Minority/Majority

Till van Rahden
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To this day, the conceptual couple of majority and minority is often viewed as a harmless way of identifying an arithmetic relationship to make sense of cultural diversity. A conceptual history suggests, however, that the juxtaposition between a majority and one or several minorities is both a recent neologism and an essentially contested conceptual couple.

The conceptual couple of majority and minority seems to transcend polemics in controversies about the tension between equality and difference. It enjoys an aura of analytical rigor and scholarly detachment because this conceptual couple rests on a relationship that appears to be numerical rather than political. It is telling that the entry on majority and minority in the Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe focuses on the history of majority rule and only contains a passing reference to questions of difference.¹

The concept of minority seems like a useful and harmless umbrella term that allows for comparative research in what has come to be known as minority studies. The opposition of minority and majority has taken on many meanings and has been applied indiscriminately to questions of difference across time and space. Yet, in each instance the concept of minority appeals both to a cultural and a statistical imagination and raises questions of difference, deviance, and abnormality. The asymmetric counter-concept of majority, in turn, is rarely articulated; it represents an unmarked normality.

Against this background, it is surprising that there are almost no studies of the conceptual history of the term “minority,” let alone of the twin concepts of “majority” and “minority,” that is, if one brackets studies that focus on the questions of majority rule.² Rather than parroting this binary opposition, it might prove more useful to study its history. In fact, the idea of a dichotomy between majority and minority as a shorthand to describe relations between ethnic or religious groups is recent; it did not exist before 1919, when, in the wake of World War I, four empires collapsed and the ideas of democracy and of the homogeneous nation-state triumphed.

Meanings of “Minority” Before Minority Studies

Prior to the twentieth century, three contexts existed in which the terms majority versus minority were central, one legal, one moral, and one political. It is only in the
third context, namely in the history of parliamentarism, that the arithmetical dimension that we regard as central mattered at all.

First, from the fifteenth century the concepts of minority and majority referred to the state of being a minor, that is a person under age, or to the age and legal status of maturity. In 1739, Johann Zedler’s *Großes Universallexikon* contained no headword for “Minderheit” or “Minorität,” but an entry “Minderjährig”: “Minderjährig or a *Minderjähriger, Minor, Minorensis* refers to the rights of a man, who has not yet reached the age of 25.” In a similar vein, the *Encyclopédie* contains no headword for *minorité*, as opposed to an entry on *majorité* that states: “*est un certain âge fixé par la loi, auquel on acquiert la capacité de faire certains actes.*”

Closely related is the second context in which the couple of majority and minority was significant in seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth-century Europe, namely as a language of moral superiority and inferiority. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the language of minor, of *minorité*, of *minoritas*, and of *minorem* referred to “the condition of or fact of being smaller, inferior or subordinate” and as such drew on ideas of legal, intellectual, and moral deficiency. The headword “Minderheit” in Campe’s *Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache* of 1809 is revealing. According to the dictionary, the term had two meanings; the first referred to the “condition in which something is less than another, both in number, quantity, and regarding inner strength and dignity; […] 2) The minor or smaller number (minority); in contrast to the majority.” The moral meaning was primary, the arithmetic dimension secondary.

In parliamentary struggles, too, the concept of majority and minority suggested moral superiority and inferiority. Throughout the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern era, the doctrine of *maior et sanior pars* contained the rise of a numerical conception of majority. As long as the principle of the “greater and sounder part” predominated, electoral victory was not based on numbers alone but on the greater weight given to the votes of some electors based on their authority, intellectual prowess, moral standing, and fairness of judgment.

In the eighteenth-century, the concept of minority began to be used to refer to a party voting together against a majority in an electoral body. In controversies surrounding parliamentary politics, the twin couple of majority and minority expressed an arithmetic relation more than anything else, albeit an arithmetic relation that had significant ramifications. Yet, since the relationship is purely arithmetic and the result of unpredictable elections, it became clear that in the
context of electoral bodies the categories of majority and minority are fluid. Today's majority can be tomorrow's minority, and vice versa.

The new meaning of majority and minority as a keyword to capture forms of cultural diversity first emerged at the contested and fractured fringes of empires. Such peripheries included the Province of Quebec in Canada, Indo-British encounters, and the borderlands of the Habsburg Empire. Conflicts over recognition were particularly visceral in these spaces of ideological contestation. The seemingly self-evident use of the binary opposition between majority and minority in controversies over cultural differences seems to have been born of colonial encounters. It is here that the concept of minority was increasingly used during the second half of the nineteenth century.

In the early twentieth century, however, the concept of minority had not yet crystallized into rallying cry for a politics of cultural recognition. If controversies over language or religion, ethnic or national particularities erupted, they were rarely couched in abstract concepts. Usually contemporaries resorted to a "mere enumeration of existing groups," whether they were conceived of as “ethnic tribes” or “nationalities,” “religious communities,” or simply as “alien elements.”

1919 – When It All Began

In 1919 everything changed. The concept of minority became a keyword in the struggles over cultural recognition in the interwar years. As a legal concept, it was dignified by the Paris treaties of 1919. Countless articles, pamphlets, and books appeared in 1919 and have done so ever since. Encyclopedias immediately began to include lengthy headwords on the subject. Simultaneously numerous new composita appeared like “Minority Protection,” “Minority Politics,” or “Minority Statistics” and the most important categories of “National Minority” and “Minority Rights.”

Within months the concept of minority took on a wide range of meanings, be they juridical or political, religious, cultural, or even racial. The more fluid and polysemic the nature of the category, the greater its popularity across the full political spectrum ranging from socialists to left-wing and conservative liberals, to fascist movements.

Throughout the polemics in the interwar years the public struggled with the question whether minority status (and therefore) the legal or at least cultural recognition of a minority would be based on religion or culture, language or
custom, race or nationality. Equally contentious was the issue whether “minority rights” were a more sophisticated and elaborate form of individual civic rights or whether they were grounded in a thick conception of group rights that could potentially overrule individual rights.

Many scholars continue to associate the polemics over minority rights in the interwar years with the breakup of the multi-ethnic empires in continental Europe. The Paris treaties led to a radical territorial reordering of the political landscape in Central and Eastern Europe. The newly emerging states had to reconcile fantasies of national sovereignty and homogeneity with the multilayered quilts of difference that had existed in the multi-ethnic empires. Even scholars who are aware that the concept is a neologism coined in 1919, place it within a long history of recognizing cultural differences. What we “now define as minority rights,” André Liebich notes, date back to the seventeenth century and “have developed primarily as an indemnity offered to defeated parties.”

Ultimately, the obsession with the concept of “minority” has less to do with the breakup of the multi-ethnic empires than the triumph of democracy in the wake of war, no matter how short-lived that triumph would prove in many countries. What may seem to be born of the preoccupations of the tribal twenties, points to a paradox inherent to the democratic project. Whatever else democracy is, it invokes not just the idea of universal suffrage, but, more importantly, the principle of majority rule. In interwar democracies, of course, all (male) citizens enjoyed the right to vote, but if democracy is government by consent, what is at stake is not universal consent but the consent of the majority. Solely thanks to the “technical tool” of the democratic majority principle, the legal scholar and political theorist Hermann Heller noted in 1927, can “the people as a unity [Einheit] rule over the people as a multiplicity [Vielheit].”

Within the larger controversies over the tension between equality and difference, democracy represents the principle of equality, whereas civic rights open up spaces for the articulation of difference. Within a liberal constitutional framework, a minority of one enjoys the same civic rights as the overwhelming majority. The triumph of universal suffrage in the wake of World War I gave rise to fantasies of democratic homogeneity and corresponding fears of difference that crystallized in the concept of Minderheitenproblem. At the same time, the specter of the tyranny of the majority that haunts the dream of democratic sovereignty gave new urgency to the language of minority rights.
After Minority Studies

To this day, the conceptual couple of majority and minority is often viewed as a harmless way of identifying an arithmetic relationship to make sense of cultural diversity. A conceptual history suggests, however, that the juxtaposition between a majority and one or several minorities is both a recent neologism and an essentially contested conceptual couple. Languages of minority rights can easily morph into a language of a minority question or a minority problem. And, as W. E. B. Du Bois noted as early as 1903, no one wants to be known as just a problem. The mid-century cataclysmic violence also fueled doubts. Once news about the death camps reached New York, the World Jewish Congress abandoned the language of minority rights. In November 1941, Nahum Goldmann argued that the minority treaties were “insufficient” for the “coming peace.” To the co-founder of the World Jewish Congress, the “main problem in guaranteeing Jewish rights, both the rights of individuals and the rights of Jewish communities to their own life (religious, cultural, national life), is not a specifically Jewish problem.” To Goldmann the key was “the abolition of the sovereign state and the establishment of international authorities with [...] powers of coercion.” He called for an “international magna charta” that “would guarantee everywhere certain minimum rights to all individuals and to all distinctive groups of individuals—religious, ethnic, linguistic, national groups.” “Such a system,” Goldmann noted, “is much preferable to the system of so-called minority rights because the expression ‘minority rights’ maintains [...] the idea that a state belongs really to the majority, and the minority are, so to speak, guests of this majority, who have to be guaranteed protection against the majority. [...] A state belongs to those who live in it, as its citizens who have built it; and the question of religious, ethnic and linguistic differences does not minimize their [...] right to be among the owners of the state.”

Perhaps, one way to avoid the assumptions of moral deficiency and intellectual immaturity that underlie the dichotomy of majority and minority is to place the relationship between the particular and the universal at the center of our understanding of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European history. Perhaps it is best to conceptualize differences not as the sudden emergence of marginal “others” in the public realm but as an omnipresent force in liberal societies. Diversity, in short, is the “inevitable effect of individual freedom.” In any liberal polity, citizens bring their specific sensibilities and fears into the public sphere. All citizens enter a democratic polity as the distinct individuals they are. It is a dangerous misunderstanding to assume that when citizens enter the realm of...
politics, they can check their moral passions and prejudices or their fears and fantasies. In the face of such passions, it is obvious that a democratic polity is neither the starting point nor the ultimate destination of citizens. In the political if not in the geographic sense, all citizens are immigrants who bring their own “minority” culture into the public sphere.\(^\text{15}\) We would do well, therefore, to challenge the predominant tendency to identify research on diversity with questions of marginality. To move beyond the paradigm of minority studies inherent in this equation, it might prove fruitful to start with the assumption that differences—moral incommensurabilities, in other words—originate within a liberal democracy.

Till van Rahden is a professor of German and European Studies at the Université de Montréal where he held a Canada Research Chair from 2006 to 2016. An expert in Modern German history, his most significant publication to date has been Jews and other Germans (2008), a work which has been received as a major contribution to Modern Jewish history and Modern European history. His latest book are Demokratie: Eine gefährdete Lebensform (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus, 2022) and Vielheit: Jüdische Geschichte und die Ambivalenzen des Universalismus (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2022).

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Email: till.van.rahden@umontreal.ca

**Tags:** Democracy / Jewish history / legal history

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4 On the following see the entries “Minor” and “Minority,” “Major,” and “Majority,” in the Oxford English Dictionary, Online edition, URL: http://dictionary.oed.com (25.04.2023); revised March 2009.


