Methodological Foundations of Ethnopolitical Conflict Studies

Maxim U. Barbashin, PhD.

Abstract

A number of methodological problems in relation to the study of the causes and progress of Ethnopolitical Conflict are identified. One major problem lies in the difference between information and knowledge. “Trying to attain knowledge under the incessant stream of publications” leads to confusion over trifles and the loss of main points. The author demonstrates the problems associated with the lack of a methodological foundation; a proper identification of a paradigm in which knowledge and theory is understood; the extent to which there is a shared conceptual language with other social sciences and the extent to which research into Ethnopolitical conflict produces its own conceptual devices. The author ends on a pessimistic note, arguing that researchers in this field may be doomed to stay within the limits of a restricted paradigm.

Ethnopolitical Conflict Studies is an essential part of the social sciences. This theoretical direction is inherently a polystructural science aimed at the integration of a number of disciplines and theoretical approaches. It draws on political science, anthropology, social psychology, sociology and ethnic studies.

The methodological problems of Ethnopolitical Conflict Studies stem first of all from the widening divergence among scholarly disciplines. Until the eighteenth century a scholar could aspire to expertise in a wide range of fields and disciplines in rather different spheres. Now, however, it is extremely difficult to follow all published research even in a very narrow field. Accordingly, the possibility of the researcher of attaining broad encyclopedic knowledge is regarded with skepticism. Therefore, as one famous Russian philosopher noted: “In order to judge something, I oblige neither me, nor others to know all the literature on the subject of discussions. In our time of unendurable writing, it would not be enough whole lives for this. And we do not need it”.

Some researchers, characterizing the current situation, come to the conclusion that research fellows feel themselves “buried” under the tremendous amount of scientific articles and monographs being produced in all countries of the world, they fail to read bibliographies thoroughly or even to look at them. Trying to attain knowledge under the incessant stream of publications, they risk all the time getting confused in trifles and missing main points. “This suppression of personal and lively thought by the enormous abundance of alien and mostly homogenous material has an effect not only on the researcher, but on the public. Scientists are not only themselves oppressed by this burden, but they oppress their readers with it… How much is written and published! And how little truly good, original, witty and profound is there in all this!”
One should take into account the following features: our epoch is called the “Information Era”, but rarely is it called the “Era of Knowledge”. Information and knowledge are not the same. In order for information to become knowledge, it needs to be received, analyzed, integrated, saved and used. Therefore, what is urgent is not the rapidly increasing manufacture of publications, but an understanding of new informational sources. One of the roots of the problem is the weak coordination among different universities and institutes (especially those that are in different countries and parts of the world). As a result much research is needlessly duplicated. One can agree with the truth of the thought written more than a century ago by Vladimir Soloviev: “Now there are more scientific workers than there have ever been, but there are a few masters. Due to the continuous accumulation of scientific material, our young scientists know more than their predecessors, but they are less able to use their plentiful knowledge. Instead of integral scientific creations, we see only a mass of building material expanding in all sides, and the work of the scientist is more and more turning into the manual labor of craftsman”.

Certainly, each science shares fundamental methodological means and special theoretical groundings. Based on these it is possible to create a kind of the united conception. But this task is not easy. One of the features that distinguish scientific knowledge is its systematization. Scientific knowledge should contain the answers to factual questions: what qualities the object has, what kind of objects possess them, what we know about the object or the sphere. Providing answers to such questions has never been a duty of the bibliographic output of the libraries around the world. A library provides the scientist some bibliographic information, but the researcher does not need bibliographies as such (though not having other sources, he has to content himself with bibliographic information), nor even the works themselves He needs for his research the facts and ideas they contain.

Each science has its own methodology, as well as history and theory. In other words, the history and theory of the science are created during the process of the scientific understanding of social or natural processes. The only question which seems unclear and remains unanswered is about philosophy. Some believe that such titles as “Philosophy of Sociology” or even “Philosophy of Physics” can exist in the scientific discourse; while others, especially methodologists, contend that Philosophy is not a science at all, because Philosophy cannot accumulate any knowledge. In other words, we know enough about the surrounding world now, we have such knowledge in all scientific disciplines whether they are social or technical, or mathematical, but we cannot be sure that our understanding of Philosophy, our understanding of the man is more appropriate and more profound than the understanding of Hegel. Does that mean the existence of the philosophical progress? Whether it can be a kind of “knowledge gain” or “new knowledge” in Philosophy which can prove that we do know more in the nature of the society than our predecessors? I suppose that we can answer all these questions. And although I do believe that Philosophy of Conflict Studies has a right to exist, such analysis is not too simple, because we must first define Philosophy precisely and then distinguish it from all the humanities and social sciences.

When speaking about Philosophy, we can use so called scientific approaches. The scientific approach in the broad sense of studying the objective reality distinguishes usually the object and the subject of the given science. One of the most widespread interpretations is as follows. The object is considered the material body, the phenomenon...
or the process, existing irrespective of learning and transforming roles of the person and
the scientific consciousness actually. Knowing the real object in all of its complexity and
infinite connections with other objects is a process which is unusually difficult.
Consequently separate sciences, as a rule, are limited to studying of separate aspects of
the certain object. It creates the subject of the given science. Thus, the object of the
science can exist outside of the observer while the subject of the science is formed by the
science. Some Russian philosophers even suppose that “object” is a kind of contracted
word of “objectivity” or “objective”. Therefore, object should be broader in its sense and
the subject of science, although such linguistic interpretations seem not convincing
enough. In any case, in my analysis this very distinction between the object and the
subject will be used.

Any object or the phenomenon can be investigated on the foundations of three common
approaches: substantial, structural and functional. Thus, for example, the object can be
studied proceeding from the material substance in which it is embodied. The object can
be considered from the point of view of its structure – that is, from studying those relations
which exist between components of the given object. Moreover, the object can be
considered proceeding from the functioning of its separate parts or as a whole. Needless
to say, the real research should combine all the above mentioned approaches.

Before analyzing ethnopolitical conflicts, I would like to mention some other common
methodological assumptions. Any separate science is connected closely by its history and
methods to all accumulated human knowledge. First, it is based on certain philosophical
and general-methodological preconditions (methodological foundations). Second, it
assumes some general scientific views of the given epochs (In other words, it exists
within a scientific paradigm). Third, it makes use of some concepts that are the common
features for a lot of adjacent sciences (for example, for all social sciences which study
human and social interactions). Fourth, any advanced science develops its own
conceptual devices (the basic concepts and methods).

Methodology is neither a manual for self-tuition, nor a receipt for “punching” discoveries.
Its aim is the scientific organization of the creative process. Therefore each methodology
seeks to introduce and use certain standards. The ideal case is that in which it is possible
to formulate a system of axioms, initial requirements, as well as a table of special
symbols, especially if the introduction of symbolism entails a principal opportunity of the
transition to this or that algebraic and mathematical equations. However if a law of physics
formulated in the mathematical language pretends to the strictly adequate description of
natural phenomena, then the mathematical models of social processes can pretend only
to increase to some extent our understanding of the investigated phenomenon. As a
result, the mathematical model describing the behavior of a social system allows
considering the behavior only similar to the behavior of the real system of natural
processes. The degree of approximation of model analysis to the real processes which
are independent of our research is completely determined by that accuracy which we
need in our conclusions.

All mathematical constructions are idealized models. They include initial restrictions, and
cannot take into account all factors. Therefore some theoreticians and especially experts
noticed the drawbacks of this approach. It describes not the real system of social
interactions but its idealized model. Such a model determines regularities that are
consistent with the linear expansion of processes, while phenomena in the social world are developed mostly under complex nonlinear laws. In the gnoseological aspect, the criterion of definite proof is its explanatory force and simplicity. A theory should be a closed system of concepts passing into each other easily with the “through action”. As Zeygarnik emphasized, “a criterion for scientific reliability is not the recurrence of isolated facts, on the contrary, isolated facts find scientific reliability only in the context of theory”.6

The essence of science is creating new combinations of facts, not just collecting new empirical data. Putting aside the issue of empirical facts, one may say that the task of any theory is to attempt to find all common features uniting all the variety of facts which have been opened up to the researcher. According to A. Mikhaylova, “an admirer of “pure” empiricism is like a naturalist-artist who, wishing to paint photographically precisely all particular properties [of the object] posing for him, misses the point – a deep quality which causes the entire particular. He represents the similar world which is not clear to him”.7

The artist aspiring to show the very essence of the represented while not renouncing the truth should subordinate the particulars to the main thing and prefer deep internal similarity based on the understanding of the reflected object to external similarity. But to come nearer to a deep understanding of the object, it is necessary to step aside from it, to keep away from it, to absorb in the focus of its attention not only that part of the object which is open to the observer now, but also everything which is connected to it, which can give any new features for its understanding.8 It is the very rapprochement of distant facts which leads to their deeper comprehension and this is the force of science. The problem of analysis is reduced to the attempts to make clear a unity and non-randomness of such a set of meanings instead of others. “We place ourselves inside special theoretical structure which becomes the looking glasses through which we search for anomalies”.9

All facts and parts of the researched object should be covered by the theory, besides the facts not taken into account or missed for some reasons till now, and the sides opened in the object again should be kept within its theoretical framework. Yet for theorists in the field of Ethnopolitical Conflict such a task is too difficult to accomplish. There are too many facts, and there are even more connections between them. The number of facts in any study potentially limitless. And the roles of theory in part are to identify what are the facts or what are the important facts. Usually, it is therefore easier to define what to do than how to do. For example, how does one identify variants or follow possible connections, if there are too many of them?

One can see that useful data are buried under a heap of useless information. Considering only one aspect of a problem and rejecting the others, conflict resolution specialists lose their objectivity of the analysis appreciably. But if they want to describe the whole phenomena while not omitting anything, their ideas are simply lost in a mass of unnecessary details. However, any serious discovery is a detection of connections between apparently unnecessary and isolated things. The correct decision does not happen obviously. “This task is not simple because the subject and the object find out a property of interpenetration and crossing during studying. Therefore it is difficult for the researcher to conduct supervise the phenomena and to think about their existence irrespective of him himself”.10 Only having overcome a set of errors and mistakes on the chosen way, having checked up counter-theories and having convinced of their inconsistency, one can find the original decision out. For this purpose it is necessary to abstract from all the casual and the petty, i.e. from a reality to pass to an ideal, otherwise
he will just get confused in messy set of minor attributes.

When the required interrelation is established, the identified connections become the facts in the researching of the given object but also the facts that are obtained by the theory. This is one of the paradoxes of scientific knowledge – in certain respects the theory is more empirical than simple facts. Therefore, one can say that there is nothing more abstract than the fact isolated from its connections with other facts and, to the contrary, there is nothing more concrete than the connections of facts which are examined precisely and considered by scientists as a whole. Many facts on which scientists build their research in the past have become outdated for a long time, however their theoretical models have not yet lost their utility. As S. I. Ivanov writes, “scientific facts are not only empirical ones, but achievements of the theoretical thought also”. Unfortunately, many centers for Ethnic Conflict Studies restrict their activities to studying only the official records and papers.

The appropriate way of understanding is through wide accumulations of the theories and experiments. Thus, the distinctions in the methods of these two directions of the same science are disappearing gradually. The person, as a rule, establishes laws corresponding to the linear expansion of processes easily while the majority of the phenomena in the social world develop under complex and nonlinear laws. One can consider that these sciences draw a picture precisely corresponding to reality, but actually mathematical concepts do not aspire to reflect reality absolutely. All complex mathematical constructions are idealized models. These or those restrictions are imposed on initial conditions, and they are not taken into account actions of other factors. The idealization force of the sciences is in such flexibility and some kind of purposefulness of models.

The general is not given under direct observation. Therefore, there is the need for the theory. The theory should be created, and creativity in science consists of it. The theory is called to catch diverse connections of the phenomena which are not obvious for the researcher from his or her initial, external and empirical observations. If we recognize that isolated facts and the phenomena are connected among themselves by diverse relations, then we can agree that there is a side in the observed reality which can be understood only on the basis of theoretical knowledge, at the level of theory, and that empirical knowledge, i.e. the knowledge accessible to sensual experiences of the man, is basically incomplete knowledge. Theoretical cognition, operating with the various facts, pulling together phenomena sometimes very far from each other, seems to leave from them, but in fact makes it only to come nearer to them, to learn them in their mutual connections more deeply and precisely.

In general, very few people will dare to disagree with the statement that the scientific utility of a theory should be evaluated or tested by empirical facts. Therefore in Ethnopolitical Conflict Studies the theoretical methods are applied for the decision of separate problems where it is possible and advisable now, and the theory uses more experiments as criteria of a conclusions’ reliability. The method used is as follows: the phenomenon under scientific investigation is simplified and then some theoretical laws are applied to it. After that the received results are compared with the data of last experiences to determine the degree of divergence, and theoretical conclusions which have been received in the past are corrected in order to adapt them for practical usage.
The essential steps in the development of authentic scientific knowledge are, therefore; the deep analysis of the cases under investigation firstly, experiments on a small scale to check estimates, secondly, and consecutive specification of concepts. The full-scale realization of the given fundamental purpose consists of the decision of the whole complex of auxiliary tasks. They can be subdivided into scientific-theoretical ones (focused on the development of scientific methodology by creating new theoretical approaches and polishing up the research toolkit) and scientific-practical (empirical) ones. Some scientific-theoretical tasks include theoretical formulations by accepting new hypothesis or even social laws. The law in social sciences, as well as in natural ones, means relations “if - that”. In other words, it is a certain connection between hypothetical conditions and hypothetical results. Such laws do not predict what will be going on in the certain place during concrete time. Social laws are not expected to find decisions of tactical tasks. These laws are just common, macrosocial descriptions.

Conflict processes are complex and different. Here research is expected to support, at the appropriate empirical level, a representation of the information file formed purposefully whose analyzes forms the basis for subsequent scientific generalizations, theoretical conclusions, practical recommendations and so on. In this respect the empirical base, as well as methodical instruments and its theory act as an indispensable condition of any research making its toolkit. Empirical bases are usually subdivided into a whole empirical base (representing itself the extensive informational massive which demands regular updating and reproduction), an empirical base of separate sub disciplines, and an empirical base of concrete research, formed entirely from specificity of the investigated object, scientific purposes and setting problems. The process of the empirical base formation of the concrete research is the most difficult and time-consuming. It is mainly based on the field researches providing accumulation of the necessary information due to the primordial date gatherings, sociological surveys, and observations. However, the very information file which is gathered by official statistical services (in ethnopolitical sphere such data are about migrants, incomes of separate ethnic groups, degrees of representation in power and state structures, and son) is of crucial importance now. The Internet, with its numerous international databases, provides many easily exploitable informational opportunities.

Forming the empirical base of the research, one can find a methodological difficulty consisting of serious drawbacks in such methodological approach which is called the “presentism”. “Each science, - remarks E. Sokolov, - has the question about the review of all available views on the decision of any concrete problem that assumes the revealing of the positive results with rejection of mistakes and errors on this way…” However, “if such orientation becomes dominating and absolute, can have unpleasant consequences… A scientific text of the past is understood here not as a historical source but as a research of the object to which is given the interpretation and explanation, and the estimation in terms of modern scientific knowledge. Therefore scientific texts of the past are frequently being rewritten - are being changed symbols, drawings, etc. in updated editions, and in comments “mistakes” are corrected. Actually, such an edition provides a way to reconstruct the path of the author’s thoughts”.  

The second methodological approach is called “antiquarism” by the famous historian of science, N. Kuznetsova. It is connected with the principal denial of opportunities to compare the data of the past knowledge with the modern one. It admits both the value
and the self-sufficiency of the past scientists’ views, and modern similar representations concerning objects of scientific knowledge equally. Such an approach can bring significant advantages to the development of Ethnopolitical Conflict Studies because it helps reconstruct those sociopolitical features of the past communities based on which philosophers and sociologists had created their theoretical frameworks; however the equivalence of different theoretical constructions complicates the question about the priority and novelty of views of these or those researchers. Nevertheless, for modern scientists this issue is not very important. As V. M. Leibin put it: “Bacon had still emphasized that the question about novelty is not as simple as it can seem at first sight. Not without reason is there an opinion according to which the new is the well forgotten old… The question is not who has coined any new concept in the history of philosophy and science, or who has suggested an original idea and heuristic circuits first. More important, [is the question] how a new concept, an original idea or a set of theoretical propositions promoted the invention of nontraditional doctrine which had significant impact on the paradigm shift of thought, the change of value orientations in the Western culture”.

Let me put forward some conclusions. In its ideal positivism was a mechanical direction in scientific thought wishing to promote objectivity and neutrality of the science as a whole. Of course, such ideal is not questioned. This is a wonderful ideal, if it can be reached by researchers themselves. Unfortunately, the real world is too complex; therefore objectivity has its own restrictions. When realizing this thought, postmodernism began its development. The thought, even scientific, cannot be a kind of absolute criteria according to which all the existing reality has to coincide. There are some scientific problems that cannot be resolved anyway, even after using the best methods and technical means. There is the mathematical theorem of Kurt Hedel who suggested that in any abstract system of knowledge, beginning from the certain level of complexity, there are always true statements which cannot be proved by means of this system. And there are false statements which cannot be denied. In other words, “the validity of system statements in each sufficiently powerful system can not be defined within the framework of this system”. That is, in any system there are problems which cannot be resolved within its frameworks and by using its means. For the achievement of this objective it is necessary to pass on to the next level which is higher than the current system.

As for ethnopolitical conflicts, one can notice that “now monodisciplinary studies of interethnic conflicts are conducted generally, “hybrid” specialists are on the periphery”. Therefore the peculiarity of most Ethno-Conflict studies is that in their base there is the methodology of ethnological analysis, rather than conflict one. In general, a complex or synthetic approach to the researching of different objects processes, and phenomena should be used in Conflict Studies. The theoretical base of such polymethodology can be characterized as the combination of such general principles as spatiality, concreteness, locality and integration.

Unfortunately, in Ethnopolitical Conflict Studies methodological approaches now are usually subdivided according to the highly specialized preferences of scholars – philosophers study philosophy of conflict, psychologists take no notice of political factors, and jurists ignore socio-psychological processes. And although such a “specialization” is enough for theoretical aims of model reproduction of the existing ethnic and conflict processes, it does not fulfill any practical aims. A researcher who tests his hypotheses in
practice can find that his theory “does not work” because the real object of conflict clashes
is more difficult than simplified model schemes.

A lot of objective difficulties in the “methodological understanding” push researchers to
postmodernist analysis. Such statement seems a bit categorical, but at the same time it
shows exactly the situation with the “methodological mood” in the humanities and social
sciences. The necessity of using the postmodernist paradigm was formulated precisely by
one Moscow economist Irina Busygina: “The modernist metatheories did not pay special
attention to distinctions and details, being focused on general. The postmodernism, on the
contrary, has shattered the world into millions of pieces, stains, shades…The
fragmentariness, narrowing a field of vision but extraordinary underlining the special,
carries an idea of liberation from the tyranny of the total”.

This view is close to the modern concept of intertextuality, according to which the world
appears as a huge text in which everything has been told already and the new is possible
only according to the principle of kaleidoscope: a mixture of certain elements creates new
combinations. Therefore the modern society appears as “the world of presentational
forms and images”. Nevertheless, taking into account the achievements of the
postmodernism, one needs to recognize the values of the rational-empirical method
proceeding from the positivist assumptions. It obliges a scientist to remain on the grounds
of reliable established facts and tear the mystical veil off the supernatural. Using such
methods, the researcher and his or her object are in a distance, and the researcher
operating with the scientific equipment as an instrument, elicits facts from the nature,
groups them, and generalizes them in laws.

In studying social conflicts, the most positivist approach is an instrumentalist or system
direction which also explains conflicts in accordance with social conditions external to the
person, group or society. Therefore social conflicts are usually explained either as
reactions to social stimulus, external to the actor or in connection with the individual
psychological or material needs of actors participating in the conflict which are treated as
variants of internal stimulation. In general, the causes of almost any social phenomenon
can be considered either external ones in relation to it or internal ones. As Sechenov I. M.
wrote in the last century, “The first reason of any human action lies outside of it”.

In any event, it is extremely difficult to formulate any simple causal hypothesis for social
processes. In fact “this task does not just suppose but demands compulsorily a certain
measure of what is otherwise called superficiality, and here nothing can be done. If the
cartographer has marked a city off circle on a map, one needs not to become angry with
him on the grounds that this city actually does not have such a geometrical form. From a
map another [quality] is demanded - that the scale be sustained”. Human society is one
of the most complex systems among the known ones in our world, and there are many
internal reasons and connections within it. Some factors are necessary, but they are
insufficient for the conflict development. The social situation “causes” the conflict, but only
where and when the set of other factors is available, otherwise, all people of the world
would clash constantly.

Therefore some psychologists believe that life circumstances themselves do not
determine personal development, but it depends on what mutual relations with the
environment the person has. Sergey Leonidovich Rubenstein later expressed such
ideas in his classical formula: “The external reasons operate through internal conditions”.

Peace and Conflict Review · Volume 2 Issue 1 · Year 2008 · Page 8
In his book, Rubenstein described the given law as follows: “All phenomena in the world are interconnected. Any action, any change of one phenomenon is reflected in all others and it represents itself a response to a change of other phenomena influencing it. Any external influence is reflected through internal qualities of that object, the phenomenon which is exposed to it”. This concept shows that circumstances create people in the same manner in which people create circumstances (Karl Marx). I suppose that this combination of extreme methodological points will be more sufficient for social processes, and the causes of any conflict can be examined as “the external through the internal”. One cannot deny the role of a situation (strictly speaking, structure or position, - I will explain this further) in ethnopolitical conflicts – almost all conflict specialists support the situational approach now – but we also do not need to ignore personal or subjective factors of conflict actors.

It is more convenient to use a synthesized explanatory model and to consider social events as results of the interrelated systems’ actions, working depending on the behavior of one and the other. However, ethnopolitical conflicts are so complex that their adequate analysis is difficult not depending on which scientific methods one prefers to use. All of them are only instruments for the analysis and an opportunity of practical use is the main criterion for the choosing of this or that from them.

Such synthesis of approaches assumes their connections in a kind of integrity from the point of view of modern methodological requirements and in the essential features of their structure. It allows clearing interrelations of ethnic issues out which were not evident earlier. The Russian philosopher Rosanov V. V. wrote about it in his well-known book “Twilights of Enlightenment”: “A box, nails, and objects: objects would be gone without the box, the box cannot knocked up without nails, but the “nail” is not the most important thing, because all – “for objects”, and on the contrary, “the box embraces all” and is “most of all”.

Some important features remain to clarify, although I indicated the importance of them above. Positivism assumes that science should not be restricted for any reason. Such restrictions hinder scientific creativity objectively. In the beginning one needs to imagine the object under investigation by using his or her intuition and some common knowledge, although scientific theories and methods are also important. The researcher has to imagine how some structural elements are organized on the grounds of a certain general principle that he borrowed from theoretical assumptions already known. He does not need to hurry. He can hold them in a reserve as some options until the facts will allow the using of them and solving what is true in social reality and what not there. But it does not necessarily mean that the using of such options should have political or ideological character. Unfortunately, many researchers prefer to use only ideological explanations. One possible reason is the clear popularity of such methods among audiences at which scientific works are aimed. Or perhaps such responses are related to the position of donors or expectations of specific actors and organizations. One thing is certain: it is destructive of scientific endeavor. We need to separate science from ideology, and scientific views are neither expected, nor obliged to meet ideological requirements. This is a kind of my “gnoseological optimism”. But that is the only one. Therefore one needs to narrow scientific explanations by such methodological assumptions, hoping that it can help researchers develop their ideas thoroughly, although in practice whether we want it or not, we may be doomed to stay within the limits of our restricted paradigm.
Footnotes


12This is especially obvious in the Russian centers on Ethnological Monitoring.


15Leibin V. M. Freyd, psychoanaliz i sovremennaya zapadnaya filosofsiya. M. 1990. p. 64, 82.


About the Author

Maksim U. Barbashin is a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for System and Regional Studies and Prognosis, South Federal University, Rostov-on-Don, Russia. He has authored numerous publications in leading Russian journals: Nauchnaya mysl Kavkaza, Ujnorossiyskoe obozrenie, and Sotsialno-gumanitarnye znaniya on ethno-social and
ethno-political issues.