Dynamics of change in multiethnic societies

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Many of us live in large cities of the modern world, which in general are heterogeneous multiethnic societies. Immigrants come to these settlements looking for better living conditions and for work opportunities. Immigrants also tend to stay close to their kinsmen and to people coming from their places of origin, for solidarity purposes, to reproduce a sense of belonging and cohesion, as well as for group identity.

Frontiers between modern states also involve multiethnic relations, migratory processes, and tensions. The movements and flow of people, ideas, objects, and information from place to place is an issue that is being addressed as a new mobility paradigm (1). As it is in the present, it was in the past.

Ethnic groups, whether formed in the periphery of states or inserted as ethnic enclaves, claim a common ancestry, share cultural values, and sometimes even a common language. In general, ethnic identity is a cultural and dynamic construction. In Blanton's words (2), ethnicity is a form of "trust-building signaling," a strategy for the establishment of a socially cooperative group. The benefits of ethnic signaling are best seen in zones of weak periphery incorporation along boundary zones or frontiers of polities or world systems, in the context of intercultural trade, and in contexts of poorly functioning or failed states.

This Special Feature is devoted to exploring the dynamics of change in past multiethnic societies, and the economic, social, and political factors behind it. Eight contributions are presented that represent a wide variety of scenarios, from those presenting the interaction of two types of societies in frontier zones [Eastern Anatolian-Transcaucasian areas (3, 4), as well as the Mesoamerican frontier in Zacatecaas (5)], three cultural components [two of the Tiwanaku state and one of the Wari imperial state, in the region of Moquegua, Peru (6)], or four or more ethnic components [the Teotihuacan case in Central Mexico (7) and Colonial America (8)].

Of the eight contributions, one presents the theoretical perspective around ethnic construction from the point of view of collective action (2). Six others deal with ancient-state societies in the Near East (3, 4), China (9), Mesoamerica (7, 5), and the Andean Region (6). Another contribution discusses multiethnic societies in settler, managerial, or missionary colonies in North America (8).

The article dealing with China (9) explores three millennia (II and I millennia B.C. and the first three centuries of the C.E.) of changing societies, the transformation in settlement pattern, and political conditions throughout various dynasties. The ones presenting the Eastern Anatolian examples (3, 4) also present a three-millennia perspective (V–III millennia B.C.) of changing multiethnic dynamics. The Teotihuacan case in Central Mexico (7), the La Quemada example in Zacatecas (north-central Mexico) (5), the Moquegua case in Peru (6), as well as the Colonial historical examples (8) deal with a three-to-five century interaction.

The main issue that interested me when organizing this Special Feature was how cooperation and tensions between different ethnic components within a particular socio-political background generated transformation in these societies. Some examples belong to permeable frontiers where societies of different complexity necessarily interact, sometimes with relations that produce dimorphic social configurations (i.e., seminomad-sedentary people), sometimes with phases of stress that prelude collapse, and new forms of settlement and social life.

In other examples, we see the settlement of people of different origins in geomorphic units (valleys, basins), each ethnic component segregated to a particular sector, with a modest degree of cooperation.

Other cases may be caused by population movements from urban sites in one region to urban sites in other regions, where new economic and political phenomena take place, mainly because of insertion of the newly arrived.

Finally, in other examples, large multiethnic urban settlements receive migrant groups as a result of environmental stresses stimulating demographic displacements. After the pristine multiethnic synthesis that the newly arrived provoke, new forms of economic cooperation, social integration, and perhaps corporate organizations take place, and this new scenario attracts newcomers in search of work opportunities and better life conditions. Nevertheless, these cases of multiethnic pacts are feeble and prelude tensions between different interests, often of an economic nature. Tensions occur when multiethnic organizations display strategies that are contrary or different to those of the state where they insert themselves.

In the contributions to this Special Feature, different types of archaeological data are taken into consideration to assess multiethnic organizations and their transformations: settlement patterns (whether regional, site-specific, or intrasite), the types of domestic structures, socio-economic units, subsistence strategies, technological traditions and craft production, funerary rituals, and human remains (patterns of dismemberment, isotopic values, trace elements, ancient DNA, activity markers, cranial modification, dental mutilation). We could also add the attires, headdresses, corporal paint, and other indexical attributes worn by each person in a multiethnic environment, as well as the culinary practices and traditions displayed by the components.

Finally, multiethnic relations involve consensus-building, cooperation, and the construction of complex corporate organizations that capitalize the abilities, expertise, and different points of view of the different groups. These dynamic entities may provoke a momentum in societies where obsolete conservative institutions resist change. The extreme case is Mesoamerica (particularly Central Mexico), where a wide variety of ethnic and linguistic groups interacted closely to produce a common tradition and the evolution of state societies headed by enormous multiethnic capitals.

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