



THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF XENOPHOBIA

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Abstract

According to experts, the division of people into “us” and “others,” characteristic of the phenomenon of xenophobia, is considered a natural process. When encountering strangers, the emergence of fear (phobia) produces a similar emotional and psychological state. However, an often-overlooked aspect is that the boundary drawn between “us” and “them” is not always natural; it is socially constructed and may be accompanied by the formation of an enemy image. This leads to the need to develop new theoretical and methodological approaches to studying the social nature of xenophobia, its types, and its causes. In this regard, constructivism can be considered one of the most effective methodologies for this research.

Keywords: Philosophers, sociologists, and scholars of religion, primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism

Introduction

Philosophers, sociologists, and scholars of religion rely on approaches such as primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism in the scientific and theoretical study of religious xenophobia. Based on these approaches, there exists a dichotomous theory of religious xenophobia, which is grounded in relations between groups defined by national and religious identity, expressed in terms such as “us – them” or “ours – others.” In turn, the attitudes of group members are based on their specific cultural characteristics and features.



The primordial (from English: primordial – original, primary) approach is associated with scholars such as C. Geertz and E. Shils. Supporters of this direction consider national and religious belonging as one of the original and inherent characteristics of humanity. Scholars such as P. van den Berghe, C. Geertz, L. Gumilev, and S. Shirokogorov contributed to the development of this approach.

Representatives of the instrumentalist approach, on the other hand, base their views on the doctrine of the objective interconnection and causal relationship between all phenomena in the formation of national and religious views. Scholars such as A. Zdravomyslov, K. Young, N. Cheboksarov, Y. Arutyunyan, A. Cohen, A. Tsutsiev, D. Horowitz, and R. Abdulatipov are among its representatives. In this framework, belonging to a particular religious group and becoming a member is understood as a conscious choice of the individual, connected with pragmatic considerations – namely, the acquisition of certain religious, political, economic, or social benefits.

Constructivism, in contrast, views specific ethnic and religious groups as constructed models or frameworks created by political elites to achieve particular goals. This approach has been developed by scholars such as P. Berger, J. Broynne, I. Neumann, E. Gellner, T. Luckmann, B. Anderson, T. Eriksen, V. Tishkov, E. Hobsbawm, F. Barth, O. Bauer, and K. Verdery.

The formation of the constructivist approach in science began in the 1960s. In their well-known work *The Social Construction of Reality*, P. Berger and T. Luckmann argued that individuals project their subjective understandings onto society, and in turn, their world becomes institutionalized and transforms into an objective social structure. According to constructivism, the subject does not merely reflect reality but actively constructs it. The methods through which these processes are formed are closely linked to the socialization of the individual.

Berger and Luckmann distinguish between primary and secondary socialization, both of which are closely related to self-awareness and identity formation. Primary socialization occurs during childhood and is of decisive importance. It is characterized by strong emotional influence, as the child becomes emotionally attached to “significant others.” Through this process, the child not only accepts others but also forms their own “self.”



Secondary socialization refers to the process by which an already formed individual enters new spheres of social life and assimilates them. While in the primary stage the child has no choice and identification occurs naturally, in the secondary stage the individual consciously engages with the complex institutional systems of society and adopts them. Language serves as the primary tool in this process. It simplifies institutional meanings inherent in social reality, often through stereotyping. As a result, the assimilation of social meanings becomes easier, and the effectiveness of the socialization process increases.

This approach allows for a methodological understanding of the social nature of xenophobia, viewing natural social phenomena as structured systems constructed by humans.

According to experts, social classification determines how individuals perceive reality and form their understanding of the world. When criteria for dividing society into groups are internalized in mass consciousness, people begin to perceive their environment through these boundaries. However, for the idea of grouping to transform into opposing concepts such as “us” and “them,” an individual must feel a sense of belonging to a particular community. This process of self-association is known as identification, which plays a decisive role in the formation of worldview.

Identity, or belonging, emerges under the influence of the social environment. By associating themselves with a system of values, norms, and traditions, individuals become aware of their group membership. Through this, they perceive their lives not only on a personal level but also within the continuity of generations and historical processes. However, identity involves not only unity but also differentiation and opposition – it establishes boundaries between “us” and “others.”

Identification manifests in two forms: positive and negative. In positive identification, individuals experience pride, solidarity, and a sense of dignity toward their group. In negative identification, a critical or rejecting attitude toward other groups is formed, intensifying the “us–them” conflict. These two tendencies usually coexist and interact in the process of social self-awareness.

The mechanism of negative identification was analyzed in detail by the Russian sociologist L. Gudkov, who described it as “self-affirmation through the denial of the other.” In this process, individuals or groups reinforce their status by



portraying others negatively – as alien, unacceptable, or even dangerous. Thus, the “other” is constructed as an antipode, an absolute opposite.

As a result, the formation of negative attitudes toward “outsiders” becomes a means of strengthening internal group solidarity. Such perspectives unite group members around shared values and reinforce their social cohesion. One of the founders of identity theory, E. Erikson, also supported this view, emphasizing that any positive identity is partly defined through negative images. According to him, individuals or communities affirm themselves partly by devaluing others.

The socially constructed boundary between “us” and “others” establishes a certain social distance between groups and helps preserve group identity. In this sense, xenophobia is rooted in two fundamental processes: categorization and identification. Through these mechanisms, a community constructs its social reality and reinforces it both symbolically and culturally.

In contemporary scientific research, the “us-them” dichotomy is examined within the framework of social identity theory, where the significance of the “other” in forming group belonging is explained by H. Tajfel and J. Turner. Social identity constitutes the foundation of xenophobia, as it arises through intergroup comparison, which enhances the importance of group membership and strengthens collective emotions. Perceptions of “us” and “others” are the result of classification and definition processes, which are essential components of reality perception and are often based not on personal experience, but on ready-made representations existing within group discourse.

In scientific discourse, two main approaches dominate the explanation of social classification. The first approach interprets social categorization as a cognitive mechanism that simplifies and accelerates the processing of diverse and contradictory information (S. Moscovici). The second approach views it as stemming from a fundamental psychological tendency toward positive self-evaluation through intergroup comparison (H. Tajfel). In both cases, categorization is considered a key mechanism for constructing perceptions of group existence by uniting them through shared characteristics. For an object to acquire reality, it must be categorized and verbally designated. Therefore, controlling the process of social categorization effectively means controlling the construction of the worldview. This is achieved by introducing categorization criteria into mass consciousness.



In conclusion, xenophobia should be understood not merely as an emotional reaction to perceived difference, but as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by processes of categorization and identification. The “us vs. them” dichotomy, reinforced through socialization and collective representations, plays a central role in the formation of group identity and intergroup boundaries. Theoretical approaches such as primordialism, instrumentalism, and especially constructivism provide valuable frameworks for analyzing how these distinctions emerge and are maintained. Ultimately, examining xenophobia through these methodological lenses allows for a deeper understanding of its origins, mechanisms, and impact within contemporary societies.