 'demos', which was a territorial-civil association. Over the centuries, ethnicity changed its meaning, alternatively being associated with tribal, regional, religious, class, and national affiliations.

In this article, as in the majority of contemporary writings on the subject, ethnicity will be defined as group identity, based on common cultural affiliation and a belief in a shared ancestry and a common future. Ethnicity is predominantly linked to specific places, either existing or mythical, as a central pillar of identity construction. Ethnic identities – like all social constructs – are fluid and malleable, tending to rise in social and political importance during periods of conflict, and wane during times of peaceful ethnic coexistence. P0015

It is useful to sharpen the above definition of ethnicity by highlighting two ideal types: 'immigrant' and 'homeland'. The purpose is not to create a (false) dichotomy of ethnic experiences, but to highlight dimensions of the phenomenon, which help explain the wide variety of ethnic groups, their boundaries, and goals. P0020

Immigrant ethnicity is based on a long-standing distance from the homeland, and is typically characterized by a gradual process of integration and assimilation into the host society, although the extent of this process varies greatly between groups. Immigrant ethnic groups commonly struggle for civil rights and equality in the allocation of public resources. The gradual assimilation and mobilization of most immigrant groups into host societies has often transformed their identity into what sociologist Herbert Gans termed 'symbolic ethnicity'. Such identity maintains several cultural markers, such as holidays, religion, and food, which do not threaten the main values and practices of the host society, especially the state's cultural orientation, its legal, economic, and political systems. Symbolic ethnicity imposes negligible constraints on major life decisions of minority members, being expressed in their relative freedom on matters such as place of residence, marriage, work, politics, and leisure. Immigrant ethnicity thus generally marks a gradual erosion of the group's structural distinction from the host society and from other immigrant minorities. P0025

On the other hand, homeland ethnicity is held by groups residing on the territory believed to be the 'cradle' P0030

of their identity and history. Drawing on the group's geographical continuity and the corresponding preservation of cultural and social boundaries, the distinction of the group is maintained, often quite intensely. Residence on homeland territory is often accompanied by the establishment of ethnic institutions (in areas such as education, culture and religion) which reproduce cultural and social boundaries between the group in question and neighboring groups. Needless to say, homeland ethnicity is also subject to change, but its relative stability has been a source of cultural and political power. This power has been used extensively to transform homeland ethnic groups into national movements, by making inseparable the links between collective identity, power, and land, as powerfully illustrated by the (now replaced) national anthem in pre-1994 South Africa.

Gellner explain, the political and spatial reorganization of human society (marked by urbanization, industrialization, nationalism, and colonialism) have profoundly broadened and politicized cultural identities.

European colonialism, which saw the conquest and control of most of the globe by between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, had a central role in this transformation. In parallel, the modern nation-state was created in Europe, elevating ethnicity to the level of state ideology, and fueling the stratification of colonized identities, as discussed in the next section. The colonial period is critical because it set the scene for ethnic relations and conflicts to the present day. European colonizers did not simply attempt to control and co-opt local populations, as commonly practiced by earlier empires, but to comprehensively manage their identity, economy, and geography. European colonial rulers, aided by modern technologies and new forms of deadly violence, systematically registered and classified conquered populations as both ethnically (and often biologically) different and inferior. This created the foundation for centuries of systematic forms of global racism, based on the putative superiority of the white 'race'.

New geographies lay at the heart of the colonial period. As shown by geographer Derek Gregory, this was both physical and mental. Colonialism rearranged colonized societies by facilitating European settlement and exploitation of local labor and resources, destroying and displacing local societies and their living environments, augmenting local urbanization, and introducing urban and regional planning. In addition, colonized regions were exploited for geopolitical military reasons, and 'modern nation-states' were carved out of a pre-colonial diverse and complex political space, particularly in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. These measures created a geography of long-term ethnic conflict, whose ruptures and dislocations still fuel tensions across the globe, in locations such as Peru, Rwanda, South Africa, and Sudan, through Lebanon, Iraq, and Israel/Palestine, to Pakistan, India, and Malaysia, to name just a few examples. Moreover, colonial geographical practices were accompanied by a discursive mental framing, which 'scientifically' rationalized European conquest as modernizing a wide range of 'primitive' tribes and nations through the imposition of European-specific and predominantly Christian values.

Colonial rule, framed as it was within the rising of global capitalist economy, also typically created patterns of uneven development and long-term structures of economic dependency between the metropolitan (European) economies, and the colonial peripheries, as well as class stratification within the colonies. It was common for colonial rulers to sharpen, and often invent, ethnic differences within colonized territories, with the upwardly mobile local groups typically undergoing a process of

S0015 **The Call of South Africa**

P0035 Out of the blue heaven, out of the depth of our sea
Over our eternal mountains, where the cliff-tops echo
again...
We will live, we will die – we are yours, South Africa...
In the marrow of our bones, in our heart and soul and
spirit
Fatherland we will carry the renown of your name with
honour
True and faithful as Afrikaners – children of South
Africa

P0040 Yet, as the South African case demonstrates, what appears to be an 'eternal' identity is actually reshaped ceaselessly by political events, public discourses and practices, material processes, and cultural trends. It cannot be analyzed in isolation from other social relations, because it is constantly mediated by gender relations, class affiliation, politics, and religious practices. Ethnic identities are often perceived as 'threatened' by the dynamics of assimilation, globalization, and immigration. Hence, the construction of ethnicity requires a constant practice of boundary maintenance, often achieved through social conflict, territorial struggles, and racism. The tension between the fluidity of identity and the attempts by social powers (particularly national states and cultural elites) to maintain and deepen ethnic boundaries is a notable hallmark of ethnic identity and societal structure in the modern era.

S0020 **Colonizing Ethnicity**

P0045 Modernity has brought about fundamental changes in the nature of ethnicity. As philosopher Charles Taylor, sociologist Anthony Smith, and anthropologist Ernest

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Europeanization, later conceived as Westernization. The formalization of these identities as 'ethnic' (or 'racial' or 'religious', or 'sectarian'), institutionalized social difference around the notion of ethnicity. To be sure, the colonial influence also brought with it ideas of democracy, equality, and citizenship, but these egalitarian concepts seem to have often remained secondary to the manipulation of primordial sentiments and mobilizations.

P0065 The remaking of ethnicities during the colonial era was thus couched in patterns of cultural (European) domination. It established the foundation for Western control over what became the 'Third World', generating pervasive anticolonial insurgencies, resulting in the liberation of many colonized societies. Widely documented and analyzed in postcolonial studies, European colonialism has left deep footprints in postcolonial societies, often generating new rounds of ethnic conflict due to the prevailing logic of partition and state structures putatively 'belonging' to a dominant ethnicity. As noted, this idealized political geography imported and imposed European concepts of bounded ethno-national identities, and forcefully superimposed them over a complex, dynamic, and fluid space of intertwined identities in the colonized world.

P0070 Another conspicuous legacy of colonialism has been a mass immigration from ex-colonies to metropolitan centers, such as London, Paris, and Amsterdam. This postcolonial 'ripple' has recently destabilized the political geography of 'metropolitan' European and North American societies, and unsettled the image of their own nation-state. Yet, the evolution of ethnic identities and conflicts cannot be solely attributed to European colonialism, as they have re-emerged in different guises during the postcolonial period. New forces have propelled the reformulation of ethnicity, including globalization, increased internal and international migration, economic restructuring, the rise of indigenous peoples, and internal political struggles for control of the nation-state, to which we now turn.

S0025 **Nationalizing Ethnicity**

P0075 The modern nation-state has emerged as one of the most important loci of power during the modern epoch, if not the most important. As analyzed by political geographer Peter Taylor and legal geographer David Delaney, the state developed into a powerful 'container' of compartmentalized human societies, by combining the increasingly important political principle of self-determination with highly effective forms of human territoriality.

P0080 The demarcated political territory was constructed as a 'sacred homeland', belonging to a people defined generally in ethnic terms; that is, a cultural group holding a myth of common origin and kin relations, and a long

historical affiliation with 'its' territory. This sentiment was echoed in the famous call by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck during the nineteenth-century attempt to unite Germany: "Germans – think with your blood"

In immigrant and settler societies the emphasis was naturally different, but also centered on the framing of cultural-cum-ethnic identity, through the promotion of notions such as 'creed', 'founding fathers', and 'state ideology'. These were translated into the application of assimilation ('melting pot') policies, designed to create a homogenous nation. P0085

On the state level then, ethnic identities were widely transformed and institutionalized into state nationalism. Groups thus politicized and mobilized their members by strengthening, recreating, or inventing the historical connection of culture, people, and territory. The rise of nationalism began mainly in Europe and, as noted above, was associated with European colonialism, during which cultural and 'racial' identities became widely studied, formalized, and stratified. There were cases in which genuinely equal citizenship developed through the promotion of civic nationalism, but until the middle of the twentieth century, these were relatively scarce. P0090

The popularity of the nation-state order grew steadily, and reached a peak during the Interwar period (1918–39), when it was introduced (often imposed) to eastern parts of Europe and on large parts of the colonized continents. Proponents of this order argued that the division of the world into a mosaic of discrete nation-states ('a state to each nation, and a nation to each state') would enhance stability, democracy, and prosperity. However, as detailed below, this system has often exacerbated, rather than abated, ethnic conflict. P0095

The association between ethnic nationalism and conflict is often profoundly geographical, being linked to claims for exclusive control over mixed territories. For this kind of politics, then, national territory is a zero-sum resource, which unlike other resources (e.g., economic growth, culture, or environmental assets) cannot be shared. This has provided the locus of numerous ethno-national conflicts, with rivaling claims for sovereignty over the same territory. To complicate matters, the meaning of territory is often related to fractured and contested histories, drawing legitimacy from periods of varying ethnic control over the territory in question. These multilayered histories cannot be easily accommodated in the current uni-dimensional political geography of state power, generating conflicting claims, aggressive wars, and ethno-national tensions. The recent examples of Kosovo, Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine, Tamil Elam, the Baltic Soviet States, and Kashmir, all illustrate the enduring potency of ethno-national territorial disputes based on fractured histories and contested visions over the same territory. P0100

- P0105 The geography of ethnic conflict is closely linked to the political concept of self-determination, which has been widely accepted as a legitimate political expression of peoplehood. It has thus provided an important organizing principle for world politics over the last century, by constructing a desired state of affairs whereby each nation can exercise its right for self-determination on 'its own' homeland territory. P0130
- P0110 Self-determination created a direct link between identity, territory, and power, and has politicized the notion of the 'homeland'. It had the effect of fueling, and even creating, political aspirations among many ethnic groups. The spatiality of the self-determination principle has been critical to this development, as the attachment of the group to 'its' land has developed into a highly valuable asset in the pursuit of state power. The proliferation of ethnonationalism is forcefully illustrated by the constantly rising number of UN member-states – from 50 in 1945 to 192 in 2007.
- S0030 **Marginalizing (Minority) Ethnicities**
- P0115 The dominance of the nation-state order encountered an enduring complication – the persistence of minorities. Nationalist ideologies were commonly premised on the disappearance of substate ethnic differences, or alternatively on their permanent marginalization. This was augmented by the rising influence of capitalism and liberalism, both focusing on the individual as a producer, consumer, and political agent, thereby drawing attention away from the identity and plight of minorities. P0140
- P0120 The seemingly 'natural' connection between ethnicity, homeland, and nationalism often involved the appropriation of the state by a dominant ethnicity which usually crowned itself as representing the 'true' national spirit. This gave rise to a range of homogenizing and domineering policies. However, this approach also created 'trapped minorities' – those facing discrimination due to their identities, but at the same time prevented from exercising their own self-determination in the state's homogenizing public sphere. The 'entrapment' of minorities, and the ensuing conflict is one of the most significant legacies of state nationalism to this very day.
- P0125 This constellation led to continuing attempts to control and marginalize minorities. Geographers such as Alexander Murphy, David Sibley, and Oren Yiftachel, and sociologist Michael Mann have documented the widespread implementation of discriminatory policies. These may take many forms ranging from a denial of recognition of distinct minority cultures, such as practiced in France, Turkey, or Germany, to more overt discrimination (also termed 'derogatory recognition') evident in 'ethnocratic states' such as Israel, Malaysia, and Estonia.
- In extreme cases, oppression and conflict may lead to ethnic cleansing, as occurred in Cyprus, Palestine, Bosnia, or Sudan; and even to genocide, as horrifically witnessed during the Nazi extermination of Jews, and in more recent times in Cambodia and Rwanda. The common denominator has been the constructed 'eternal ownership' of the homeland by the dominant ethnic nation and the questionable status of minorities. The concept of an exclusive homeland can also cause a 'chain reaction' and mobilize minorities against one another. The logic of ethnic spatial purity is exemplified by the following quotation from an ancient Sinhalese text, the Pujavaliya, often used in the current ethnic struggle in Sri Lanka to enshrine the dominance of the Buddhist-Sinhalese over other communities residing in the island state.
- This island belongs to the Buddha himself... Therefore, the residence of wrong-believers in this Island will never be permanent... Even if non-Buddhist ruled Ceylon by force for a while... Lanka is destined to be ruled by Buddhist kingdoms. P0135
- But the oppression of minorities is not universal. Some states have opted for maintaining a fragile status quo of majority domination without overt oppression. Other more democratic states have introduced policies of accommodation, as documented by the thorough works of political scientists McGarry and O'Leary. These policies have ranged from accepting minority-driven partition, as in the case of Malaysia–Singapore, Czechia–Slovakia and some of the post-Soviet states, or more commonly introducing power sharing and forms of spatial coexistence embedded in the concept of 'consociationalism' or 'new federalism'. In recent times a more open-ended approach of multiculturalism has also gained prominence, attempting to base cultural and regional policies on recognition of the identities and aspirations of minorities. These politics of recognition have been most evident in immigrant societies such as Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, and also increasingly in policies toward minorities in Europe, Asia, and Africa.
- Table 1** summarizes the spatialities of three main approaches to policies toward ethnic minorities – oppression, status quo, and accommodation. These are not mutually exclusive, and the table treats them as 'ideal types' for analytical purposes. It is acknowledged that in reality, policies and spatialities are more complex and multilayered. P0145
- Policies toward minorities, however, have never remained static. In recent years, following evidence that ongoing oppression of minorities generally spawns resistance and possible insurgence, many multi-ethnic states have increasingly introduced accommodation policies. Despite this move, other states continue to P0150

T0005 **Table 1** Policy approaches to minority ethnic spaces – a schematic presentation

<i>Ethnic space</i>	<i>Policy options</i>		
	<i>Oppressive</i>	<i>SQ</i>	<i>Accommodation</i>
Body	Forbid/marginalize	Apathetic	Facilitate
Home	Demolish/confine	Confine	Facilitate
Property	Reduce value	'Market forces'	Develop
Neighborhood	Undermine/confine	Restrict control	Indifference
Ghetto/enclave	Create/preserve	Preserve	Protect/open boundary
Turf	Undermine	Restrict	Facilitate
Sacred Sites	Minimize	Condone	Expand
Shanty town	Criminalize	Ignore	Selectively legalize
City	Majority hegemony	Maj. control	Power sharing
Land	Expropriate/restrict use	Little change	Proport. allocation/restitut'n/compent'n
Region	Deny, undermine	Restrict	Facilitate
Territory/homeland	Deny	Deny	Autonomy
Diaspora	Sever links	Restrict links	Indifference

oppress and marginalize minorities, thus maintaining a high level of ethnic conflict.

S0035 **Urbanizing and Globalizing Ethnicity**

P0155 Urbanization has been one of the major geographical transformations of the modern era. In 2005, for the first time in history, more people resided in cities than in rural areas, while in the West the figure is around 90%. Needless to say, urbanization means more than a mere spatial transformation, harboring profound economic, cultural, and political implications. These have intensified in recent years with the acceleration of globalization, which elevates the scale of human activities beyond the state. Cities are vital connecting nodes in this process, as they facilitate the actualization of globalization processes (known as 'regional integration' or Europeanization) through their economic and cultural roles. The impact of urbanization on ethnic identities has been profound. It has changed the manner in which ethnic boundaries are constructed, the nature of interaction with other groups, and the characteristics of political mobilization.

P0160 Cities constitute the hubs of economic, political, and cultural power, and the sites in which development and globalization actually take place. As such, they are vitally important for understanding the dynamics of ethnic identities and conflicts. Notably, urban ethnic dynamics are shaped by opposing and simultaneous forces, enhancing both assimilation and fragmentation. On the one hand, as shown by political geographer Peter Taylor, state regimes promoting national unity and economic growth saw the cities as critical for their project of creating a unified nation and economy. Urban sociologist Manuel Castells opened a new perspective by noting that cities became centers of collective consumption (for housing, education, health, and the like), thereby enabling the

regime to integrate urbanizing populations into a relatively homogenous collectivity.

At the same time, however, as highlighted by geographers and urbanists Jane Jacobs, Doug Massey, and Fredrick Boal, countervailing forces of fragmentation have been at work, making the city a springboard for a new political geography of ethnic mobilization and conflict. While in the rural areas ethnic identities have been relatively (though of course not entirely) stable, in the city, the identity sphere became more dynamic. In the rural areas the construction of identities was closely associated with national claims for territorial control, while in the cities issues relating to civil status, economic position and service provision became more prominent.

P0170 This rural–urban difference should not be treated as dichotomous, but as a matter of degree and contingency. The relative openness, fluidity, and instability of cities – in terms of housing, employment, or lifestyles – is associated with a corresponding (relative) flexibility of politics and identities. In addition, due to their globalizing economic and cultural roles – and unlike rural areas – cities are centers of intra-state and international immigration, which constantly reshapes the nature of ethnic spaces and relations. Therefore, as noted by urban scholars such as Scott Bollen, Ira Katznelson, Don Mitchell, and Kian Tajbakhsh, the city possesses 'a promise' to transform identities and society, and create new forms of spatial coexistence, even in cases of protracted conflicts. Katznelson thus notes:

Cities are porous... Liberalism is inconceivable... without the urbanization of early modern Europe, which became the location for political emancipation, from racial, ethnic and religious oppressions...

P0180 Yet, structural forces such as expansionist or racist state nationalism, and uneven globalization and economic growth have often worked to thwart this promise. As

shown by Oren Yiftachel these forces often produce 'ethnocratic cities', whereby dominant ethnic groups use the mechanisms of urban governance to further its power and material interests. Such cities are marked by high levels of coerced segregation, racial ghettos, and persistent conflicts, as shown by the examples of Paris, Jerusalem, Colombo, or Berlin. Significantly, powerful ethnic groups use the development and accumulation processes governed by urban policy to buttress their dominant class position. Minorities are typically left on the margins of urban-based accumulation, leading to the demarcation of segregated urban 'ethno-classes' as elaborated below.

P0185 In some cases, segregation may be largely voluntary, and acts as a form of conflict management. As shown by geographer Yizhak Schnell, this occurs mainly in cities accommodating groups separated by religious or racial affiliation, without explicit claims to a national control over space, such as Muslim groups in most European cities, Blacks and Hispanics in American cities, and ultra-orthodox groups in Israeli cities. Conflicts abound in such cities, but their potential harm is reduced by patterns of voluntary segregation.

P0190 Ethnic relations are particularly volatile in cities divided on ethno-national lines, most notably in urban areas occupying sites of collective symbolic value. Planning scholar Scott Bollen has shown how protracted urban conflicts in cities such as Belfast, Jerusalem, and Sarajevo, are associated with broader national claims for territory. These tensions are commonly reproduced by urban policymakers, working under the assumptions of their own national historical narratives. Yet, the influence is never uni-directional, and urban policy can also aggravate, or appease, the larger national conflict.

P0195 Other types of ethnic and racial conflicts are documented by geographer Jenny Robinson, who claims that 'ordinary urbanism', not associated with sacred or national locations, also typically produces local conflicts, thereby sharpening ethnic, class, and local identities. Hence, in a wide variety of settings, the city gives rise to the formation of 'ethno-classes', being partially porous social groupings based on a combined cultural and economic affiliation. Quite often, the more economically mobile sections of minority groups integrate and even assimilate into the mainstream and voluntarily lose their ethnic affiliation, or alternatively form a wide range of 'hybrid' identities.

P0200 The economically deprived parts of the community typically remain quite segregated from the mainstream and subsequently maintain higher degrees of ethnic difference. These segments are likely to face barriers to assimilation, stemming from their marginalized position in the labor and housing markets. This is often enhanced by popular and institutional prejudice and by a politics of identity – all working to maintain the ethno-class

boundary. As shown by geographers Ash Amin, in immigrant cities, ethnic identities tend to strengthen with economic marginality, causing alienation and protest based on the coexistence of difference and deprivation. This alienation erupts in times of mass protest and violence, as occurred in Paris's immigrant neighborhoods in late 2005, in northern cities of Britain during 2003 and Los Angeles in the early 1990s.

Urbanizing globalization has also mobilized diasporas as a significant political geographical factor. Improved communication technology and mobility have facilitated the maintenance of close contact with the homeland, and have coincided with the politicization of difference to create active diaspora communities. These communities tend to have a dual orientation: they struggle for their equality in the new location, and also maintain material, political, and emotional contact with their countries of origins. This setting creates new global, trans-national networks, mediated through urban ethnic communities.

Another critical feature of today's geography of ethnic conflict is the emergence of mass urban informalities. As illustrated by urbanists Ananya Roy and Mike Davis, globalizing urbanization governed by neo-liberal states often results in the coerced and rapid rural to urban migration, and in the subsequent creation of unplanned and un-serviced shanty towns, usually at the edge of existing urban centers. In parallel, large disenfranchised and often rightless populations 'disappear' into the urban mass, typically as domestic and illegal workers. To illustrate the process, it may be enough to quote a 2006 report by the Chinese government, which notes that Beijing and Guangzhou have each absorbed 3–4 millions people classified as 'floating' (unregistered and unauthorized) during the last two decades.

This process creates in effect a new situation which can be conceptualized as 'urban apartheid', where citizenship is constructed on the basis of people's origins, ethnicity, and class. Migrants fuel the urban economy with their labor and spending, but are prevented from attaining full urban citizenship, that is, full access to urban resources and representation. This emerging landscape of profound inequality forms the basis for enduring urban conflicts, and appears to sketch the political geography of ethnic relations for years to come.

Concluding Comment

As shown above, the making of ethnic identities has been inseparable from the geography of political and social conflict. Ethnicity has been politicized during the era of European colonialism, and institutionalized by the parallel emergence of the nation-state as the backbone of the world's political order. Within this political geography, ethnic and cultural affiliations have become directly

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linked to the hierarchies of power and wealth. The nation-state has both assimilated and marginalized minorities, generating conflicts and the sharpening of identities. In recent decades, accelerating urbanization and globalization have spawned new geographies of urban 'ethno-classes'. While ethno-national and regional struggles over territorial control continue to rage, a new terrain of urban ethnic struggles has emerged over issues of segregation, economic mobility, and urban informalities. The dynamic interaction of ethnic identities and human geography is therefore likely to shape world politics well into the future.

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