

Minority

The word minority has become very widespread, and it is used to refer to numerous realities related to different fields of study and different disciplines. It is therefore very difficult to give a satisfactory definition. What can however be said, in the most general sense, is that a minority is a "community of belonging" united by ties that may be religious, ethnic, linguistic or cultural, assuming that these ties between the members of the minority are sufficiently long-standing and lasting to found an identity that is different from that of the rest of the population. The word can also refer to new types of social groups seeking to defend or gain recognition for certain rights, while at the same time organising themselves and producing a sufficiently coherent discourse for the majority to agree on a specificity, a behaviour or a lifestyle that distinguishes or excludes them.

The use of the word minority often points to a lack of social cohesion, and we can wonder why such differences are maintained over time. A minority remains a minority, or is perceived as such, precisely because it does not integrate into a wider social whole. There are two reasons for this. Firstly the minority, made up of members who are conscious of their difference, tends to cultivate that difference. Secondly, the minority is maintained within that difference, and sometimes contained within a second-rate political and economic status by the majority. Thus the use of the word minority can suggest an idea of resistance, or even tension, within the social body.

The typologies of minorities are clear-cut, and relate to well-defined criteria and categories. Any group possessing specific ethnic markers (language, religion, tradition or any other) forms a differentiated ethnic group, and in some cases a minority. Religious minorities (Christians in Lebanon, Sunnis in Iran for instance) and linguistic minorities (French speakers in the USA or Canada, Swedish speakers in Finland, Kurds in Iran) are easy to distinguish. One or two cultural traits, such as religion or language are thus markers and enable the minority group to be outlined. There are also ethnic minorities (the Romani in numerous European countries, for instance) and national minorities (Germans in Denmark, Magyars in Slovakia, Romania and Ukraine). The ethnic minorities are distinguished solely by certain cultural features, although they do not reject what Stéphane Rosière calls the "national pact". National minorities are more political in character, since they refuse this pact.

For numerous authors, a minority, whether ethnic or national, is necessarily autochthonous (in certain instances referred to as an autochthonous people). This generates the idea that a group of population was at some stage enclosed within a larger social and political ensemble without changing their territory. This manner of viewing things may well be too restrictive. By way of the interplay of international migrations, forced or voluntary, an allogeneic population can indeed find itself in the position of a minority in the receiving country.

The theme of minorities, which appeared before 1920 in the work conducted in the Chicago school (on ethnic and racial minorities, relationships between blacks and whites, and racism), became an important research subject for numerous disciplines from the 1990s. It is in sociology, and in particular in urban sociology, that the widest variety of approaches is to be found: «segregation» processes, the situation of minority groups in different political settings (liberal model, multicultural model, communitarianism), relationships between minority groups (Rallu et al, 1994), relationships between minority and majority groups, internal organisation and mobilisation of minority groups and collective action (the formation of "active" minorities) (Mann, 1991), relationships between communities, and integration of immigrant populations. With the rise of «gender» studies, and the focus on sexual minorities, minorities have become a dominant theme mobilising various approaches, raising in particular the issues of social justice and forms of discrimination: social perceptions of sexual minorities and patterns of institutional and social regulation (Corriveau & Davost, 2011), the study of sexism, or of the risk of suicide among young people belonging to sexual minorities (Beck et al, 2010), the study of the political issues of sexual identity, or of verbal abuse against racial and sexual minorities (Butler, 2004).

Law and legal sociology have also integrated this theme. Among other things, these two disciplines explore the way in which existing laws in various countries contribute to influencing the way minorities are perceived, to defining their contours, and in some cases to conserving their limitations by various political means (Calvès, 1998, Kymlicka, 1995, Sabbagh, 2003, Woehrling, 1998). They also explore the way in which minorities use the legal framework as a resource to mobilise collectively and in some cases come to power (Noreau, 1999, Roussel, 2004).

Following on from jurists, the approaches proposed by the political sciences and political sociology are varied, although the theme was for some time marginal in the discipline (Voutat, Knuesel, 1997). These approaches focus, among other things, on integration

policies (Noblet, 1991), on the way in which minorities change to become active political forces (Benbassa, 2011), on the institutional mechanisms that they use in some cases to take part in political life, or on territorial belonging of minorities in different types of State and in different institutional settings (the importance of local institutions, federalism, decentralisation etc.).

The approaches to minorities deployed by geographers are no less varied, in particular in the areas of geopolitics and political geography, because the geography of minorities never corresponds to state divisions. In addition, the presence of one or several minorities in a territory can be a destabilising factor. It can lead to territorial claims (Chechens, Basques for instance) and in some cases generate conflict concerning «borders» (irredentism, annexation, separatism, schism, partition, fragmentation, balkanisation) (Sanguin, 2010). Certain states do not hesitate to respond to such claims by violence or even ethnic cleansing or genocide. Attention is also focused on spatial belonging and territorial appropriation by minorities (Audebert, 2008), on their political action and influence in the emergence of regional nationalisms (Tétart, 2010), and so forth. The geographer's view is however not restricted to situations of conflict. Geographers also consider, for instance, the way in which sexual minorities find their place in geographical space, and the way in which they produce space. Here, among others, Marianne Blidon can be mentioned for her work on the spatial patterns of the gay communities in Paris (Blidon, 2006), Boris Grésillon on the gay cultural venues in Berlin, Emmanuel Redoutey on the Marais district in Paris, and work on the geography of homosexuality in general (Redoutey, 2002 and 2004), or Nadine Cattan and Stéphane Leroy on homosexuality in the «public space».

see also: "ethnic group"

Bibliographie