

From Culture to Ethnicity to Conflict

*An Anthropological Perspective
on International Ethnic Conflict*

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Chapter 1

Ethnicity, Culture, and “the Past”

It is understandably difficult to determine in general—and even in a concrete individual case—what influence specific ethnic factors . . . have on the formation of a group. . . . Any cultural trait, no matter how superficial, can serve as a starting point for the familiar tendency to monopolistic closure.

—Max Weber

In the late twentieth century “ethnicity” and “ethnic conflict” captivate the world’s attention like perhaps no other social phenomenon on earth. Even relatively peaceful societies like the United States are not immune to it, although it only infrequently erupts into open conflict and violence and then only briefly. But, in fact, despite its ubiquity—or perhaps because of it—ethnicity and ethnic conflict are not particularly well understood, either by the public or by many scholars. This is due to both terminological confusion and to inadequate knowledge of the details and background of specific cases. Ethnicity and ethnic conflict are particularly fertile subjects for conflation of categories, mystification of facts, and general denogatory, in no small part because the issues, as in the United States, are so emotionally charged. This chapter is dedicated to clarifying some of these confusions and to presenting some of the details and background information crucial to understanding these momentous social forces.

Some of the most perplexing problems arise from the vagueness of the term and phenomenon called *ethnicity* and from its indefinite and ever-expanding domain. One of the central arguments of this chapter will be that ethnicity is in fact not a single unified social phenomenon but a congeries, a “family,” of related but analytically distinct phenomena. The foundations of ethnicity, the “markers” of ethnicity, the history of ethnicity, the aims

and goals of ethnicity—these things vary from case to case. For instance, in one circumstance religion may be the decisive distinction between two ethnic groups (say, in Northern Ireland), while in another language or history or race or any number of other qualities may serve the same function. Even within one case of ethnicity or conflict the referents or the emphasis on referents of the groups concerned may shift over time. Further, not all culturally distinct groups are ethnic groups precisely, and (in an odd paradox) not all ethnic groups are culturally distinct groups; the relation of ethnicity to “culture” is less than perfect. Not all ethnic groups are ancient and organic social entities; some can make the claim, while others are noticeably recent. Finally, not all ethnic groups are in conflict, not all conflicts are equal in intensity, and not all conflicts seek the same ends.

This very elusiveness of ethnicity is largely responsible for its expandability, which is largely responsible for its utility in the modern world. When is a group an ethnic group? There are no hard or fast rules or standards by which to judge. The answer, of course, as unsatisfying as it is, is that social collectivity, of any nature and antiquity, can don the mantle of ethnicity—one of the most elastic of social concepts—and stake a successful claim to identity and rights as a group can achieve the status of ethnic group. The point is this: it does not matter if any particular group is really an ethnic group or what a real ethnic group is; instead, ethnicity has become so central to social discourse—and social competition—that its salience and effectiveness have become attractive to all sorts of collectivities.

Ethnicity and Ethnic Groups

Ethnicity is, at first glance, the process or phenomenon that underlies or gives rise to ethnic groups. DeVos defines it as the “subjective symbolic or emblematic use of any aspect of culture [by a group], in order to differentiate themselves from other groups” (1975, 16). For Burgess it is “the character, quality, or condition of ethnic group membership, based on an identity with and/or a consciousness of group belonging that is differentiated from others by symbolic ‘markers’ (including cultural, biological, or territorial), and is rooted in bonds to a shared past and perceived ethnic interests” (1978, 270). These and other definitions repeatedly raise points about symbolism, meaning, and identity and about cohesion, solidarity, and belonging. In terms of the former I am talking about a social and psychological process whereby individuals come to identify and affiliate with a group and some aspect(s) of its cul-

ture; ethnicity is then what emerges when a person, as affiliated, completes the statement: “I am a _____ because I share _____ with my group.” Ethnicity is consciousness of difference and the subjective salience of that difference. It is also mobilization around difference—a camaraderie with or preference for socially similar others. It is in this sense a “familial” kind of relationship, with emotional characteristics—a bond, a tie, a sentiment, an attachment. It is even regularly likened to kinship, as a kind of kinship writ large. Horowitz writes that, based on the primacy of birth and shared origin, “ethnicity and kinship are alike. . . . The language of ethnicity is the language of kinship” (1985, 57). He also quotes Michael Fischer as saying that “ethnicity may be the maximal case of societally organized intimacy and kinship experience” (60). Pierre van den Berghe, as is well-known, goes even further in asserting that “ethnic and racial sentiments are extensions of kinship sentiments” (1987, 18), developing this observation into a biological or ethological theory of ethnicity.

This much being said, there is much diversity within the phenomenon of ethnicity. One of the first things that ethnographers of ethnicity discover is that the strength and significance of ethnicity vary between individuals and groups as well as over time for any particular individual or group. Some ostensibly ethnic groups (say, some indigenous people or urban minorities) with authentic shared origins and culture have little ethnic feeling, and other groups with much less in common have strong feelings. Not only that, but a group may have vibrant, even militant, ethnicity at one moment in time and much less so at a later moment, or vice versa. And, of course, in any particular group some individuals have powerful ethnic sentiments, while others do not, and some individuals with powerful sentiments engage in ethnic-based confrontation and violence, while others do not.

Ethnicity is, thus, subjective, even while it is based on, refers to, or invokes “objective” or shared cultural or historical markers. The first of several issues I might raise, following DeVos’s earlier definition, is which part of culture is used by a particular group and why. No ethnic group treats all aspects of its culture or history as markers of its identity; it would be awkward if not impossible to do so, and besides, for any group, some elements of its culture will be *the same as* those of another group, thus defeating the purpose of distinguishing it from the other group. Any part, no matter how small, of a group’s trait list can make a perfectly adequate ethnic marker. What is more, for any one group, the parts of culture that it chooses and uses may vary over time, from religion at one stage to language in another to class or what have you.

As a subjective phenomenon, as a "consciousness," a second issue is that having distinct social/cultural characteristics is not sufficient to make ethnicity—and not having them is not sufficient necessarily to prevent it. A group that is distinct in some way may not be aware of or mobilized around that distinction and may not use it for any social or political purpose (again, all groups are distinct in some ways: senior citizens are distinct, but most people do not ordinarily think of them as ethnic). For example, the difference between *ethnicity* and *ancestry* has been highlighted by some students of ethnicity. Ancestry is a more or less objective fact (although not one that all of us readily know), and, if asked to give one's ancestry, most Americans can and will list one or more societies that enter into one's family history. Yet, if asked one's ethnicity or ethnic identity, these facts often recede into the background: individuals tend to choose *one* (even if two or more lines of ancestry obtain) or to ignore them all and choose *American* or some other generic term.

By the same token a group may overlook differences in the pursuit or definition of its ethnicity—in fact, ethnicity generally demands the overlooking of internal differentiations. *Hispanic* as an ethnicity embraces a remarkable amount of cultural, historical, and economic diversity. Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans, Puerto Rican-Americans, and all of the other "Hispanic" Americans are distinguished by a tremendous variation of society and culture and of economic class in the United States; the only thing that unifies them is language (or linguistic descent) and the general part of the world from which they, or their ancestors, hail. The same can be said of *Asian-American*, an even more diffuse term, since the groups so encompassed do not even share language. In fact, many Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans have not affiliated with those ethnic identities and still conceive of themselves in more particularistic, local terms: they have not (yet?) developed the self-concept and group concept implicit in the label.

To a certain extent ethnicities are labels, often labels created for administrative purposes. Labels can be made and unmade and remade. In Canada the ethnicity of *French-Canadian* has lately been quietly replaced with *Quebecois*, which carries a territorial connotation. Labels, however, also have consequences. The shift from *French-Canadian* to *Quebecois* changes the membership of the group created by the label (e.g., are francophone Canadians living outside Quebec "Quebecois"?). The shift from *black* to *African-American* in the United States does not change the membership much but does change the marker of ethnicity, from skin color to

ancestral origin in the broadest sense. And, since any trait, large or small, can be a marker and the basis of a label and an ethnicity, it is possible to see today a move to create new labels and ethnicities such as *mixed race*. If, in the end, individuals with a particular trait achieve consciousness and organization on the basis of that trait, then it is an ethnicity, even if it was not one yesterday.

Accordingly, if a group is not conscious of or organized in terms of its characteristics, then there is no ethnicity, no matter how distinct it may be. Many indigenous peoples, radically distinct from any other groups, did not and do not have "ethnic consciousness." As I will explain, ethnicity and mobilization as an ethnic group require a certain consciousness of difference, a certain objectification of culture and cultural difference, and a certain "distance"—cognitive if not temporal—from culture, a certain reflexive relation with one's own culture. People who live their culture unproblematically tend not to be ethnic in the proper sense of the word.

In other words, ethnicity is not and cannot be an objective phenomenon. There is, first and foremost, no one-to-one correspondence between culture and ethnicity. Cultural differences alone do not ethnicity make; culture, or cultural difference, becomes ethnicity if and when a group takes it up and uses it in certain specific and modern ways. Naturally, too, ethnicity does not always or necessarily make for conflict; certain kinds of ethnicity in certain situations with certain catalyzing events make conflict out of ethnicity. Thus, small differences in culture may make for large and contentious differences in ethnicity, while large differences in culture may lead to small or no ethnic differences or conflicts. If scholars want to understand ethnicity, they will not succeed by merely listing the empirical cultural traits of groups (which in itself is not as simple as it sounds) or describing their empirical, or "true," history.

In concluding this section, it is well to remember that not all instances of ethnicity will be the same. In terms of cultural marker, intergroup relations, and intragroup subjectivity there is in actuality not one ethnicity but many. Yinger (1994, 4) for one offers a schematization of this variety, finding eight types of ethnicity depending on three variables that are only indirectly related to objective cultural characteristics: self-perception (or avowal) of ethnicity, other perception (or ascription by other) of ethnicity, and participation in ethnicity. The eight resulting types become: (1) full, if self-perception, other perception, and participation are all present; (2) unrecognized, if self is absent but other and participation are present; (3) private, if self and participation are present but other is absent; (4) hidden,

if participation is present but self and other are absent; (5) symbolic, if self and other are present but participation is absent; (6) stereotyped, if other is present but self and participation are absent; (7) imagined, if self is present but other and participation are absent; and (8) nonethnic, if all three are absent. This complexity is, I believe, not only important but also salutary for ethnic studies.

Ethnic Group

It goes without saying that ethnicity is not the only way to affiliate, organize, or categorize human beings. Neither is ethnicity the only source of conflict in the world, even between cultural groups, loosely construed. For example, the ongoing problems in Algeria would hardly, under normal circumstances, be considered ethnic in nature. Religious, political, economic, ideological, gender, and other kinds of groups can have the same quantity of cohesion, salience, and even animosity and conflict as ethnic groups, and it is very inadvisable to confuse the disparate types. What, then, is an ethnic group? It is one of the types of human social collectivity, named identity—groups based on some shared quality of social behavior, thought, or feeling. One of the main problems for social scientists is the specification of its difference from or relation to other social collectivities such as “nation,” “people,” “society,” “tribe,” “minority,” “race,” or “class.” Students of ethnic phenomena offer various definitions and characterizations; some even suggest differentiations or substitutions within the term itself. A discussion of terminology like the one that follows may seem sheer pedantry, but it actually serves two critical functions: to clean up conceptual sloppiness that interferes with description and comparison and to articulate issues of “unit of analysis” that are increasingly important in anthropology and other social sciences.

In, if not the first, then the classic definition of *ethnic group*, Weber describes it as one of “those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists” (1968, 389). R. A. Schermerhorn has defined *ethnic group* as “a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood. . . . A necessary component is some consciousness of kind among members of

the group” (1970, 12). Abner Cohen calls it “an informal interest group whose members are distinct from members of other groups in that they share a measure of . . . ‘compulsory institutions’ like kinship and religion, and can communicate among themselves relatively easily. [In] strife between such ethnic groups . . . people stress their identity and exclusiveness” (1969, 4). Yinger defines *ethnic group* as “a segment of a larger society whose members are thought, by themselves or others, to have a common origin and to share important segments of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients” (1994, 3). For Anthony Smith an ethnic group is “a type of cultural collectivity, one that emphasizes the role of myths of descent and historical memories, and that is recognized by one or more cultural differences like religion, customs, language, or institutions” (1991, 20).

As different as these definitions are, there are clearly certain commonalities between them. Most basically, they return always to *difference*, however conceived or however employed—to a difference between groups that is apparent and important to the members of the groups. The crucial domain of difference is *culture*; or, more precisely, some part of a shared culture; some theorists also allow that physical or “racial” traits may figure into ethnic groups, but this is not always the case, and even when it is those traits, in the modern phenomenon of ethnic group, are inscribed with cultural significance. This culture may be real, however, or it may be putative or subjective without compromising the power and salience of the group’s identity; specifically, the culture (often taken as “tradition”) exists as *memory* of the true, or “original,” condition of the group—whatever its actual condition in the present. *Origin* and *descent* are frequent idioms in positing this group identity, and, even more critically, an ideology of continuity with that past, that traditional culture, or that blood or kinship line is regularly maintained. It is unimportant whether these views are true or demonstrable. Ultimately, the group is based more on its consciousness, or “awareness,” of difference and shared traits and past than on the objective quality of those traits.

Further, the various definitions emphasize the *relational quality* of ethnic groups; an ethnic group is a “culturally distinct” segment of a larger social whole. It is impossible, or better yet nonsensical, to think of an ethnic group in isolation from other groups or “at home” in a culturally homogeneous society or state (e.g., Japanese are not an ethnic group in Japan). Arguably, then, groups that are not part of a larger social whole

