Entry for

Encyclopaedia of International Development, Tim Forsyth, editor, London: Routledge.

Ethnicity/Identity

Alex Law

Ethnicity has replaced 'race' as a term in general academic and official usage. However, its precise meaning varies widely. Early anthropological and sociological uses of the term referred to essential group attributes like biology, language or *cultural heritage that ethnic groups were presumed to possess in common. More recent usage tends to understand ethnicity in much looser terms, focussing on how boundaries between ethnic groups are constructed, maintained and challenged. This shift in part reflects unease over violent conflicts between groups based on notions of ethnic purity as in *'ethnic cleansing' but also to promote more positive conceptions of ethnic minorities in multicultural Western countries.

A key shift occurred in the 1960s in the analysis of *indigenous people in terms of ethnicity rather than 'tribe'. British anthropologist Max Gluckman's 1930s African studies of the interaction of Zulus and Europeans began to point to the ways that in the context of colonial rule group boundaries were maintained to produce separate *'communities'. Gluckman influenced later anthropological studies like Clyde Mitchell's The Kalela Dance (1956), where rural-based 'tribal' rituals and identities were carried over into urban settings by migrant labourers, and Abner Cohen's Custom and Politics in Urban Africa (1969). Cohen adopted the newly

fashionable term 'ethnicity' from US sociology to account for the distinctive identity and economic self-interest of Hausa migrants to the Nigerian city of Ibadan. A strong sense of ethnic identity emerged out of the need for mutual trust among Ibadan Hausa to maintain control over the trade in kola nuts and cattle. Such ethnic instrumentalism has been criticised for neglecting the meanings that group members themselves hold about their ethnic identity.

Around the same time as Cohen, the Norwegian anthropologist Frederick Barth advanced the view that the substantive content of ethnic group identity and practices is much less important than the ways in which the idea of ethnic distinctiveness is reproduced. In Ethnic Groups and Boundaries (1969) Barth moved away from colonialist concerns with the minutiae of 'tribal' affiliation to make the more or less permanent boundary markers between ethnic groups central. As Thomas Erickson more recently put it, 'Ethnicity is essentially an aspect of a relationship, not a property of a group'.

A fault line in approaches to ethnicity lies in competing 'primordialist' versus 'modernist' perspectives. Is ethnic belonging rooted deep in the distant past or is it a more recent creation of the modern period? Primoridialism is itself derived from J.G Herder's Romantic idea of a Volk, a nationalist fiction about ethnic origins in blood and soil, which notoriously became an ideological organising principle for Nazi policies of racial supremacy. For the Soviet anthropologist Yulian Bromley, a general 'ethnos' prevails throughout history and becomes manifest in a more specific 'ethnikos', under specific economic and political conditions. Bromley stipulates the enduring basis of the ethnos as residing in 'a historically formed community of people characterised by common, relatively stable cultural features, certain distinctive psychological traits, and the consciousness of their unity as distinguished from other

similar communities'. Barth also took a broadly 'primordialist' approach that sees new group members inherit ancient traditions and lines of descent.

In contrast, 'modernists' like Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan in the US claim that ethnicity is a product of specifically modern conditions and that the 'new word' ethnicity 'reflects a new reality'. In their collection, *The Invention of Tradition*, (1983) Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger catalogue the creation of a specifically modernist sense of ethnicity and nationalism for binding populations into a shared group identity. Few today accept the notion of an enduring structure of ethnicity prevailing all the way through history from the earliest hunter-gatherer societies to global capitalism. The attribution of ethnic categories became a useful vehicle for Europeans organising colonial labour along a hierarchy of occupational functions. As such, ethnic identities emerge only with the rise of *imperialist political economy. In Rwanda and Burundi, for example, complex and fluid relationships between Tutsis, Hutus and Twas became rigid ethnic identities under German and Belgian colonial administrations. While pre-colonial Rwanda was no pre-modern bucolic idyll it lacked the defined ethnic rivalries that erupted into the *genocidal violence of 1994, when one million people were massacred in one hundred days.

Ethnicities can also emerge where no previous identity, culture, religion or ancestry was claimed, sometimes with disastrous consequences as in the case of the *ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims in 1992. Before the war 'ethnic Muslims' in Bosnia-Herzegovina identified with either Croat or Serbian culture. Not until they faced violent persecution on the basis of a common Islamic identity did Muslim ethnicity solidify into a shared defensive identity.

Thomas Erickson distinguishes four contexts out of which ethnic identity typically arises. First, among urban minorities like traders or migrant labour; second, among minority 'stateless' nations like the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Iran; third, among multi-ethnic populations found typically in post-colonial settings; fourth, among indigenous minorities dispossessed by colonial occupation, as in the native peoples of the Americas. To Erickson's typology Steve Fenton adds a fifth category, that of post-slavery minorities, such as the 'black' Afro-Carribeans or Afro-Americans.

Many approaches tend to be silent over the ethnic identity of dominant, majority or powerful groups in western societies. These are simply deemed to be 'white' local, regional or national cultures without any specific claim to ethnic identity. Here the politics of multiculturalism tends to be reduced to seeing 'others' in terms of exotic cultures, which ought to be tolerated or respected as radically different from the dominant 'host' culture. This has been resisted by 'universalists' who argue that differences are socially acquired and are not inherent or 'natural'. Therefore, other cultural practices can be learned and, ultimately, ethnic identity threatens the ideal of a universal humanity.

Further reading

See the journal: Ethnicities for current research on ethnicity and related areas such as identity politics, multiculturalism and nationalism.

Davidson, N. (1999) 'The trouble with ethnicity', <u>International Socialism</u>, 84: 1-32.

5

Erickson, T. H., (2002) <u>Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives</u>, London: Pluto Press.

Fenton, S. (1999) <u>Ethnicity: Racism, Class and Culture</u>, London: Macmillan.

Hobsbawm, E.J., Verdery K. and Fox, R.G. (1992) 'Ethnicity and Nationalism in Europe today', <u>Anthropology Today</u>, 8(1): 3-15.

Hutchison, J. and A. D. Smith, A.D. (eds), (1996) <u>Ethnicity</u>, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Smith, A. D. (ed) (1986) <u>The Ethnic Origins of Nations</u>, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

(1,053 words)