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Prejudice, discrimination and intergroup conflict

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Thomas Pettigrew's article, "Intergroup Prejudice: Its Causes and Cures," analyzes how prejudice and discrimination feed into intergroup conflict, and describes some favorable conditions for optimal intergroup contact for reduction or elimination of this conflict.

Aside from the valuable information and arguments it poses, there are two aspects I particularly appreciate about the article. The first is that it stems from the desire to imagine a decent, democratic society.¹ And, secondly, the arguments and data are accompanied by personal experiences, helping us to better understand the issue and convincing us that prejudice is something that touches us all, though assuredly not the same way or with the same consequences. (repeating "same" is important to achieve effect)

This commentary will attempt to describe and comment on some of the article's main points. Pettigrew's article is well-framed and his assumptions and conclusions well-founded; however, I would like to address several points in order to further our understanding of how intergroup prejudices work and the effects they have on societies such as ours.

Prejudice and discrimination

Intergroup prejudice includes the negative emotions and irrational beliefs one group has concerning other groups (again, by repeating "group" a special effect is achieved), and as thus is linked to ignorance and hatred. It is much more than that, however. In fact, it also functions as a social assumption according to which innate and unavoidable roles exist for each group. This assumption leads to material or symbolic forms of sanction for anyone stepping out of these roles. This extension of the intergroup

¹ "Decent society" refers to a moral and political aspiration to dwell in societies where citizens and groups are not humiliated or oppressed (Margalit, 1996)

prejudice concept requires a consideration of more subtle factors concerning the refusal to build affective ties with members of certain groups who do not fit the roles provided for them. The rejection of contact is neither hatred nor fear, necessarily, but a complex sentiment that impedes the building of solid group ties.

Let us take a minute here to associate this kind of emotional neutrality with two features inherent in cultural interactions with outgroups. The first is the belief that outgroup members will never be loyal to our codes of cultural interpretation. Outgroups are, in this sense, a threat to our normal order of affairs.¹ (Schutz, 1944; 1957) The fear Costa Ricans confess to feel towards Nicaraguan and Colombian immigrants appears to be linked to the fact that they are not like us.² For this reason they do not seem worthy of our esteem, even though we do not necessarily hate them.

A second feature is related to what Freud calls the narcissism of irrelevant differences, a form of narcissism found in neighboring groups who tend to magnify their minor differences. Its most damaging imaginary conclusion is that only absolute equals can coexist and, for this reason, anyone not in our group does not concern us and cannot coexist together with us. This narcissism often leads to a wish to close our borders, drive out foreigners and protect our shelters. These actions have an element of hostile narcissism and evince a need to discuss the fantasies we construct about ourselves.³

The questionable loyalty towards us of outgroups and the narcissism of minor differences presuppose the inability of certain individuals to be like us, understand who we are and merit our affection. They constitute two cultural mechanisms with which we can understand other dimensions of the theory of role incongruity.

For Pettigrew, prejudice is directly linked to discrimination. To discriminate is to limit the essential opportunities and choices of a minority as compared to the dominant group. It may be triggered by individual and situational causes, but more than anything it is due to structural causes. Discrimination is maintained by conformity to discriminatory norms that put up social barriers to intergroup contact and come from historical conflicts and oppressive institutions such as slavery or apartheid. Discriminatory

² Although the social processes and policies are different, the same feeling of strong distrust and threat is felt in other societies with regard to other immigrants. Samuel Huntington has written a book in which one can perceive the fear felt by majority groups in the United States towards Mexican immigrants, sustained by the central assumption that these would never be like them (Huntington, 2004).

³ I have analyzed some of the most significant nationalist fantasies in Costa Rican society in "*El imposible país de los filósofos. El discurso filosófico y la invención de Costa Rica*".

societal norms poison intergroup relations and establish a perverse normality that can only be overcome by their elimination.

Although this argument seems to be valid for understanding relations between ethnocultural groups, it must be revised when trying to understand and transform relations between socioeconomic groups. As Pettigrew states, social class is a key differentiator in Latin America, and is essential in understanding how prejudices and discrimination work. In the first place, in quantitative terms it does not produce minorities, but rather majorities, and in terms of social sensitivity it produces almost unsalvageable hatred and distrust. In this case the elimination of discriminatory norms does not seem to be enough, since we are talking about economic and social structures that continue segregating hatred and contempt, even when a few institutions change their norms.

Authoritarian personalities and sentimental education

Pettigrew clarifies that not all prejudices come out of conformity to societal norms. In fact, some individuals are more inclined to intergroup prejudice out of the deep-rooted needs of their authoritarian personalities. They adhere rigidly to their own cultural world and are aggressive towards outgroups. When an attempt is made to discuss their prejudices with them, they usually refuse to take information or arguments seriously. Their prejudices are not errors to be corrected with data and reasoning, but rather convictions highly resistant to information, dialogue and arguments. (see Bobbio, 1994; especially the second part dedicated to the nature of prejudice and racism)

With respect to these authoritarian personalities, it might be important to look into the possibility of fostering a critical distance from their own culture and basic trust in other legitimate cultural forms. It would be interesting to know if Dr. Pettigrew's research has considered the possibility of accompanying optimal intergroup contact with something we could call, in Flaubert's words, sentimental education. This would allow individuals to expand their moral horizons in such a way that they would not easily slide down the slippery slopes of hatred and fear. The education of feeling would also make it possible for individuals to feel concern for the fate of any other human beings and, moreover, be capable of imagining themselves in others' shoes. Undoubtedly, the structuring of feeling cannot guarantee prejudice and discrimination will be eliminated, but it might be helpful to ask what the possibilities are of educating that structure for democratic coexistence.

Intergroup contact under optimal conditions

For Pettigrew, prejudice, discrimination and intergroup conflict can be dealt with through contact under optimal conditions.⁴

This presupposes an equal status among groups, group interdependence and cooperation, and the development of potential friendships among groups. According to his research, these conditions improve emotions – fear, hatred, affection – and weaken biased beliefs and negative stereotypes.

For this reason, Pettigrew ends up proposing that policies be designed based on societal indices for the work force, place of residence, education and marriage. Policies aimed at eliminating segregation in these areas would help create optimal intergroup contact situations and trigger a constructive cycle leading to less intergroup prejudice, discrimination and conflict.

Defending constitutions and fair legal codes is one way of dealing with structural disadvantages for certain groups. Its effectiveness, then, depends on the existence of states committed to strong, participative democracy. Professor Pettigrew is not certain they exist. In Latin America there are many reasons to feel this same dubiousness. Our states of law, when they exist, are precarious and tend to treat their more vulnerable citizens fairly brutally. They tend to be the institutional correlate of authoritarian oligarchies whose dominant feeling is that of opulence and direct contempt towards anyone outside their family and business networks. In Latin America, the most dramatic results of discrimination have an element of aporophobia, that is, revulsion and hatred for the poor.

What do we do with a cultural climate that fosters the imagining of societies as battlefields where you have to win over, and hopefully crush, everyone else?

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⁴ This theory is valid in itself, but also because it allows for judging the danger of agreeing to offerings such as those of Samuel Huntington. According to him, there is nothing like intense, lasting warfare to foster contact between culturally distinct ethnic groups. Although this may seem like a sinister joke, the truth is this is one of the central themes of his book "*Who Are We? The Challenges to America's Identity*".

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