

# Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Minority Rights

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## 4 Ethnicity, class, and the 1999 Mauritian riots

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### Introduction

A few recurring issues regarding ethnic pluralism have been raised regularly during the last couple of decades.

1. *Issues concerning discrimination and racism, or group hegemony.* Many sociological and anthropological studies of urban or immigrant minorities, indigenous peoples or territorial minorities, postcolonial plural societies and stable nation-states, raise these problems in various ways. Are equal rights enjoyed by all citizens in a given state, and what do “equal rights” entail in practice? Under what circumstances do conflicts emerge? The extant social science literature covers judicial systems, language policies, labor markets, educational systems, and so on.
2. *Questions concerning discursive hegemonies.* Particularly in the related fields of literary and cultural studies, symbolic power has been a key variable in work on pluralism and minorities. The key issues, which can be traced back to the work of Frantz Fanon (1971 [1952]), concern whether or not members of traditionally oppressed groups can express their identity on their own terms, that is to say, to what extent they are forced into reproducing the hegemonic discourse.
3. *Cultural rights versus individual rights.* These problems have been raised particularly among social philosophers, and have been dealt with in very sophisticated, if occasionally US-centric, ways in the communitarianism–liberalism debate (see Taylor 1992), where communitarians argue that cultural communities are more fundamental than individuals and defend notions of collective group rights, while liberals argue the need for universal, individual human rights that do not make concessions to cultural variation.
4. *Assimilation, integration, and segregation.* Studies of historical change involving majority–minority relations inevitably deal with these options: whether the minority eventually melts into the majority (or, more rarely, vice versa), whether the minority achieves equality

without having to sacrifice certain cultural diacritica, or whether the groups are kept strictly apart in a form of enforced or voluntary apartheid.

5. *Pluralism versus hybridity.* A related, but more recent perspective, especially developed among anthropologists (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996), discusses the cultural dynamics of multiethnic societies, investigating to what extent the constituent groups influence each other, and to what extent they remain culturally discrete.
6. *Constructivist studies of history and ideology.* Drawing inspiration both from Foucault and from the justly famous *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), these studies show how strong group identities, where enemy images of others frequently figure prominently, are constructed through selective, ideological, and sometimes fraudulent narratives about the past or dramatic rituals involving powerful symbols of community.
7. *Globalization and localization.* The founding paradox of contemporary ethnicity studies is the fact that the seeming economic, social, and cultural homogenization engendered by globalization has led to strong ethnic revitalization, nationalism, and other essentialistic assertions of rooted cultural identities (Friedman 1994).

A few more areas could have been mentioned, but these frequently intersecting topics are arguably some of the most central ones in the field.<sup>1</sup> However, this chapter will not take on any of these central debates, all of which I consider important, and all of which I have spent many years engaging with (see e.g. Eriksen 2002). What I propose to do instead is to present a case of apparent ethnic conflict which none of these currently dominant perspectives seems able to account for properly.

Seen as a whole, the contemporary literature on ethnically plural societies depicts a conflict-ridden world of volatile minority situations, precarious equilibriums, racial oppression, and ethnic discrimination, predicaments of culture and tricky political situations where cultural rights and individual human rights are confronted. The truly successful polyethnic societies are few and far between in this literature; that is, societies where individual rights are balanced with tolerance and cultural diversity, where religious differences go together with economic growth, patriotism and functioning political democracy; where interethnic marriages are grudgingly or even enthusiastically accepted, where the relationship between class and ethnicity is sufficiently complex that the one could not be reduced to the other, and where no single ethnic group could be said to have monopolised the state apparatus or the imagery of nationbuilding. A strong candidate for a place in this apparently rare category until

recently was – or still is, this is as yet uncertain – Mauritius. Below, I shall trace the itinerary of interethnic relations in that society since the late 1960s, while drawing some parallels to other societies, particularly in Europe. I then move to an analysis of the recent ethnic riots that shocked Mauritians and shook the very foundation of their society in 1999.<sup>2</sup> In the course of this analysis, I shall argue that an important dimension seems to be missing from the current academic discourse on identity politics, namely that of class in a wide sense, which incorporates symbolic dominance as well as economic power.

### **The ethnic dimension in Mauritian politics and everyday life**

Mauritius is an oceanic island 800 kilometres east of Madagascar, with a population of slightly over a million. With no indigenous population, all the inhabitants are the descendants of immigrants, largely brought there in the successive waves of slavery and indentureship during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The main ethnic groups are Hindus of North Indian descent, Creoles (Catholics of African, Malagasy and mixed descent), Muslims of North Indian descent, Tamils and Telegus of South Indian descent, Sino-Mauritians of Chinese descent and Franco-Mauritians of French and British descent. The wealthiest groups are the Franco and Sino-Mauritians, while the largest and politically dominant group are the Hindus. Ethnic classification in Mauritius is an intricate and fascinating matter, but there is no need to go deeper into it in the present context (cf. Eriksen 1988, 1998).

After having been colonized first by France (1715–1810) and then by Britain (1810–1968), Mauritius became a constitutional monarchy within the Commonwealth in 1968, changing its status to that of a republic in 1992. Politics in independent Mauritius is deeply ethnic in character. By contrast with many other multiethnic countries, such as Tito's Yugoslavia, ethnicity is not officially regarded as politically irrelevant, and the main political parties have always more or less openly catered to particular ethnic groups. With a number of important exceptions, Mauritian politics is identity politics in the sense that the ethnic identity of voters is crucial for their voting patterns. The Labor Party and the Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien (MSM) compete for the Hindu vote, the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM) and the Parti Mauricien Social Démocrate (PMSD) compete for the Creole vote, while the majority of the Muslims have tended to vote either for the MMM or, in the 1960s, for a Muslim party. Politicians representing smaller ethnic groups unable to win simple majorities in any constituency tend to enter

into strategic alliances with one of the large parties. As documented almost weekly in the Mauritian press, patronage and ethnic favoritism are widespread, and, since independence, the public sector has become gradually more dominated by Hindus, that is the politically dominant group.

At the same time, Mauritian politics has followed democratic principles and practices for over three decades of independence. Moreover, it cannot easily be argued that the Hindus are simply the hegemonic group. A large proportion of Mauritian Hindus are rural and poor, while there are many rich Muslims and influential Creoles. The media sphere is dominated by Catholics, the sugar industry by Franco-Mauritians, and small trade by Sino-Mauritians. It could be argued therefore that Mauritius has to a great extent achieved a viable, if precarious, model of power-sharing, ensuring members of all ethnic groups the possibility of social mobility along different lines. That is to say, this holds true with one notable exception, pointed out by many commentators over the years: other things being equal, working-class Creoles are generally faced with poorer opportunities than other Mauritians. Although Mauritian economic statistics do not reveal correlations between class and mobility, it is easy to see that the very considerable economic growth which has transformed Mauritian society since the mid-1980s has affected Creole-dominated areas to a much lesser extent than the rest of the island. This is evident in the housing standard, the availability of employment and the general infrastructure.

The emphasis on ethnic membership in the political sphere echoes a similar preoccupation with ethnicity in other domains. Since Mauritius is a fairly small island (1800 sq kms) and the ethnic groups are not physically isolated in monoethnic enclaves, the inhabitants encounter members of other ethnic groups many times every day. As a result, cultural differences diminish while group consciousness remains strong. Endogamy is the rule and not the exception, and since kinship is an important principle of local organization in virtually all the ethnic groups (with the partial exception of the Creoles), ethnic networks tend to be important in a person's everyday life. Now, it could be argued, and has indeed been argued (in Eriksen 1986, 1988), that differences in kinship structure can be a factor when accounting for differential access to certain resources. Creole kinship is based on the nuclear family, with shallow, bilateral genealogies and loose connections with remote kin. By contrast, the patrilineal Hindu, Muslim and Sino-Mauritian families form the backbone of strong corporate lineage-based groups with deep moral obligations towards relatives. In other words, a Hindu in a powerful position is obliged to help his or her relatives in a way that a Creole would not be. The *social capital* of

Creoles gives more limited possibilities for investment than that of other groups.

Mauritian multiculturalism is not without its detractors. As early as the 1950s, the Mauritian author Malcolm de Chazal (1951) wrote contemptuously of his country of origin as a “tropical inferno” where nobody meets anybody outside of the “freemasonries of blood.” Since Independence, cultural and political radicals have tried to undermine ethnic boundaries, frequently either by promoting creolization at the individual level (mixing various influences according to personal whim), or by arguing, along Marxist lines, the primacy of class over ethnicity. Others have pointed out that ethnic identity seems to become gradually weaker in some segments of the population, particularly in the towns, and that it may eventually lose its practical significance for a growing minority of the population, provided that the division of labor continues to move away from ethnic segmentation, and that kinship and religion are weakened as dimensions of identification. Be this as it may, it is beyond dispute that for a majority of Mauritians, ethnic identity remains important both at a symbolic or existential level and at a practical, social level. The “fruit salad” metaphor is frequently invoked in domestic discourse (borrowing, presumably, from the US metaphor of the “salad bowl”), suggesting that the various pieces of different fruits – banana, papaya, pineapple etc. – must be kept discrete lest Mauritians lose their sense of roots and identity. Critics argue, against this description, that the fruit salad metaphor is a euphemism for “apartheid with a human face,” but it cannot be denied that for a majority of Mauritians, their ethnic identity provides them with personal networks as well as a sense of ontological security.

The recent ethnic unrest in Mauritius began with a public manifestation of Creole resentment, and it is therefore necessary to take a look at the situation of the Creoles, seen as a community, before proceeding further.

### **The *malaise créole***

In the years before Mauritius achieved independence, many authoritative warnings were issued to the effect that social and economic disaster might be imminent. Burton Benedict, the island’s only major ethnographer before independence, concluded an analysis of Mauritius by stating that: “The ethnic divisions of Mauritius are changing. They are no longer mere categories but are becoming corporate groups. The danger of communal conflict increases” (Benedict 1965: 67). Also in the 1960s, the Report of the Meade Commission, published and endorsed by the

Colonial Office, argued that the combination of rapid population growth (about 3.5 percent in the 1960s), ethnic diversity and extreme economic dependence on a single crop, sugar, was a recipe for disaster (Meade *et al.* 1961). Independent Mauritius would prove these grim predictions to be wrong; population growth was reduced to less than 1.5 percent, economic diversification ensured that the economy eventually rested on three pillars rather than one (sugar, manufacturing and tourism), and by the 1980s, it was evident that Mauritius had evolved into a functioning parliamentary democracy where governments had been peacefully replaced through multiparty general elections. While the unemployment rate was 20 percent as late as 1985, the country was importing labor only a couple of years later.

Although the vast majority of scholars and commentators – foreign and Mauritian alike – had been impressed mainly by the unexpected economic and political success of independent Mauritius during the 1980s and 1990s (see Simmons 1982; Bowman 1991), worries began to be voiced, particularly in the second half of the 1990s, to the effect that social unrest might be brewing – especially among the Catholics of mainly African descent, the Creoles. This population segment had, on the whole, experienced a slower upward mobility than other groups, and it was visibly underrepresented in a number of vital professions. As the Mauritian government has been dominated by Hindus since Independence, due to their strength in numbers, tendencies towards favoritism and nepotism, which have been well documented in a number of cases, did not usually benefit the Creoles. The most impoverished sections of the population were – and are, with a few exceptions – Creoles. Lacking a strong kinship-based corporate organization, they did not profit collectively from individual mobility either. Besides, the Creole elite, many of whom belong to the category formerly known as *gens de couleur*, and who are of mixed European-African or Asian-African origin, is concentrated in the liberal professions, where it is neither customary nor easy to help distant relatives with job opportunities, and where ethnic identification tends to be weak.

By the early 1990s, it was well established in Mauritian public discourse that Creoles had generally enjoyed weaker social mobility than the rest of the population during the otherwise booming 1980s, and that they were affected by social problems much less common in the other groups: teenage pregnancies, long-term unemployment, low educational levels and petty crime. The term *le malaise créole* (the Creole ailment) was coined by a Creole priest, Père Roger Cervaux, in this period, and it immediately caught on among Creoles and non-Creoles alike, as an apt description of an acute social problem.

Complaints against what was and is perceived as unjust Hindu dominance in politics and the state apparatus have been common since independence, but Creoles are traditionally weakly politically organized. Either their political organizations were ill-fated and short-lived, or they voted for parties that would either never achieve power (PMSD) or that had formed coalitions where non-Creoles were the leaders (MMM). During the latter half of the 1990s, a new social movement and later political party, saw the light of day, namely the *Mouvement Républicain*. Led by a lawyer formerly close to the late PMSD leader Gaëtan Duval, this essentially populist movement had a strong libertarian and antigovernment rhetoric, sprinkled with elements of Afrocentric resentment and anarchist visions of social justice. Support for the movement grew quickly, particularly in poor urban neighborhoods and especially among the young, as it seemed to promise the Creoles their just share of the Mauritian miracle without going into ultimately self-defeating and humiliating compromises with Hindus and Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

It can be argued that some elements of the *Mouvement Républicain* may be seen as a result of globalization, the belated arrival of Black Power to Mauritius. (Its ethnic orientation, however, is not definitive; the leader, Rama Valayden, has an ambiguous ethnic identity.) Since Mauritius is located far away from the USA and the Caribbean, and its main literary language is French, not English, Black Power and militant Rastafarianism did not catch on there in the 1960s and 1970s. Only in the late 1980s did local musicians adopt the rhythms and sounds of the reggae (amalgamating it with the traditional *séga* into a hybrid form called *seggae*), and efforts to improve the conditions for the Creoles were largely associated with certain trade unions, French-educated intellectuals, and the Catholic Church, none of which favored postcolonial resentment and aggressive antiwhite, anti-Hindu or antistate rhetoric as political tools.

There is nevertheless one major exception to this picture, which reveals that the recent riot had its precursor not just in form, but also in content. The most important Creole politician for thirty years, Gaëtan Duval (who died in 1996), regularly used ethnic resentment as a tool in his political work, although he frequently went into strategic coalitions with non-Creoles. During the lengthy negotiations for independence in the mid-1960s, he infamously coined the slogan *Malbar nou pa oulé* (We don't want Hindus), *malbar* being a pejorative term comparable to "nigger" in English. His party, the PMSD, has been connected – if obliquely – to the ethnic riots of 1965 and 1968, a series of violent incidents that were for three decades considered the final ethnic riots in Mauritius.

Before proceeding to an analysis of the 1999 riots, a couple of preliminary points must be made. First, quite unlike contemporary ethnic

movements in many other countries, the right to be different has not been a major issue in independent Mauritius. The country's citizens have always enjoyed complete freedom of religion and a language policy which has sought compromise between the many languages used in various contexts. Although Duval warned his supporters in the mid-1960s that Mauritius was about to become a "little India," there is little to indicate that this happened, although the MBC (Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation) increased the proportion of Indian feature films in its programming in the late 1990s. Mauritius is complex and creolized at the level of culture; fashionable revitalizations of ethnic traditions thrive side by side with modernization and individualism. Typical expressions of Creole identity, such as the *séga* music and dance, are regarded as symbols of national culture, not as expressions of a minority identity. To the extent that culture has been politicized, as I shall show later, it has been as a symbol for particular rights, not as an end in itself.

Second, the Westminster system of political representation in Mauritius – a legacy from colonialism – creates stable majorities, but it does not entail proportionate representation. However, all major ethnic groups are represented in Parliament, partly because the geographical distribution of Hindus, Creoles, Muslims, and Chinese ensures that all groups get their MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly), partly because an ingenious "Best Loser" system guarantees seats in Parliament for eight runners-up (of a total of 70 MLAs). In other words, unlike say, Sami in Norway, North Africans in France or indigenous peoples in Canada, Creoles are reasonably well represented in Parliament – in spite of being loosely politically organized. In the present Legislative Assembly (elected in September 2000), 21 percent of the members belong to the general population, and most of them could be considered Creoles – which is an obvious, but not catastrophic underrepresentation of a population segment which comprises about 30 percent of the total population. In the government, the representation is poorer (currently three of twenty-four cabinet ministers), and there has been an obvious downward mobility of Creoles in Mauritian politics since the Second World War.

In sum, the plight of the Mauritian Creoles does not fit into the current scholarly debate over minority situations. To reiterate the claims made in the Introduction: theirs is not a clear-cut case of discrimination or racism; no single group is hegemonic in Mauritius; non-Creoles do not have a discursive hegemony (indeed, Catholics dominate in the media); debates over cultural rights versus individual rights do not affect Creoles particularly; assimilation into the dominant group is not an option; the pluralism-hybridity issue and social constructions of the past are largely irrelevant; and the issue is not one of global influences versus

local identities. Politically and culturally, Mauritius seems to have found a viable and stable compromise between universalist values and ethnic particularism (cf. Eriksen 1997). Yet, interethnic tensions have grown steadily since the early 1990s.

### The 1999 riots

Two of the core symbols of the new Creole movement are cannabis and *seggae* music, incidentally the most popular domestic music in the island. In February 1999, a mass meeting in favor of legalization was held, and among the participants was the island's most popular singer, who performed and recorded under the sobriquet Kaya in deference to Bob Marley. Kaya openly smoked cannabis at the meeting, and was detained by the police. Four days later, on Sunday February 21, it was announced that he had died in custody. According to the police, he had died from a violent epileptic fit, but his supporters were convinced that he had been murdered. On the evening of February 21, violence against the police broke out in three Mauritian towns, and police stations were set on fire. The next day, the riot spread to other locations in Mauritius, and a man was shot dead when the police opened fire against the rioters. Looting, arson, widespread material destruction and violence between demonstrators and police, as well as violence between Hindus and Creoles, continued for several days, until peace was restored on Friday, February 26, following appeals from religious leaders (notably Mgr. Jean Margéot of the Catholic Church) and the President, Sir Cassam Uteem. The riots left six people dead and over a hundred injured, and the material damage was very considerable. Although the initial target of the rioters was the police and by extension the state, the violence eventually took a communal turn.

The February riots left the Mauritian public sphere in a state of shock. Although peace was restored and life went back to normal in a matter of days, the damage caused to the fragile social fabric of Mauritius was – if difficult to assess – considerable. Comments in the Mauritian press ranged from indignation and rage directed against the “criminal elements” responsible for the chaotic situation, to more far-sighted calls for greater social justice for the Creoles, and several – including Paul Bérenger, the leader of the Opposition – asked Navin Ramgoolam's government to resign.

Soon after the riots, an initiative was taken to organize a peace march in order to demonstrate that the majority of Mauritians were committed to interethnic harmony. The result was the impressive *Chaînes d'amitié* a month after the riots, where many thousands of Mauritians formed a human chain across the island. Many now came to see the February riot

as a timely warning to the government and the public sector, telling them that the struggle to combat ethnic favoritism and systematic discrimination on ethnic grounds, to which virtually every postindependence politician had paid lip service, had to be taken seriously.

More unrest was nevertheless still to come. In mid-May, a minor riot erupted unexpectedly following a road accident near the village of Palma, and a week later, disaster struck in the capital. In the final and decisive match in the first division of the Mauritian football league, the Creole team Fire Brigade met the Muslim team Scouts on May 23. Following an 89th minute goal, the Fire Brigade won the game and, as a result, became Mauritian champions, but the Scouts had two goals annulled by the referee, including an equalizer on overtime. Furious Scouts supporters tore up their seats, players ransacked the dressing room, a Scouts official attacked the referee, while others set fire to surrounding cane fields; by evening, the violence had spread to Port-Louis. Among other things, a police station had its windows smashed. As a climax of sorts, a famous old gambling club run by a Sino-Mauritian family was set on fire, and seven people died.

Football riots are far from unknown in other parts of the world, and if this incident did not have an ethnic dimension, it could have been seen merely as an isolated tragedy – the first of its kind in Mauritius. The Muslim/Creole dimension in the football match itself is evident, if undercommunicated; in the 1980s, the formerly ethnic teams (Muslim Scouts, Hindu Cadets, Tamil Sunrise etc.) were forced to change their names, but they remained associated with ethnic “communities” nonetheless. Still, it would be misleading to see the football riot as an expression of deep Creole/Muslim hatred; it was a spontaneous outburst of rage and anger, and most of the casualties happened to be Sino-Mauritians, members of a community that has little to do with politics or sports, and which is no more associated with Creoles than with Muslims. One of the dead was actually a Muslim employee at the club, while others were Sino-Mauritians. The February riots had much deeper causes and a greater political significance; what the football riot signals, is that the threshold for mob violence has been lowered during the spring of 1999, and that – Mauritius being what it is – such violence is more likely than not to be framed in ethnic terms.

In the end, the government did not resign, but on the contrary promised to make law and order a top priority. Newspaper reports later in 1999 indicated that violent crimes were on the rise, and in early August, five prisoners escaped, apparently with the complicity of a prison guard, from the local *Bastille*. Public confidence in the police is generally low. The political opposition further called for the establishment of independent

commissions of inquiry to look into corruption, nepotism, and ethnic favoritism, and accused the government, with its law-and-order talk, of merely confronting the symptoms, not the causes, of the social unrest.

The situation gradually calmed down. However, at the September 2000 General Elections, the voters showed their dissatisfaction with the government by giving the opposition a landslide victory, returning former Prime Minister Anerood Jugnauth to power. Few dramatic changes have seen the light of day following the elections, and the current government contains twenty-four cabinet ministers, two of them relatives of the Prime Minister and only three members of the general population.

### Class, ethnicity, and kinship

There are several causes for the collective failure of the Creoles to benefit from Mauritius' recent economic growth – internal, external, cultural, and structural. First, Creole kinship and local organization tend to place comparatively weak moral obligations on individuals; marriage is entirely an individual, voluntary contract, and Creoles are not expected to help relatives or other Creoles with employment or places in institutions of higher education. Their social capital is, in a word, very limited in a situation of group competition.

Second, the Creole ethos and collective stereotype of self depicts them as individualists, in contrast to the Hindus, who have a strong ethic of kin solidarity. While it is common among non-Creole Mauritians to see Creole values as an African “survival,” it is more correct to trace them and the accompanying social organization back to the social conditions of slavery (Eriksen 1986). In the context of the present argument, it is nonetheless sufficient to note that there are systematic differences regarding values and local organization between Creoles and Hindus.

Third, the systematic use of kinship and ethnic networks by the other Mauritian “communities” for collective economic and political ends has placed the Creoles at a relative disadvantage. The civil service and the police are, partly due to the logic of kinship obligations, dominated by Hindus, and among working-class Creoles, there is a widespread feeling that their best opportunity for social mobility lies in migration. They are in a minority situation *and* lack the cultural resources necessary to profit from an employment culture of kinship obligations. Furthermore, the state is not just the largest employer in Mauritius, but it also consists of a number of institutions that Mauritians have to relate to in order to get on with their lives, such as the State Bank, the national educational board, the tax office, the postal services and, naturally, the police. When any of

these common institutions loses its legitimacy for a certain segment of the population, a likely outcome is social unrest.

It should be kept in mind that the small *Mouvement Républicain*<sup>4</sup> is not a revolutionary one aiming at systemic change. The target of the recent Creole resentment, culminating in the Kaya riots, is neither cultural discrimination nor even the inequalities resulting from libertarian capitalism, but public-sector clientilism working to their disadvantage, and as a result, a lack of confidence in the state apparatus. None of the men in top positions in Mauritian state organizations are Creoles: the Prime Minister is a Hindu, as is the Governor of the Bank of Mauritius. The President is a Muslim, and the Vice-President is a Hindu. The Commissioner of Police is also a Hindu. The Secretary-General of the powerful Mauritius Chamber of Commerce is also a Hindu.

The death of Kaya, incidentally, was not the first Creole casualty in police custody; similar deaths were recorded both in 1994 and 1995. His death gained a particular symbolic significance for obvious reasons: he had participated at a peaceful public meeting promoting Creole causes, doing something the majority of male Mauritians have done at least a few times, that is, smoking marijuana; and he was a successful Creole artist who both embodied the aspirations of his fellow Creoles as an exemplar and gave voice to their hopes and fears. Killing Kaya, if that is what the policemen did,<sup>5</sup> was possibly the worst single action that could have been envisioned for communal relations in the island. This was further aggravated in the killing, by the police, of another Creole singer during the February riots.

Be this as it may, the main source of the recent riots in Mauritius does not lie in cultural differences, religious intolerance, the suppression of cultural identities, or unequal civil rights. On the contrary, one may ask virtually any Mauritian, and he or she will express pride in the “cultural mosaic” and diversity of the small “rainbow society,” its variety being promoted as the very essence of Mauritius by politicians and tourist agencies alike. Unlike in many other multiethnic societies, religious and cultural pluralism are positively encouraged by the state, and nobody openly aspires to turn the country into an ethnically hegemonic state of the European kind.

The ultimate cause of the Mauritian state's current crisis of legitimacy, I will argue, is a particular kind of kinship solidarity and the obligations associated with it, frequently extended to metaphoric kinship, that is ethnic identity and ethnic social organization. In a liberal state, kinship solidarity may be encouraged in family businesses, accepted in larger enterprises, and condemned in the public sector. Yet this ethos of reciprocity

and caring for the family, values that have incidentally often been highly praised by politicians in nonspecific ways during rural campaigning, has led to a feeling of exclusion among Creoles. The low number of Creoles in high bureaucratic positions lends credibility to this feeling, which is further strengthened by the sense of relative downward mobility which is so widespread among Creoles as to have become virtually an emblem of their ethnic identity.

### **The riots and models of ethnicity**

The Mauritian example, I have argued, does not fit nicely into any of the current academic debates over minority rights, nationalism, and identity politics, and I shall therefore take this opportunity to use it for a brief critique of some dominant perspectives.

We should first keep in mind that a short generation ago, Marxist analyses of social life were offered wholesale as alternatives to “bourgeois” or “liberal” social science. Regarding Mauritian ethnicity, the most complete Marxist analysis was that of two French sociologists who published a book more than two decades ago (Durand and Durand 1978). They saw ethnic revitalization chiefly as a middle-class affectation intended to preserve privileges associated with caste and class, and argued that while class consciousness could provide the disenfranchised with equal rights, ethnic consciousness was a form of false consciousness that led nowhere for the masses. Whatever its merits, by concentrating on ostentatious symbolic displays of ethnic identity (one of their examples is the revitalization of the sari, a garment that had become obsolete among rural and working-class Hindu women), the Durands neglected the foundation of ethnic identity in everyday life; the fact that not only social classification of self and other, but also the flow of material and nonmaterial resources is largely directed by ethnic connections, networks, and associations. Although some factors, such as education, individualism, and the emergence of an increasingly nonethnic private-sector labor market, reduce the importance of ethnicity, the monoethnic networks of trust and mutual commitment continue to confirm and reinforce ethnicity in most Mauritian social settings. This has nothing to do with the cultural differences spoken about by ethnic ideologists in Europe and North America. As every Mauritian knows, their country might well be organized along ethnic lines even if the cultural differences between the groups were negligible. At present, as noted earlier, the cultural differences between ethnic groups in Mauritius nonetheless remain considerable and socially relevant. Their relative lack of social capital (a cultural factor) partly explains the difficult situation

of the Creoles, but such differences are not necessary for ethnicity to be socially important.

Since Marxism went out of fashion, a main controversy regarding these matters has been the ongoing debate in social philosophy between communitarians and liberals. While communitarians like Michael Walzer and Alasdair Macintyre have argued the primacy of the group over the individual, and have thereby defended ethnic movements and nonoffensive nationalist collectivism, liberals like John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, and Jürgen Habermas have argued in favor of individual rights, pointing out the predicaments inherent in a collectivism that treats people differently on the basis of presumed cultural differences. Some theorists, like Will Kymlicka, have tried to transcend this opposition, suggesting ways in which a concern for cultural rootedness among minorities or even majorities can be reconciled with liberal individualism (Kymlicka 1995). While this ongoing debate in social philosophy can be useful as a starting point for analyses of Mauritian discourses and policies relating to religion, language, education, and the electoral system, it is less helpful when we try to unravel the causes of the Kaya riots. The issue at the core here is not the question of cultural rights versus individual rights, but the extension of kinship solidarity to the metaphoric realm of ethnicity, applied to the public service of the multiethnic nation. One distinction highlighted in the communitarianism/liberalism debate nevertheless seems highly relevant, namely, that obtaining between the private and the public sphere. In the scholarly discourse about urban minorities in Western Europe as well as ethnic nationalism in Eastern Europe, it is common to argue that expressions of ethnic or cultural distinctiveness are acceptable in the private sphere but not in the public sphere; one may be different at home but not at school or at work. While this argument can also be found in Mauritian discourse, it is notoriously difficult to apply in practice, since rights and obligations anchored in the domestic sphere inevitably have ramifications in public spheres. Nowhere is this more evident than in cases of nepotism and ethnic favoritism.

Whether liberal or communitarian in normative orientation, this literature generally has surprisingly little to tell us about the current Mauritian crisis, as does the kind of Marxist analysis referred to above. The country is a well-functioning democracy with an excellent human rights record, and it has achieved a clever reconciliation between cultural rights and individual rights – yet a sizeable ethnic minority is excluded from a variety of career opportunities for structural and cultural reasons. This kind of exclusion requires no formal organization and no ideology; kinship and, by extension, ethnicity as classificatory kinship, are sufficient. Unless one



looks at this dimension of ethnic identity, which is reproduced through socialization, largely in the private sphere, there is little to suggest that Mauritius is anything but a country where liberals and communitarians can live comfortably together.

Another large body of literature, dominated by political scientists, deals with ethnic conflict, its causes and its solutions (see Horowitz 1985; Lijphart 1977 for two different, important contributions). Although few would today go as far as to claim that cultural incompatibilities explain ethnic hostilities, many of the writers dealing with these issues take the ethnic identity for granted; what needs to be accounted for seems to be not the strength of ethnic loyalty, but the outbreak of conflict. In my view, given a society with strongly incorporated ethnic groups, it is fairly easy to explain why conflict is likely to erupt under specific circumstances involving competition over scarce resources. The present challenge is not so much to explain discrimination and conflict, but why they emerge as *ethnic* phenomena. It is a straightforward task to demonstrate that, say, Pakistani immigrants are discriminated against in the labor and housing markets in Oslo, or that African Americans systematically receive an inferior education, or that the Yugoslav wars were fought on the basis of ethnicity. It is even relatively easy to offer a persuasive argument about the causes of these outcomes, provided one takes the ethnic structure of society for granted.

Like the social philosophers and social scientists writing about majorities, minorities, cultures, and individuals, alluded to above and in the introduction to this chapter, the ethnic conflict analysts have rarely shown how ethnic identity is being reproduced – it is not chiefly through overt ideologies of roots and supremacy, nor through large-scale rituals of community, but through the more low-key and less easily observable institutions of primary socialization and kinship. This is where the ultimate causes of the Kaya riots must be sought. The appropriate comparison, therefore, should not be made between the ethnic unrest in Mauritius and violent ethnic conflict in, say, Sri Lanka, Kosovo, or Rwanda; but between the Mauritian class structure and the class structure of other perfectly democratic countries where kinship, interpersonal networks and social distinctions ensure the reproduction of systematically differential access to coveted resources. In other words, the British class structure is a more relevant comparative horizon here than Scottish separatism or Cornish revivalism, or even identity politics among Muslims in West Yorkshire.

In the Mauritian case as elsewhere, it may – and will doubtless – be argued that the official multiculturalism of the country is a foil concealing systematic discrimination against particular ethnic groups: they are granted equal symbolic significance, cultural rights, and formal equality,

but are discriminated against in informal, nearly invisible, but no less efficient ways. This description fits the Mauritian situation well, but if it is invoked as an argument against cultural rights or a moderate version of multiculturalism, it must be pointed out that it conflates two separate issues: the current unrest involving part of the Creole population is not fought out over cultural rights relating to, for example, religion, language or “way of life.” The right to pursue a culturally specific way of life has never been threatened in independent Mauritius, and indeed, when cultural radicals in the 1970s tried to make Kreol – the ancestral language of the Creoles, an official language in the media and the state, many of the latter were against the proposition, since they saw French as a more sophisticated and useful language. As I have shown, the conflict can be traced to certain practices in the public sphere related to socialization patterns, not to culture. It can therefore be argued that the moderate multiculturalism institutionalized in the Mauritian public sphere – equal rights, but cultural variation – is part of the solution, not part of the problem. Since the existence of discrete “ethnic communities” is recognized both in the Mauritian constitution and in Mauritian society as a whole, it follows that ethnic particularism and favoritism are deemed possible – unlike what would have been the case in a more dogmatic liberal state, where only individuals and their families are acknowledged, or in a socialist state like Tito’s Yugoslavia, where ethnicity was officially seen as a phenomenon belonging to an earlier social formation. Similarly, in societies where the existence of social classes is denied by the dominant ideology, accusations of systemic reproductions of a particular class structure are likely to be met with limited understanding.

### Concluding remarks

I hope to have shown two things in this analysis of the February 1999 riots in Mauritius. First, ethnicity is, when all is said and done, chiefly a property of social relations, not of ideology. As long as ethnic identity has a firm foundation in kinship and social networks, it can manage quite well and even be socially dominant, without an overarching ideology or ostentatious symbolic display; in Mauritius, if anything, French-language discourse conducted by nonwhite Catholics is dominant in the public sphere, while the wider ethnic category associated with them is subordinated.

Second, this particular conflict is properly seen not as an ethnic conflict in the usual sense, despite its appearance as one. Neither of the groups wishes to annihilate, enslave, or dominate the other, achieve political independence or strengthen its collective sense of identity. Rather, the Creoles

revolted against particularist practices in the public service curtailing their individual social mobility and depriving them of equal treatment. The Creole quest for equality, taken at face value for the sake of the present argument, therefore deserves to be seen in the context of the emancipatory liberal tradition rather than as yet another expression of sectarian identity politics. In other words, not every conflict that involves two ethnic groups is an ethnic conflict. In general, conflicts involving territorial minorities and indigenous peoples confronting a more or less belligerent state are ethnic in character, while the antiracist movement and other social movements involving immigrant groups in Western Europe tend to belong to the liberal tradition in that they argue in favor of equality, *against* the ethnic logic of society. These two kinds of social movements have little in common, and deserve not to be lumped together as “ethnic” ones. One is similar to class struggle (in the wide sense including cultural aspects of class), the other to nationalism; one favors equality, the other difference. This distinction, often obscured by the blanket term “ethnic conflict,” is not a trivial one, whether one’s concern is intellectual or political.

## NOTES

A previous version of this chapter was delivered at the conference “Nationalism, Identity and Minority Rights,” Department of Sociology, University of Bristol, September 16–19, 1999. Thanks are due to the organizers for creating a stimulating setting, and, in their subsequent role as editors of this volume, for useful comments on an earlier version of the chapter.

1. The philosophical debate between communitarians and liberals is also an important one; it will be dealt with separately below.
2. Thanks are due to Malenn Oodiah, Vinesh Hookoomsing, and Elisabeth Boullé for keeping me posted on the crisis before I could come myself (I went in October 1999).
3. It then all but collapsed, like many former movements of the same structure.
4. The actual importance of this movement is negligible. It is interesting as a symptom, not as a force in itself.
5. An independent autopsy on Kaya, carried out by a foreign physician, concluded that he died from head injuries which could not have been self-inflicted, noting that the injuries could have been caused by violent shaking of the body or it being thrown to the ground. He also noted slight injuries on the singer’s face and body. The government has nonetheless called on other specialists, and nearly a year after Kaya’s death, there was officially not sufficient evidence to suggest he was murdered.

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