

Ethnicity, race and nation

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[...]

'Ethnicity seems to be a new term', state 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. 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 Max Weber – granted ethnicity much attention.

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. I shall examine

a number of approaches to ethnicity. Most of them are closely related, although they may serve different analytical purposes. All of the approaches 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. [...]

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 common 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. In other words, there is often greater variation within a 'racial' group than there is systematic variation between two groups.

Concepts of race can nevertheless be important 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. 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 existence of race, since their object of study is the social and cultural relevance of the *notion* that race exists. 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 may 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 categorization of people, while ethnicity has to do with group identification. He argues that ethnicity is generally more concerned with the identification of 'us', while racism is more oriented to the categorization of 'them'. 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. I shall not, therefore, 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 seem to be a decisive factor in interethnic relations.

Discrimination on ethnic grounds is spoken of as 'racism' in Trinidad and as 'communalism' in Mauritius, but the forms of impured 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, 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-à-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 nationalists tend to be ethnic in character, this is not necessarily the case. [...]

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 emphasizes 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 and the like.

Since Marx's time in the mid-nineteenth century, the theory of classes has been developed in several directions. 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 organization 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 delineation 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.

[...]

FROM TRIBE TO ETHNIC GROUP

There has been a shift in Anglophone social 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. This switch 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. 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 relativizes the boundaries between 'Us' and 'Them', between moderns and tribals.

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 they found about 300 different definitions. Although Ronald Cohen is correct in stating 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. Instead of going through the various definitions of ethnicity here, I will point out significant differences between theoretical viewpoints 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 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 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 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 social 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 organization 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 in social anthropology.

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? [...] 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. 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 be the case of the relationship between Serbs and Croats following the breakup of Yugoslavia, or of the tension between coastal Sami and Norwegians. There may also be considerable cultural variation within a group without ethnicity. 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 defined as a social identity (based on a contrast *vis-à-vis* others) characterized by metaphoric or fictive kinship. 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, organizational 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. My relationship with my Pakistani greengrocer has an ethnic aspect; so, it could be argued, do the war in former 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 organizations 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