

Theoretical and Methodical Design to Analyse Ethnic-Cultural Conflicts in a Comparative Study

Thesis Paper

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1. Remarks

Our starting point is the access to explain ethnic differentiation of the German sociologist Hartmut Esser¹. He tries to analyse ethnic-cultural conflicts with the Rational Choice Theory² in combination of elements of game theories. His aim is to find a theoretical model with universal character, which is able to explain the processes of creation and dynamics of different ethnic-cultural conflicts. Esser's proposal is to work with a general sociological theory of social conflicts, in which ethnic-cultural conflicts are a special case of social conflicts and of mobilisation of social movements. In the following points 2 and 3 we will summarise this proposal.

There exist very critical voices against the Rational Choice Theory and the proposal of Esser. Some of the critical arguments are convincing, and we have some doubts, too. We will discuss them under the point 4. At the end of the paper – under point 5 – we will formulate some thesis to work with a concept like Esser.

How important the objections are for our research, is dependent of our interest: Do we need a theory, which explains ethnic-cultural conflicts, or do we need a theoretical founded method to analyse these conflicts in different societies and in a comparative way? We are meaning the last point is deciding. Thus Esser's proposal could be useful to create a system of categories to compare conflicts in Spain, Great Britain, and Germany.

2. Definitions by Esser

- At first: Ethnic-cultural groups base on a specific definition of a situation, which includes the subjective faith of a common origin. That is combined often with an accentuation of differences in relation of other groups, of singularity, and of an intrinsic value of the own group.

¹ The paper bases mainly on two publications of Esser, Hartmut, 1997: Die Entstehung ethnischer Konflikte, in: Differenz und Integration. Die Zukunft moderner Gesellschaften. Verhandlungen des 28. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie in Dresden 1996, edited by Stefan Hradil, Frankfurt/New York (Campus), pp. 876-893; 1996: Ethnische Konflikte als Auseinandersetzung um den Wert von kulturellem Kapital, in: Die bedrängte Toleranz, edited by Wilhelm Heitmeyer/Rainer Dollase, Frankfurt a.M. (Suhrkamp Verlag), pp. 64-99.

² In this case it is a programme of methodological individualism and collective acts under the influence of reflections from John S. Coleman, Siegwart Lindenberg, and Gary S. Becker.

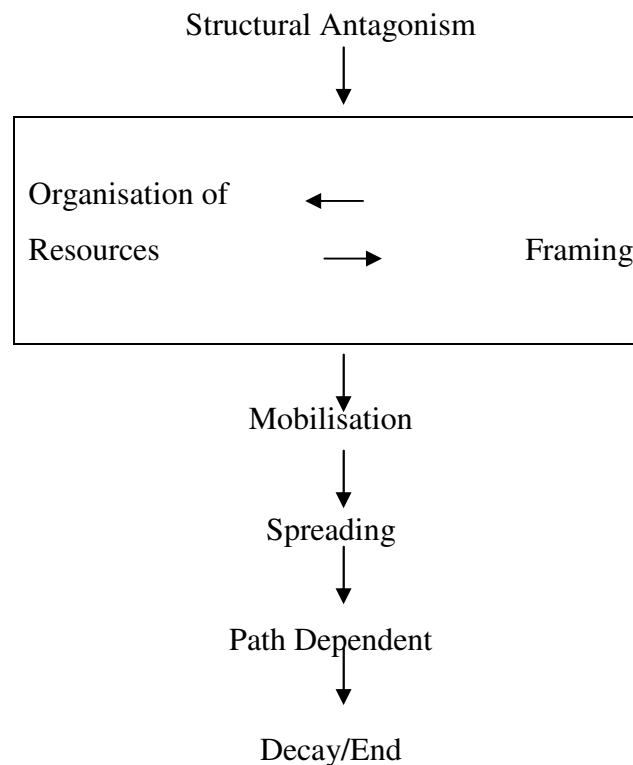
- Dependent of this definition the ethnicity of a group covers further three typical characteristics: “tradition”, “specific capital”, “ascription” and their relation to the “generalised capital”.
- *Tradition*: The ethnic faith of community is combined with attributes and symbols, which can identify specific cultural models. Each model contains typical patterns of values, emotions, and knowledges, and represents and identifies the actors inside and outside the group. It covers a programme of acts to include persons of the own group and exclude persons of other groups.
- *Specific capital*: The specific capital covers cultural capital, moral capital, social capital, and political capital (in case of Pierre Bourdieu) of individuals or groups. Specific capital means resources, which have only a value for a distinguished group. For example language, habitus, common knowledges, system of categories to estimate and solve problems and so on. Furthermore typical attributes of cultural capital are the social estimation of education certifications, professions or honours. The specific aspect of moral capital is the power to mobilise solidary emotions. The social capital marks the power to mobilise social relations. The political capital represents the way of political participation and organisation. The specific capital is important for the social esteem and the physical well-being of the group members. That is the "social production function" of this capital. In our words: Out of this definition the specific capital has not principal ethnic-cultural connotations, and it is an important part of social integration.
- *Social production function* (in case of Siegwart Lindenbergl): The acts of individuals consist of the production of goods, performance and resources to form/to create the daily life and to produce esteem and well-being. In each society and each of its groups exist special "central goods", which have the social function to produce all these. They are the "primary intermediate goods" (for example: reputation, honours, money, ownership or special symbols) which include "position goods" to document the position in a society/group (for example: a Mercedes Benz or an academic title). These primary intermediate goods have not any "natural" values. These values are institutionally defined, and it is important who has the power of Definition. These goods are marking the cultural aims of each actor, and they are describing (in case of Robert K. Merton) the "designs of group living". The composition of the specific capital is dependent of the definition and the values of the primary intermediate goods in context of their social production function. With other words: The social production function and the composition of the specific capital are the base of a fundamental social consensus of the constitution of the society. Essentially means out of these it is explainable that this background is strong and objective, and that the actors/groups have an objective interest to defend the special social production function of their primary intermediate goods, and in case of danger the value of the own group.
- *Ascription*: In the subjective view of the actors the membership of the group is not a result of an individual and free choice, and individuals are not able to take of the membership.
- *Tradition, specific capital, and ascription* mark the cultural model of an ethnicity, if that cultural model is putting into action. Then the cultural model is an ethnic-cultural model and the base to identify the own group in demarcation to other groups.
- *Generalised capital*: In principle the resources of this capital also find demand outside the group. It is generalised. For example: Human rights, economical capital in kind of money, income, and material products or education certifications, which are marketable and general acknowledged³.

³ Remark: Some of the examples are not generalised world wide, but only in world regions or parts of the world. Thus there are existing different estimations of human rights.

3. The General Model of Ethnic-Cultural Conflicts by Esser

- Ethnic-cultural conflicts are a special case of social conflicts and social movements. Out of the Esser's comprehension a conflict exist just at that moment when a social movement is developed and mobilised.
- At the beginning of social movements and of each ethnic-cultural conflict you find a structural antagonism. Distinguished collectives and groups dispute about the constitution of a society.
- A structural antagonism develops in times of modernization and processes of social transformation.
- There can be two consequences of social transformation: (1) The value of the specific capital of a group take off or get lost totally (for example: after the Francism in Spain, the fascism in Germany or the German union) and/or (2) the parts in the relation of the specific capital and the generalised capital are shifting/disarranging to the disadvantage of the generalised capital of one group. By the first variation the group fights for the alive of the own specific capital, by the second variation the relevance and dependence of the specific capital is growing, because the availability of the generalised capital is more limited than before. Both variations are signs of tendencies of social desintegration.
- In this situation it is important which cultural models are available to evaluate and to define the situation, and to "solve" the conflict. The decision for a cultural model to "solve" the conflict/the structural antagonism is dependent of (1) the individual "opportunity costs" and the individual profit. Esser means it is in principal a "rational" decision: Has a person a very strong and latent interest for a specific model and the kind of conflict regulation, he will decide against both if the costs are too high in consideration of a possible failure. (2) The decision is dependent of the power of the tradition and ascription in the (historical and cultural) consciousness of members and actors of a group.
- Esser means that the second point is a latent motivation of latent groups which can put in action very easily. In all probability the decision will be fallen for a model as an ethnic-cultural model. The ethnic-cultural model contains attitudes which serve to define the situation ethnical and to develop a frame to estimate the conflict. Esser describes that as a process of "framing" the conflict. In the process of framing the social production function of primary intermediate goods and the question, who has the power of definition, gain in importance. In the situation of a growing conflict the social production function is beginning to focus more and more on this situation, and will be combined with tradition and ascription. In this case a social conflict can mutate to an ethnic-cultural conflict. If the process of framing is successful, doubts about costs and risks will begin to suppress.
- The first point of decision is important how the process of creation and the dynamic of the ethnic-cultural conflict will pass.
- Furthermore for the dynamic it is relevant what kind of resources a group can mobilise to react on the conflict (including the costs-profit calculation, and how the process of framing is successful), and if there exist other groups which are able to enclose. Then the conflict can spread.
- If there exist a structural antagonism with disintegrating patterns, if the actors decide for an ethnic-cultural model to define the conflict and to find a frame for the conflict/define the situation ethnical, if the actors are ready to pay a high price, if the organisation of resources is possible, and if there are other enclosed groups, the probability is increasing to mobilise a social movement and to spread the ethnic-cultural conflict.

*Phases/States of Social Movements and
Ethnic-Cultural Conflicts by the General Model of Esser*



- If a social movement has developed and the conflict is spreading, the situation of all actors is beginning to change. The actors come into a "dilemma of prisoners" after the first conflict acts: If one group wants to finish the conflict one-sidedly, it will lose all meanwhile the other group will win all. That is the path dependent of a beginning conflict.

4. Critical Points

4.1 Fundamental Objections against the Rational Choice Theory and the Access of Esser

- Some fundamental critical points of the Rational Choice Theory (RC-Theory) in case of the "RREEMM"-Model of Lindenberg/Esser⁴:
 1. The Rational Choice Theory is not a real sociological theory. It does not explain social phenomenon but psychological. Social acts become to divide in variables; the RC-Theory does not realise a sociological typifying of social acts and of institutional conditions.
 2. All these do not mean that the RC-Theory is not useful because it could serve as a "conceptual system", or in our words: as a system of categories. A system of categories cannot be verified or refuted, it only can be appropriated or not.
 3. Out of these critical aspects the RC-Theory cannot find really causal explanations. Further reasons are: (a) In this theory it is unconsidered that actors on the macro level

⁴ s. Haller, Max, 1999: Soziologische Theorie im systemkritischen Vergleich, Opladen (UTB für Wissenschaft/ Leske+Budrich), pp. 309f. "RREEMM" means: An actor has resources (**R**esourceful); his possibilities are restricted (**R**estricted); he expect results and gratifications because of his acts (**E**xpecting); he evaluate these results (**E**valuating), and he tries to maximize his acts to get the highest profit with his resources (**M**aximizing).

have a very important social role. (b) Often aggregated phenomenon are interpreted as collective phenomenon. (c) The central object of sociological conceptualisations and explanations on the macro level are out of the focus: the containing structure/ the "sense" of social norms and institutions.

- In our opinion the first and second critical points are principal right. But we guess it is important what kind of object we want to analyse. In our case we want to look for ethnic-cultural conflicts in different western countries. At the beginning we do not know exactly or in detail how differences are characterise and how big they are. Thus we need a system of categories which help us to evaluate phenomenon under the same categories. Than we have to fill out the system with sociological accesses to explain the structural and cultural relations for each country (s. point 5). That means we have to define the room of analyses/ the room of references. At the result we are able to find probably a theoretical explanation for ethnic-cultural conflicts in western immigration countries or parts of them. Supposition: There are similar structures.
- The third critical point of Haller cannot be a fundamental problem of the RC-Theory. It is a question of conceptualisation a research object. Esser tries to consider the containing structure/the "sense" of norms and institution about his construction of the specific capital and the social production function (including the category of the process of framing). This is nearby the cultural class theory of Pierre Bourdieu which is a form of an interests theory. Thus we are meaning that Esser does not work only with the RC-Theory. Consequently the proposal of Esser is a combination of RREEMM and interests or class theory.

4.2 Our Objections against and Questions on the General Model by Esser

- It is not clear who are the actors on which social level and in which phase in his model of conflict escalation. Sometimes it looks like that individuals (in sense of the RC-Theory) are the actors, sometimes it looks like that groups are the actors. There is not a real defined differentiation between individuals and collectives.
- This unclerness is combined with another one: What kind of groups Esser means when he speaks about them in the phase of a structural antagonism in his model? In this phase we have not yet a social situation which is defined ethnical. Thus we do not have an ethnic-cultural model and contrary ethnic-cultural groups. Do we have social groups in one society which are arranged in a vertical social line? It had to be in this way, because the definitions of the specific capital and the social function production (including the definitions of primary intermediate goods and position goods). The resources of both can cover a whole society or a special group in a different way.
- Does this means that in case of a structural antagonism different *social* groups begin to "negotiate" about the constitution of the society? And that in dependence of the character of the structural antagonism, the division of power and dominion, and the possibilities they come to an interest compromise or the process of framing will start (s. appendix of the paper with the model of conflict situations and escalation of Esser)? Thus social groups can change to ethnic-cultural groups?
- In some western countries like Ireland, France, and Spain (partly in Italy and GB) we have (old) regional movements, and where the situation is more or less defined ethnical. But most of the regional movements do not define there ethnicity in interaction and in demarcation to another regional movement but to the central government of a state. Question: Need an ethnical definition of a situation and the process of framing an interaction with another group/ a face-to-face with another collective?
- The same question also concerns our research object. We want to research the behaviour between the ethnic-cultural majorities and minorities in Spain, GB, and Germany in case

studies. Often we find in these countries a high rate of negative attitudes against minorities in regions where only very small groups of foreigners are living. There is no situation of structural antagonism which concerns the behaviour between major and minor groups in the way of Esser's interpretation. In this case it enclose the question: Who negotiates in a situation of structural antagonism and a period of social transformation?

- Thesis: We have to differentiate between the level of the society and the level of the shop floor. In plants with different ethnic-cultural groups of employees we maybe find a concretely situation which is defined ethnical and in which the groups are in "negotiations". On the level of the society we do not have an ethnic-cultural conflict situation between majorities and immigrant groups in the way of Esser's model.
- In the General Model of Esser a conflict just is developing at the phase of mobilisation a social movement. In our opinion it is a very closed definition of "conflict". It is right to say that in (modern) societies are not existing any social conflicts without social movements, but normally these conflicts are regulated in different ways. Thus there are (latent) antagonistic social conflicts in combination with social movements which are not putting in action (for example: classes conflict - Labour movement, gender relation – feminist movement).
- Esser describes (indirectly) a situation of structural antagonism and social transformation as a radical change or as a system changing. In countries of Eastern Europe and in Ex-Yugoslavia we can observe this development and that the General Model is an appropriated system of categories to analyses the conflicts there. In comparison to these countries in western societies structural antagonism and transformation processes are most slowly with phases of interests regulation. That could be the reason why we do not find any ethnic definition of the situation similar to the eastern countries.

5. Our Proposal

- The General Model of Esser could be an appropriated system of categories to analyses phenomenon in Spain, GB, and Germany till to the phase of the process of framing in parts of the population. Thesis: On the level of the societies we have not ethnic-cultural conflicts between majorities and minorities in case of the model.
- Question: Do we have to discuss a relation of the process of framing in context of regional movements in Spain and negative attitudes/violence against immigrants?
- We have to look for indicators of structural antagonism in each of the three societies and which social groups are concerned. For example: In Germany we observe a changing process of the economic structure and the employment structure on the labour market. This is combined with (in case of Esser's proposal) with a new definition of elements of the specific capital and the social function production of parts of the working class. In the former study we were working with a theoretical explanation of "Integration-Disintegration, Disintegration-Integration" of these social groups. This means that in the time of the late 1950th to the early 1970th the group of vocational workers were passing through a period of revaluation of its specific capital and the intermediate goods/position goods, and the access of these workers to resources of the generalised capital was more opened. They were the elite of the working class and had influences on the dominate (political) culture. It was the period of social mobility and integration. Since the process of changing at beginning of the 1970th this revaluation is decreasing and a process of disintegration of this group is starting. In this situation the relevance of tradition, ascription and of cultural characteristics is growing. In this group we are finding many people with negative attitudes against foreigners in kind of the dualism "German – Stranger" and young people of this social group are the majority of right violently criminals. The ethnic definition of their

situation in combination with nationalism could be a form/a try of cultural integration. But there are not developing any ethnic-cultural movements.

- We have to differentiate between aggregated phenomenon (attitudes) and collective acts.
- Dependent of that we have to differentiate between the level of the society and the shop floors of our research. The question is if we will find kinds of ethnic-cultural conflicts on the shop floor where ethnic defined groups are trying to regulate the situation. Than we have collective acts. On the level on the society we only can analyse aggregated phenomenon.