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# ETHNICITY AND NATIONALISM

## Anthropological Perspectives

Third Edition

Thomas Hylland Eriksen

PlutoPress
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# PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

This book was written thanks to an invitation from Richard Wilson and Pluto Press. Upon receiving the invitation, I believed I would not have the time to undertake the task. Having reflected on the matter, I quickly realised I would be unable not to. I have not regretted this decision: it has been a pleasure to work on this book, which deals with a topic about which I feel great enthusiasm.

The study of ethnicity and nationalism forms the empirical focus of much contemporary anthropological research, and it has also been instrumental in raising theoretical and methodological issues of great importance, as well as providing models for understanding the contemporary world. Ethnic relations can be identified in virtually every society in the world and, contrary to much popular opinion, they may just as well be balanced and peaceful as they may be violent and volatile. Social anthropology is unique among the social sciences in offering a variety of research methods to investigate these phenomena, while simultaneously providing theoretical concepts and models that enable us to understand, account for and compare diverse ethnic phenomena.

Several people have been involved - wittingly or unwittingly - in the process of writing this book. Richard Wilson and Leif John Fosse have both read the entire manuscript critically, and their comments have been enlightening and very useful. Several of my colleagues and students have commented on ideas and concepts, especially concerning the relationship of ethnicity to gender and class. My former teachers at the Department and Museum of Anthropology, University of Oslo - Eduardo Archetti, Harald Eidheim and Axel Sommerfelt - should also be acknowledged for having taught me, among other things, that ethnicity is not self-explanatory. Finally, a nod of recognition must be directed towards the people who invented word processing, which enables authors to remain in total command of their own work until it is completed.

Oslo, June 1993

# 1 WHAT IS ETHNICITY?

> It takes at least two somethings to create a difference ... Clearly each alone is - for the mind and perception - a non-entity, a non-being. Not different from being, and not different from non-being. An unknowable, a *Ding an sich*, a sound from one hand clapping.
>
> Gregory Bateson (1979: 78)

Words like 'ethnic groups', 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic conflict' have become common terms in the English language, and they keep cropping up in the press, in TV news, in political programmes and in casual conversations. The same can be said for 'nation' and 'nationalism', and it has to be conceded that the meaning of these terms frequently seems ambiguous and vague.

There has been a parallel development in the social sciences. During the 1980s and 1990s, one could witness an explosion in the growth of scholarly publications on ethnicity and nationalism, particularly in the fields of political science, history, sociology and social anthropology. This growth is probably only parallelled by the explosion in studies featuring the key terms of 'globalisation', 'identity' and 'modernity', which incidentally refer to phenomena closely related to ethnicity and nationalism. The relationship of ethnicity to other forms of collective identification, including gender, local and religious identity, will be discussed in the final chapters of this book.

In social and cultural anthropology, ethnicity has been a main preoccupation since the late 1960s, and it remains a central focus for research after the turn of the millennium. Although I believe the relevance of this book extends beyond the confines of academic anthropology, it highlights the contributions of anthropology to the study of ethnicity and kindred phenomena. Through its dependence on long-term fieldwork and its bottom-up perspective on social life, anthropology has the advantage of generating first-hand knowledge of social life at the level of everyday interaction. To a great extent, this is the locus where ethnicity is created and re-created. Ethnicity emerges and is made relevant through social situations and encounters, and through people's ways of coping with the demands and challenges of life. From its vantage point right at the centre of local life, social anthropology is in a unique position to investigate these processes at the micro level.

Anthropological approaches also enable us to explore the ways in which ethnic relations are being defined and perceived by people; how they talk and think about their own group and its salient characteristics as well as those of other groups, and how particular world views are being maintained, contested and transformed. The personal significance that ethnic membership has to people can best be investigated through that detailed on-the-ground research which is the hallmark of anthropology. Finally, social anthropology, as it is a comparative discipline, studies both differences and similarities between ethnic phenomena. It thereby provides a nuanced and complex vision of ethnicity in the contemporary world.

An important reason for the current academic interest in ethnicity and nationalism is the fact that such phenomena have become so visible in many societies that it has become impossible to ignore them. In the early twentieth century, a leading social theorist such as Max Weber discarded 'ethnic community action' *(Gemeinschaftshandeln)* as an analytical concept, since it referred to a variety of very different kinds of phenomena (Weber 1980 [1921]). Weber also held that 'primordial phenomena' like ethnicity and nationalism would decrease in importance and eventually vanish as a result of modernisation, industrialisation and individualism. This never came about. On the contrary, ethnicity, nationalism and similar forms of identity politics grew in political importance in the world throughout the twentieth century, particularly since the Second World War.

War and other armed conflicts in the 1990s were typically internal conflicts, and most of them - from Sri Lanka and Fiji to Rwanda and Bosnia - could plausibly be described as ethnic conflicts. An influential theory of geopolitical conflict from the post-Cold War era even claims that future conflicts will largely take place in 'the faultlines' between 'civilizations' (Huntington, 1996). Ethnic struggles for recognition, power and autonomy, however, often take a non-violent form, as in the Quebecois independence movement in Canada. Moreover, in many parts of the world, nation-building - the creation and consolidation of political cohesion and national identity in former colonies or imperial provinces - is high on the political agenda. In a very different kind of context, ethnic and national identities have become fields of contestation following the continuous influx of labour migrants and refugees to Europe and North America, which has led to the establishment of new, permanent ethnic minorities in these areas. Since the Second World War, and especially since the 1970s, indigenous populations such as Inuits ('Eskimos'), Sami ('Lapps'), Native Americans and Australian Aborigines have organised themselves politically, and are demanding that their ethnic identities and territorial entitlements should be recognised by the state. Finally, the political dynamics in Europe moved issues of ethnic and national identities to the forefront of political life in the 1990s. At one extreme of the continent, the erstwhile Soviet Union split into over a dozen ethnically based



states. With the disappearance of the strong socialist state in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, issues of nationhood and minority problems emerged with unprecedented force. At the other extreme of the continent, the reverse seems to be happening, as the nation-states of Western Europe are moving towards a closer economic, political and possibly cultural integration within the framework of the European Union. But here, too, national and ethnic identities have become important issues in recent years. Many Europeans fear that the loss of their national or ethnic identity will result from a cultural standardisation following tight European integration. Others, who take a more positive view of such processes, welcome the possibilities for a pan-European identity to replace the ethnic and national ones in a number of contexts, for instance by organising European sports teams and a European military force. During the electoral campaign preceding the first Danish referendum on the Maastricht treaty in June 1992, a chief anti-EU slogan was: 'I want a country to be European in.' This slogan suggested that personal identities were intimately linked with political processes and that social identities, for example as Danes or Europeans, were not given once and for all, but were subject to negotiations. Both of these insights are crucial to the study of ethnicity.

This book will show how social anthropology can shed light on concrete issues of ethnicity; which questions social anthropologists ask in relation to ethnic phenomena, and how they proceed to answer them. In this way, the book will offer a set of conceptual tools which go far beyond the immediate interpretation of day-to-day politics in their applicability. Some of the questions which will be discussed are:

- How do ethnic groups remain distinctive under different social conditions?
- Under which circumstances does ethnicity become important?
- What is the relationship between ethnic identity and ethnic political organisation?
- Is nationalism always a form of ethnicity?
- What is the relationship between ethnicity and other forms of identification, social classification and political organisation, such as class, religion and gender?
- What happens to ethnic relations when societies are industrialised?
- In which ways can history be important in the creation of ethnicity?
- What is the relationship between ethnicity and culture?

This introductory chapter will present the main concepts to be used throughout the book. It also explores their ambiguities and thereby introduces some principal theoretical issues.

## THE TERM ITSELF

'Ethnicity seems to be a new term', according to Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan (1975: 1), who point to the fact that the word's earliest dictionary appearance is in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1972. Its first usage is attributed to the American sociologist David Riesman in 1953. The word 'ethnic', however, is much older. It is derived from the Greek *ethnos* (which in turn derived from the word *ethnikos),* which originally meant heathen or pagan (R. Williams, 1976: 119). It was used in this sense in English from the mid-fourteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, when it gradually began to refer to 'racial' characteristics. In the United States, 'ethnics' came to be used around the Second World War as a polite term referring to Jews, Italians, Irish and other people considered inferior to the dominant group of largely British descent. None of the founding fathers of sociology and social anthropology - with the partial exception of Weber - granted ethnicity much attention. In early modern Anglophone sociocultural anthropology, fieldwork ideally took place in a single society and concentrated on particular aspects of its social organisation or culture. British anthropology in the tradition of Radcliffe-Brown or Malinowski, moreover, tended to favour synchronic 'snapshots' of the society under study. With its emphasis on intergroup dynamics, often in the context of a modern state, as well as its frequent insistence on historical depth, ethnicity studies represent a specialisation which was not considered appropriate by the early twentieth-century founders of modern anthropology.

Since the 1960s, ethnic groups and ethnicity have become household words in Anglophone social anthropology, although, as Ronald Cohen (1978) has remarked, few of those who use the terms bother to define them. In the course of this book, I shall examine a number of approaches to ethnicity. Many of them are closely related, although they may serve different analytical purposes. Sometimes, however, heated argument arises as to the nature of the object of inquiry and the appropriate theoretical framework. All of the approaches of anthropology nevertheless agree that ethnicity has something to do with the *classification of people* and *group relationships*.

In everyday language the word ethnicity still has a ring of 'minority issues' and 'race relations', but in social anthropology it refers to aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive. Although it is true that 'the discourse concerning ethnicity tends to concern itself with subnational units, or minorities of some kind or another' (Chapman *et al.,* 1989: 17), majorities and dominant peoples are no less 'ethnic' than minorities. This will be particularly evident in chapters 6-8, which discuss nationalism and minority-majority relationships.



## ETHNICITY, RACE AND NATION

A few words must be said initially about the relationship between ethnicity and 'race'. The term race has deliberately been placed within inverted commas in order to stress that it has dubious descriptive value. Whereas it was for some time fashionable to divide humanity into four main races, modern genetics tends not to speak of races. There are two principal reasons for this. First, there has always been so much interbreeding between human populations that it would be meaningless to talk of fixed boundaries between races. Second, the distribution of hereditary physical traits does not follow clear boundaries (Cavalli-Sforza *et ah,* 1994). In other words, there is often greater variation within a 'racial' group than there is systematic variation between two groups. Thirdly, no serious scholar today believes that hereditary characteristics explain cultural variations. The contemporary neo-Darwinist views in social science often lumped together under the heading 'evolutionary psychology' (Barkow *et ah,* 1992), are with few if any exceptions strongly universalist; they argue that people everywhere have the same inborn abilities.

Concepts of race can nevertheless be relevant to the extent that they inform people's actions; at this level, race exists as a cultural construct, whether it has a 'biological' reality or not (cf. also Jenkins, 1997: 22). Racism, obviously, builds on the assumption that personality is somehow linked with hereditary characteristics which differ systematically between 'races', and in this way race may assume sociological importance even if it has no 'objective' existence. Social scientists who study race relations in Great Britain and the United States need not themselves believe in the objective existence of racial difference, since their object of study is the social and cultural relevance of the *notion* that race exists, in other words the social construction of race. If influential people in a society had developed a similar theory about the hereditary personality traits of red-haired people, and if that theory gained social and cultural significance, 'redhead studies' would for similar reasons have become a field of academic research, even if the researchers themselves did not agree that redheads were different from others in a relevant way. In societies where ideas of race are important, they must therefore be studied as part of local discourses on ethnicity.

Should the study of race relations, in this meaning of the word, be distinguished from the study of ethnicity or ethnic relations? Pierre van den Berghe (1983) does not think so, but would rather regard 'race' relations as a special case of ethnicity. Others, among them Michael Banton (1967), have argued the need to distinguish between race and ethnicity. In Banton's view, race refers to the (negative) categorisation of people, while ethnicity has to do with (positive) group identification. He argues that ethnicity is generally

more concerned with the identification of 'us', while racism is more oriented to the categorisation of 'them' (Banton, 1983, 106; cf. Jenkins, 1986: 177). This implies that race is a negative term of exclusion, while ethnic identity is a term of positive inclusion. However, ethnicity can assume many forms, and since ethnic ideologies tend to stress common descent among their members, the distinction between race and ethnicity is a problematic one, even if Banton's distinction between groups and categories can be useful (cf. chapter 3). Nobody would suggest that the horrors of Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 1990s were racial, but they were certainly ethnic - in other words, there is no inherent reason why ethnicity should be more benign than race. Besides, the boundaries between race and ethnicity tend to be blurred, since ethnic groups have a common myth of origin, which relates ethnicity to descent, which again makes it a kindred concept to race. It could moreover be argued that some 'racial' groups are ethnified, such as American blacks who have gradually come to be known as African-Americans; but also that some ethnic groups are racialised, as when immutable traits are accorded to ethnic minorities; and finally, there are strong tendencies towards the ethnification of certain religious groups, such as European Muslims. Formerly known by their ethnic origin, they are increasingly lumped together as primarily 'Muslims'. Finally, Martin Barker's notion of *new racism* (Barker, 1981; cf. also Fenton, 1999: chapter 2) seems to explode the analytical usefulness of the distinction. The new racism talks of cultural difference instead of inherited characteristics, but uses it for the same purposes; to justify a hierarchical ordering of groups in society.

I shall not in the following distinguish between race relations and ethnicity. Ideas of 'race' may or may not form part of ethnic ideologies, and their presence or absence does not generally seem to be a decisive factor in interethnic relations. Now, it could be argued that the main divisive mechanism of US society is race as opposed to ethnicity; but on the other hand, the main divisive mechanism of Indian society may be said to be religion as opposed to race (or, for that matter, ethnicity). Discrimination on ethnic grounds is spoken of as 'racism' in Trinidad and as 'communalism' in Mauritius (Eriksen, 1992a), but the forms of imputed discrimination referred to can be nearly identical. On the other hand, it is doubtless true that groups who 'look different' from majorities or dominating groups may be less liable to become assimilated into the majority than others, and that it can be difficult for them to escape from their ethnic identity if they wish to. However, this may also hold good for minority groups with, say, an inadequate command of the dominant language. In both cases, their ethnic identity becomes an imperative status, an ascribed aspect of their personhood from which they cannot escape entirely. Race or skin colour as such is not the decisive variable in every society.



The relationship between the terms ethnicity and nationality is nearly as complex as that between ethnicity and race. Like the words ethnic and race, the word nation has a long history (R. Williams, 1976: 213-14) and has been used with a variety of different meanings in English. We shall refrain from discussing these meanings here, and will concentrate on the sense in which nation and nationalism are used analytically in academic discourse. Like ethnic ideologies, nationalism stresses the cultural similarity of its adherents and, by implication, it draws boundaries vis-a-vis others, who thereby become outsiders. The distinguishing mark of nationalism is by definition its relationship to the state. A nationalist holds that political boundaries should be coterminous with cultural boundaries, whereas many ethnic groups do not demand command over a state. When the political leaders of an ethnic movement make demands to this effect, the ethnic movement therefore by definition becomes a nationalist movement. Although nationalisms tend to be ethnic in character, this is not necessarily the case, and we shall look more carefully into the relationship between ethnicity and nationalism in chapters 6-8.

## ETHNICITY AND CLASS

The term ethnicity refers to relationships between groups whose members consider themselves distinctive, and these groups may be ranked hierarchically within a society. It is therefore necessary to distinguish clearly between ethnicity and social class.

In the literature of social science, there are two main definitions of classes. One derives from Karl Marx, the other from Max Weber. Sometimes elements from the two definitions are combined.

The Marxist view of social classes emphasises economic aspects. A social class is defined according to its relationship to the productive process in society. In capitalist societies, according to Marx, there are three main classes. First, there is the capitalist class or bourgeoisie, whose members own the means of production (factories, tools and machinery and so on) and buy other people's labour-power (employ them). Second, there is the petit-bourgeoisie, whose members own means of production but do not employ others. Owners of small shops are typical examples. The third and most numerous class is the proletariat or working class, whose members depend upon selling their labour-power to a capitalist for their livelihood. There are also other classes, notably the aristocracy, whose members live by land interest, and the lumpenproletariat, which consists of unemployed and underemployed people - vagrants, petty thieves and so on.

Since Marx's time in the mid-nineteenth century, the theory of classes has been refined in several directions, not least through studies of peasants in the Third World (Wolf, 1966). Its adherents nevertheless still stress the

relationship to property in their delineation of classes. A further central feature of this theory is the notion of class struggle. Marx and his followers held that oppressed classes would eventually rise against their oppressors, overthrow them through a revolution, and alter the political order and the social organisation of labour. This, in Marx's view, was the chief way in which societies evolved.

The Weberian view of social classes, which has partly developed into theories of social stratification, combines several criteria in delineating classes, including income, education and political influence. Unlike Marx, Weber did not regard classes as potential corporate groups; he did not believe that members of social classes necessarily would have shared political interests. Weber preferred to speak of 'status groups' rather than classes.

Theories of social class always refer to systems of social ranking and distribution of power, Ethnicity, on the contrary, does not necessarily refer to rank; ethnic relations may well be egalitarian in this regard. Still, many polyethnic societies are ranked according to ethnic membership. The criteria for such ranking are nevertheless different from class ranking: they refer to imputed cultural differences or 'races', not to property or achieved statuses.

There may be a high *correlation* between ethnicity and class, which means that there is a high likelihood that persons belonging to specific ethnic groups also belong to specific social classes. There can be a significant interrelationship between class and ethnicity; both class and ethnicity can be criteria for rank, and ethnic membership can be an important factor in class membership. Both class differences and ethnic differences can be pervasive features of societies, but they are not one and the same thing and must be distinguished from one another analytically.

## THE CURRENT CONCERN WITH ETHNICITY

If one were to run a word-search programme through a representative sample of English-language anthropological publications since 1950, one would note significant changes in the frequency of a number of key words. Words like 'structure' and 'function', for example, have gradually grown unfashionable, whereas Marxist terms like 'base and superstructure', 'means of production' and 'class struggle' were widespread from around 1965 until the early 1980s. Terms like 'ethnicity', 'ethnic' and 'ethnic group', for their part, steadily grew in currency from the mid- to late 1960s until (my guess) the late 1980s, and have probably remained in the top ten since then. There may be two main causes for this. One of them is changes in the world, while the other concerns changes in the dominant way of thinking in anthropology.

Whereas classic social anthropology, as exemplified in the works of Malinowski, Boas, Radcliffe-Brown, Levi-Strauss, Evans-Pritchard and others, would characteristically focus on single 'tribal' societies, changes in



the world after the Second World War have brought many of these societies into increased contact with each other, with the state and with global society. Many of the peoples studied by social anthropologists have become involved in national liberation movements or ethnic conflicts in post-colonial states. Many of them, formerly regarded as 'tribes' or 'aboriginals', have become 'ethnic minorities'. Furthermore, many former members of tribal or traditional groups have migrated to Europe or North America, where their relationships with the host societies have been studied extensively by sociologists, social psychologists and social anthropologists.

Some ethnic groups have moved to towns or regional centres where they are brought into contact with people with other customs, languages and identities, and where they frequently enter into competitive relationships in politics and the labour market. Frequently, people who migrate try to maintain their old kinship and neighbourhood social networks in the new urban context, and both ethnic quarters and ethnic political groupings often emerge in such urban settings. Although the speed of social and cultural change can be high, people tend to retain their ethnic identity despite having moved to a new environment. This kind of social change has been investigated in a series of pioneering studies in North American cities from the 1920s and in Southern Africa from the early 1940s, and we will return to these studies in the next chapter.

In a classic study of ethnic identity in the United States, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan (1963) claimed that the most important point to be made about the 'American melting-pot' is that it never occurred. They argued that rather than eradicating ethnic differences, modern American society has actually created a new form of self-awareness in people, which is expressed in a concern about roots and origins. Moreover, many Americans continue to use their ethnic networks actively when looking for jobs or a spouse. Many prefer to live in neighbourhoods dominated by people with the same origins as themselves, and they continue to regard themselves as 'Italians', 'Poles' and so on in addition to being Americans - two generations or more after their ancestors left the country of origin.

An important insight from anthropological research has been that ethnic organisation and identity, rather than being 'primordial' phenomena radically opposed to modernity and the modern state, are frequently reactions to processes of modernisation. As Jonathan Friedman has put it, '[e]thnic and cultural fragmentation and modernist homogenization are not two arguments, two opposing views of what is happening in the world today, but two constitutive trends of global reality' (Friedman, 1990: 311).

Does this mean that ethnicity is chiefly a *modern* phenomenon? This is a tricky but highly relevant question. The contemporary ethnic processes referred to above can be described as modern in character. In an influential statement on political ethnicity, Abner Cohen (1974a) has argued that the

concept is perhaps most useful in the study of the development of new political cultures in situations of social change in the Third World. However, it must be added, some of the most important studies of ethnicity have been carried out in non-modern societies, and if quantity were anything to go by, ethnic studies are most vigorously pursued in Western societies.

The contemporary concern with ethnicity and ethnic processes is partly related to historical changes such as the ones mentioned above. It could nevertheless also be argued that the growing interest in ethnicity reflects changes in the dominant anthropological mode of thought. Instead of viewing 'societies' or even 'cultures' as more or less isolated, static and homogeneous units as the early structural-functionalists and Boasians would have tended to do, anthropologists now typically try to depict flux and process, ambiguity and complexity in their analyses of social worlds. In this context, ethnicity has proven a highly useful concept, since it suggests a dynamic situation of variable contact and mutual accommodation between groups.

## FROM TRIBE TO ETHNIC GROUP

As already mentioned, there has been a shift in Anglophone anthropological terminology concerning the nature of the social units we study. While one formerly spoke of 'tribes', the term 'ethnic group' is nowadays much more common. In the late 1970s, Ronald Cohen remarked: 'Quite suddenly, with little comment or ceremony, ethnicity is an ubiquitous presence' (R. Cohen, 1978: 379). Although the peak of ethnicity studies was reached a few years later, quantitatively speaking (cf. Banks, 1996: 1), the study of intergroup dynamics and cultural variation has reached a point of no return in the sense that it is difficult to envision future social scientists talking about 'alien tribes'. This change in terminology implies more than a mere replacement of one word with another. Notably, the use of the term 'ethnic group' suggests contact and interrelationship. To speak of an ethnic group in total isolation is as absurd as to speak of the sound from one hand clapping (cf. Bateson, 1979: 78). By definition, ethnic groups remain more or less discrete, but they are aware of- and in contact with - members of other ethnic groups. Moreover, these groups or categories are in a sense *created* through that very contact. Group identities must always be defined in relation to that which they are not - in other words, in relation to non-members of the group.

The terminological switch from 'tribe' to 'ethnic group' may also mitigate or even transcend an ethnocentric or Eurocentric bias which anthropologists have often been accused of promoting covertly. When we talk of tribes, we implicitly introduce a sharp, qualitative distinction between ourselves and the people we study; the distinction generally corresponds to the distinction between modern and traditional or so-called primitive societies.



If we instead talk of ethnic groups or categories, such a sharp distinction becomes difficult to maintain. Virtually every human being belongs to an ethnic group, whether he or she lives in Europe, Melanesia or Central America. There are ethnic groups in English cities, in the Bolivian countryside and in the New Guinea highlands. Anthropologists themselves belong to ethnic groups or nations. Moreover, the concepts and models used in the study of ethnicity can often be applied to modern as well as non-modern contexts, to Western as well as non-Western societies. In this sense, the concept of ethnicity can be said to bridge two important gaps in social anthropology: it entails a focus on dynamics rather than statics, and it relativises the boundaries between 'Us' and 'Them', between moderns and tribals (see also Jenkins, 1997: chapter 2).

## WHAT IS ETHNICITY?

When we talk of ethnicity, we indicate that groups and identities have developed in mutual contact rather than in isolation. But what is the nature of such groups?

When A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn investigated the various meanings of 'culture' in the early 1950s (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952), they identified 162 different definitions. Although it remains correct that most of those who write on ethnicity do not bother to define the term, the extant number of definitions is already high - and it is growing (B. Williams, 1989). Instead of going through the various definitions of ethnicity here, I will point out significant differences between theoretical perspectives as we go along. As a starting point, let us examine the recent development of the term as it is used by social anthropologists.

The term 'ethnic group' has come to mean something like 'a people'. But what is 'a people'? Does the non-immigrant population of Britain constitute a people, does it comprise several peoples (as Nairn, 1977, tends to argue), or does it rather form part of a Germanic, or an English-speaking, or an Atlantic, or a European people? All of these positions may have their defenders, and this very ambiguity in the designation of peoples has been taken on as a challenge by anthropologists. In a pioneering study of ethnic relations in Thailand, Michael Moerman (1965) asks himself: 'Who are the Lue?' The Lue were the ethnic group his research focused on, but when he tried to describe who they were - in which ways they were distinctive from other ethnic groups - he quickly ran into trouble. His problem, a very common one in contemporary anthropology, concerned the boundaries of the group. After listing a number of criteria commonly used by anthropologists to demarcate cultural groups, such as language, political organisation and territorial contiguity, he states: 'Since language, culture, political organization, etc., do not correlate completely, the units delimited by one criterion

do not coincide with the units delimited by another' (Moerman, 1965: 1215). When he asked individual Lue what were their typical characteristics, they would mention cultural traits which they in fact shared with other, neighbouring groups. They lived in close interaction with other groups in the area; they had no exclusive livelihood, no exclusive language, no exclusive customs, no exclusive religion. Why was it appropriate to describe them as an ethnic group? After posing these problems, Moerman was forced to conclude that '[s]omeone is Lue by virtue of believing and calling himself Lue and of acting in ways that validate his Lueness' (Moerman, 1965: 1219). Being unable to argue that this 'Lueness' can be defined with reference to objective cultural features or clear-cut boundaries, Moerman defines it as an *emic category of ascription.*[1] This way of delineating ethnic groups has become very influential (cf. chapter 3).

Does this imply that ethnic groups do not necessarily have a distinctive culture? Can two groups be culturally identical and yet constitute two different ethnic groups? This is a complicated question, which will be dealt with at length in later chapters. At this point we should note that, contrary to a widespread commonsense view, cultural difference between two groups is not the decisive feature of ethnicity. Two distinctive, endogamous groups, say, somewhere in New Guinea, may well have widely different languages, religious beliefs and even technologies, but that does not necessarily mean that there is an ethnic relationship between them. For ethnicity to come about, the groups must have a minimum of contact with each other, and they must entertain ideas of each other as being culturally different from themselves. If these conditions are not fulfilled, there is no ethnicity, for ethnicity is essentially an aspect of a relationship, not a property of a group.[2]

This is a key point. Conversely, some groups may seem culturally similar, yet there can be a socially highly relevant (and even volatile) interethnic relationship between them. This would have been the case with the relationship between Serbs and Croats following the break-up of Yugoslavia, or the tension between coastal Sami and ethnic Norwegians. There may also be considerable cultural variation within a group without ethnicity (Blom, 1969). Only in so far as cultural differences are perceived as being important, and are made socially relevant, do social relationships have an ethnic element.

Ethnicity is an aspect of social relationship between agents who consider themselves as culturally distinctive from members of other groups with whom they have a minimum of regular interaction. It can thus also be

1 In anthropology, it is common to use the term *emic* to refer to 'the native point of view'. It is contrasted with *etic,* which refers to the analyst's concepts, descriptions and analyses. The terms are derived from phonemics and phonetics.

2 Glazer and Moynihan (1975: 1) nevertheless define ethnicity as 'the character or quality of an ethnic group'. Hopefully, the advantages of seeing it as a relationship instead, as something which is *between* and not *inside,* will become apparent in later chapters.



defined as a social identity (based on a contrast vis-a-vis others) characterised by metaphoric or fictive kinship (Yelvington, 1991: 168). When cultural differences regularly make a difference in interaction between members of groups, the social relationship has an ethnic element. Ethnicity refers both to aspects of gain and loss in interaction, and to aspects of meaning in the creation of identity. In this way it has a political, organisational aspect as well as a symbolic one.

Ethnic groups tend to have myths of common origin and they nearly always have ideologies encouraging endogamy, which may nevertheless be of highly varying practical importance.

## KINDS OF ETHNIC RELATIONS

This very general and tentative definition of ethnicity lumps together a great number of very different social phenomena.[3] My relationship with my greengrocer (who was born in Pakistan) has an ethnic element, however minor; so, it could be argued, did the wars in ex-Yugoslavia and 'race riots' in American cities. Do these phenomena have anything interesting in common, justifying their comparison within a single conceptual framework? The answer is both yes and no.

One of the contentions from anthropological studies of ethnicity is that there may be mechanisms of ethnic processes which are relatively uniform in every interethnic situation: to this effect, we can identify certain shared formal properties in all ethnic phenomena.

On the other hand, there can be no doubt that the substantial social contexts of ethnicity differ enormously, and indeed that ethnic identities and ethnic organisations themselves may have highly variable importance in different societies, for different individuals and in different situations. We should nevertheless keep in mind that the point of anthropological comparison is not necessarily to establish similarities between societies; it can also reveal important differences. In order to discover such differences, we must initially possess some kind of measuring stick, a constant or a conceptual bridgehead, which can be used as a basis of comparison. If we first know what we mean by ethnicity, we can then use the concept as a common denominator for societies and social contexts which are otherwise very different. The concept of ethnicity can in this way not only teach us something about similarity, but also about differences.

3 It would have been perfectly possible, but ultimately fruitless, to delve into the nuances and differences between extant definitions of ethnicity. Banks (1996: 4–5), for example, lists about a dozen slightly different definitions of ethnicity, as well as a short quotation from A.P. Cohen (1985), who sees the exercise of trying to give an accurate, robust definition of ethnicity as counterproductive.

Although the concept of ethnicity should always have the same meaning lest it ceases to be useful in comparison, it is inevitable that we distinguish between the social contexts under scrutiny. Some interethnic contexts in different societies are very similar and may seem easily comparable, whereas others differ profoundly. In order to give an idea of the variation, I shall briefly describe some typical empirical foci of ethnic studies, some standard kinds of ethnic relations.

(a) Urban ethnic minorities. This category would include, among others, non-European immigrants in European cities and Hispanics in the United States, as well as migrants to industrial towns in Africa, Koreans in Japan and Chinese in Indonesia. Research on immigrants has focused on problems of adaptation, on ethnic discrimination from the host society, racism, and issues relating to identity management and cultural change (cf. chapters 4, 7 and 8). Anthropologists who have investigated urbanisation in Africa have focused on change and continuity in political organisation and social identity following migration to totally new settings (cf. chapter 2). Although they have political interests, these ethnic groups rarely demand political independence or statehood, and they are as a rule integrated into a capitalist system of production and consumption.

(b) Indigenous peoples. This word is a blanket term for aboriginal inhabitants of a territory, who are politically relatively powerless and who are only partly integrated into the dominant nation-state. Indigenous peoples are associated with a non-industrial mode of production and a stateless political system (Minority Rights Group, 1990; cf. Paine, 1992, 2000). The Basques of the Bay of Biscay and the Welsh of Great Britain are not considered indigenous populations, although they are certainly as indigenous, technically speaking, as the Sami of northern Scandinavia or the Jivaro of the Amazon basin. The concept 'indigenous people' is thus not an accurate analytical one, but rather one drawing on broad family resemblances and contemporary political issues (cf. chapters 4 and 7).

(c) Proto-nations (so-called ethnonationalist movements). These groups, the most famous of ethnic groups in the news media, include Kurds, Sikhs, Palestinians and Sri Lankan Tamils, and their number has been growing. By definition, these groups have political leaders who claim that they are entitled to their own nation-state and should not be 'ruled by others'. These groups, short of having a nation-state, may be said to have more substantial characteristics in common with nations (cf. chapter 6) than with either urban minorities or indigenous peoples. They are always territorially based; they are differentiated according to class and educational achievement, and they are large groups. In accordance with common terminology, these groups may be described as 'nations without a state'. Anthropologists have studied such movements in a number of societies, including Euzkadi or the Basque country (Heiberg, 1989), Brittany (McDonald, 1989) and Quebec (Handler, 1988).

(d) Ethnic groups in 'plural societies'. The term 'plural society' usually designates colonially created states with culturally heterogeneous populations (Furnivall, 1948; M.G. Smith, 1965). Typical plural societies would be Kenya, Indonesia and Jamaica. The groups that make up the plural society, although they are compelled to participate in uniform political and economic systems, are regarded as (and regard themselves as) highly distinctive in other matters. In plural societies, secessionism is usually not an option and ethnicity tends to be articulated as group competition. As Jenkins (1986) has remarked, most contemporary states could plausibly be considered plural ones.

(e) Post-slavery minorities:[4] the descendants of slaves, largely in the New World. Neither immigrants nor indigenous peoples, their ancestors were transformed from being members of distinctive, African ethnic groups to simply labour, negroes, "niggers'" (Fenton, 1999: 42). These groups have later re-defined themselves along different lines depending on the society and context in question. Some of the more striking expressions of a re-discovered Africanness are the *négritude* movement of the French-speaking areas, Jamaican rastafarianism and, more recently, US Afrocentric ideology (Asante, 1988) on the one hand, and a celebration of hybridity on the other (Gilroy, 1987; Hall, 1991). Their identity politics tend to be based on their shared history of enforced uprooting and suffering.

The definition of ethnicity proposed above would include all of these kinds of interethnic relationship, no matter how different they are in other respects. Surely, there are aspects of politics (competition for power and recognition) as well as meaning (social identity and belonging) in the ethnic relations reproduced by urban minorities, indigenous peoples, proto-nations and the component groups of plural societies alike. Despite the great variations between the problems and substantial characteristics represented by the respective kinds of groups, the term ethnicity may, in other words, meaningfully be used as a common denominator for them. In later chapters, it will be shown how anthropological approaches to ethnicity may shed light on both similarities and differences between the various social contexts and historical circumstances that will be explored.

4 Thanks to Steve Fenton (1999: 31–2) for alerting me to the significance of this category.

## ANALYTICAL CONCEPTS AND 'NATIVE' CONCEPTS

The final problem to be discussed in this chapter concerns the relationship between anthropological concepts and their subject-matter. This is a problem with complicated ramifications, and it concerns the relationships between (i) anthropological theory and 'native theory', (ii) anthropological theory and social organisation, and (iii) 'native theory' and social organisation.

It can be argued that the terminological shift from 'tribe' to 'ethnic group' mitigated the formerly strong distinction between 'moderns' and 'primitives'. The growing anthropological interest in nationalism entails a further step towards 'studying ourselves'. For if ethnicity can be non-modern as well as modern, nationalism must be identified with the modern age, with the French Enlightenment and German Romanticism as parallel starting points. Nationalist slogans, movements and symbols have later penetrated into the heartlands of anthropological research. Nationalism, as it is a modern state ideology, is present in the social worlds in which the anthropologists themselves live. Although there are interesting differences between particular nationalisms, nationalism as such is a modern ideology. When studying nationalism in a foreign country, it is therefore difficult to use one's own society as an implicit contrast as anthropologists have frequently done when studying what they regard as exotic societies. In fact, as Handler (1988) has observed, nationalism and social science, including anthropology, grew out of the same historical circumstances of modernisation, industrialisation and the growth of individualism in the nineteenth century. For this reason, Handler argues, it has been difficult for anthropologists to attain sufficient analytical distance vis-a-vis nationalisms; the respective concepts and ways of thinking are too closely related (cf. also Herzfeld, 1987; Just, 1989).

Handler's point is also valid in relation to modern ethnopolitical movements. Those who speak for these movements tend to invoke a concept of culture which is in fact often directly inspired by anthropological concepts of culture, and in some cases they self-consciously present themselves as 'tribes' reminiscent of the 'tribes' depicted in classical anthropological monographs (Roosens, 1989). In these cases, there is an intrinsic relationship between anthropological theorising and 'native theory'. Additionally, when anthropologists study contested issues in their own societies, there is a real risk that the scholarly conceptual apparatus will be contaminated by the inaccurate and perhaps ideologically loaded everyday meanings of the words. For this reason, we should be particularly cautious in our choice of analytical terms and interpretations when we study phenomena such as ethnicity and nationalism.

The points made by Handler and others in relation to the study of nationalism and modern ethnopolitics can nevertheless be seen as general



problems of social anthropology. The main problem concerns how to articulate the relationship between anthropological theory, 'native theory' and social organisation (Mitchell, 1974; cf. also Baumann, 1996). In a sense, ethnicity is created by the analyst when he or she goes out into the world and poses questions about ethnicity. Had one instead been concerned with gender, one would doubtless have found aspects of gender instead of ethnicity. On the other hand, individuals or informants who live in the societies in question may themselves be concerned with issues relating to ethnicity, and as such the phenomenon clearly does exist outside of the mind of the observer. But since our concepts, for example ethnicity and nationalism, are our own inventions, we must not assume that the actors themselves have the same ideas about the ways in which the world is constituted - even if they are using the very same words as ourselves! History and social identity are constructed socially, sometimes with a very tenuous relationship with established, or at least official, facts (cf. chapter 4).

There are often discrepancies between what people say and what they do, and there will nearly always be discrepancies between informants' descriptions of their society and the anthropologist's description of the same society. Indeed, many anthropologists (for instance Holy and Stuchlik, 1983) hold that it is a chief goal of the discipline to investigate and clarify the relationship between notions and actions, or between what people say and what they do. One may disagree with their 'rationalist' perspective, which seems to assume that a simple, 'economic' means-end rationality underlies all social action, but the general problem remains important: why is it that people say one thing and then proceed to do something entirely different, and how can this be investigated?

This discrepancy is relevant for ethnic studies, and it requires that we are clear about the distinctions between our own concepts and models, 'native' concepts and models, and social process. In some societies, people will perhaps deny that there is systematic differential treatment between members of different groups, although the anthropologist will discover that such discrimination exists. Conversely, I have met many Christians during fieldwork who have sworn, in conversations, that they would (for ostensibly sound reasons) have nothing to do with Muslims; later on, it has turned out that they in fact entertain quite strong and sometimes confidential relationships with Muslims. It is, indeed, frequently contradictions of this kind that lead to anthropological insights.

## FURTHER READING

Guibernau, Montserrat and John Rex, eds. (1997) *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration*. Cambridge: Polity. An author-

itative, well-edited collection of short texts covering the main approaches and theoretical positions.

Vermeulen, Hans and Cora Covers, eds. (1994) *The Anthropology of Ethnicity Beyond 'Ethnic Groups and Boundaries'*. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis Four essays by leading scholars of ethnicity giving an idea of the state of the art

# 2 ETHNIC CLASSIFICATION: US AND THEM

> He came of good class, had a light olive complexion and hair with large waves ('good' hair, Miss Henery thought of it as; as a member of the West Indian coloured middle class, she conceived of human hair in terms of 'good' and 'bad' - sometimes 'good' and 'hard'; 'good' hair is hair that is European in appearance; 'bad' or 'hard' hair is of the kinky, negroid type).
>
> Edgar Mittelholzer (1979 [1950]: 58)

The first fact of ethnicity is the application of systematic distinctions between insiders and outsiders; between Us and Them. If no such principle exists there can be no ethnicity, since ethnicity presupposes an institutionalised relationship between delineated categories whose members consider each other to be culturally distinctive. From this principle, it follows that two or several groups who regard themselves as being distinctive may tend to become more similar *and* simultaneously increasingly concerned with their distinctiveness if their mutual contact increases. Ethnicity is thus constituted through social contact. This chapter will present general aspects of these processes of contact. In later chapters, wider contexts for ethnic relations at the interpersonal level will be elucidated - from the formation of ethnic groups (chapter 3) and the creation of ethnic identities and ideologies (chapter 4), to the historical conditions for ethnicity (chapter 5), the relationship between ethnicity and the state (chapters 6, 7 and 8), and the impact of globalisation on identity politics (chapters 8 and 9). Although ethnicity is not wholly created by individual agents, it can simultaneously provide agents with meaning *and* with organisational channels for pursuing their culturally defined interests. It is very important to be aware of this duality.

## THE ECOLOGY OF THE CITY

Some of the earliest empirical research on complex polyethnic societies was undertaken by the group which has come to be known as the Chicago School, comprising urban sociologists as well as anthropologists (Park, 1950; cf. Hannerz, 1980). Among the main problems investigated by Robert Park and his associates in the 1920s and 1930s was how it could be that