RETHINKING ETHNICITY

Arguments and Explorations

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sociology embraces all of the methods and most of the concerns of anthropology, the reverse is not true. Social anthropology can thus be analogized as an exclusive and specialized sub-section or clan of the greater sociological tribe.

Lest this view be thought too extreme, or perhaps even flippant, consider the following definition of sociology, offered by the late Roy Wallis, writing in the *The Times Higher Education Supplement* on 18 April 1986, a time when sociology was having to justify itself in an altogether hostile British political climate:

> Sociology is not only about translating the manners and mores of alien life and sub-culture into the language and sensibility of the rest, it is about making strange and problematic what we already know, questioning the assumptions long held in our community deriving their strength from prejudice and tradition rather than open-minded observation. And making the strange, the foreign, obvious, enabling us to see how reasonable people starting from the point they do, could come to live and think this way; and making what has hitherto seemed obvious in our own society problematic, to question how and why it is done, providing the opportunity for reappraisal or greater understanding of our own behaviour, seems to me a socially and morally worthwhile purpose.

This is, admittedly, only one view of sociology. Any such definition, in a discipline famous for differences of opinion if not discord, must be. But it sketches out a broad intellectual enterprise with which most – if not all – social anthropologists would feel utterly at home. In the context of the present discussion, it eloquently emphasizes the essentially sociological character of social anthropology.

This doesn't mean, however, that sociology and social anthropology are the same thing. They clearly are not (quite). The differences of emphasis between them, when taken together, constitute a specifically anthropo-logical point of view:

> Our emphasis on pluralism, our understanding of culture, our appreciation for the informant's perspective . . . add up to a distinctive perspective. (Blakey *et al.* 1994: 302)

A minimalist disciplinary model of this kind is what I have in mind when I persist in seeing myself as an anthropologist: comparative, epistemologi-cally relativist, methodologically holistic, focusing on culture and meaning, stressing local perceptions and knowledge, and documenting the routine of everyday life. This is the specifically anthropological version of the socio-logical imagination.

However, if the notion of anthropology as a segment of sociology is right, and given the situation in which it finds itself, we need to do more than establish sufficient differences between sociology and social anthro-pology to allow the latter a distinct intellectual identity. Anthropology is still faced with a problem, which the following summarizes nicely:

> it is not a crisis of *representation* which now threatens our discipline but a problem of *relevance*. Social anthropology as we know it is in danger of becoming marginalized and redundant unless it adapts to the changing world

> which now threatens to undermine its cherished theories, methods and practices. This means, above all, re-evaluating its conventional objects of study and developing new domains and methods of inquiry that are commensurate with the new subjects and social forces that are emerging in the contemporary world . . . anthropology's image as a discipline still primarily concerned with exotic, small-scale disappearing worlds must be complemented – perhaps even supplanted – by greater concern with 'emerging worlds', the culture of the 'colonizers' as well as those of the colonized, and on subject areas that cannot be defined by traditional fieldwork methods alone. (Ahmed and Shore 1995: 14–16)

Apart from wanting to insist that the problem of anthropological relevance is neither new nor even particularly recent – a small minority of anthro-pologists, some of them eminent within the discipline, have been pursuing the approach advocated by Ahmed and Shore for many years now – this, it seems to me, pretty much hits the nail on the head.

The rest of this book should be read, therefore, not only as a rethinking of ethnicity, but also as a contribution to the rethinking of anthropology. To the development of an anthropology that is unapologetically at home in large-scale, metropolitan, industrialized societies. An anthropology that is sure of its epistemological ground when using survey methods, archival sources, relying on secondary material, or whatever. A discipline that is defined not by its methods or by its places of work, but by its *concerns* and, above all, by its *point of view*.

Locating ethnicity

So, what do anthropologists mean when they talk about ethnicity? What does anyone mean when they talk about ethnicity? The word comes from the ancient Greek *ethnos*, which seems to have referred to a range of situations in which a collectivity of humans lived and acted together (Østergård 1992a: 32), and which is typically translated today as 'people' or 'nation'. Since the early decades of this century, the linked concepts of ethnicity and ethnic group have been taken in many directions, aca-demically (Stone 1996) and otherwise. They have passed into everyday discourse, and become central to the politics of group differentiation and advantage, in the culturally diverse social democracies of Europe and North America. With notions of 'race' in public and scientific disrepute since 1945, ethnicity has obligingly stepped into the gap, becoming a rallying cry in the often bloody reorganization of the post-Cold-War world. The obscenity of 'ethnic cleansing' stands shoulder to shoulder with earlier euphemisms such as 'racial hygiene' and 'the final solution'.

So it is important to be clear about what our subject – ethnicity – is and about what it is not. An early and influential sociological reference to ethnic groups, and the ultimate rootstock of the argument which I will develop in subsequent chapters, can be found in Max Weber's *Economy and Society*, first published in 1922 (1978: 385–98). An ethnic group is based, in this view, on the *belief* shared by its members that, however

distantly, they are of common descent. This may or may not derive from what Weber calls 'anthropological type' (i.e. 'race', embodied difference or phenotype):

> race creates a 'group' only when it is subjectively perceived as a common trait: this happens only when a neighbourhood or the mere proximity of racially different persons is the basis of joint (mostly political) action, or conversely, when some common experiences of members of the same race are linked to some antagonism against members of an *obviously* different group. (1978: 385)

Perhaps the most significant part of Weber's argument is that:

> ethnic membership does not constitute a group; it only facilitates group forma-tion of any kind, particularly in the political sphere. On the other hand, it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized, that inspires the belief in common ethnicity. (1978: 389)

Weber seems to be suggesting that the belief in common ancestry is likely to be a *consequence* of collective political action rather than its *cause*; people come to see themselves as *belonging* together – coming from a common background – as a consequence of *acting* together. Collective interests thus do not simply reflect or follow from similarities and differ-ences between people; the pursuit of collective interests does, however, encourage ethnic identification.

In terms of collective action, this sense of ethnic communality is a form of monopolistic social closure: it defines membership, eligibility and access. Any cultural trait in common can provide a basis and resources for ethnic closure: language, ritual, economic way of life, lifestyle more generally, and the division of labour, are all likely possibilities in this respect. Shared language and ritual are particularly implicated in ethnicity: mutual 'intelligibility of the behaviour of others' is a fundamental prerequisite for any group, as is the shared sense of what is 'correct and proper' which constitutes individual 'honour and dignity'. By this token, an ethnic group is a particular form of *status group*. Finally, Weber argues that since the possibilities for collective action rooted in ethnicity are 'indefinite', the *ethnic group*, and its close relative the *nation*, cannot easily be precisely defined for sociological purposes.

The next significant sociological contribution to our understanding of ethnicity came in an undeservedly somewhat neglected short paper by the Chicago sociologist Everett Hughes, first published in 1948 (1994: 91–6). Hughes had clearly read Weber, and he rejected a commonsensical or ethnological understanding based simply on distinctive 'cultural traits':

> An ethnic group is not one because of the degree of measurable or observable difference from other groups: it is an ethnic group, on the contrary, because the people in it and the people out of it know that it is one; because both the *ins* and the *outs* talk, feel, and act as if it were a separate group. This is possible only if there are ways of telling who belongs to the group and who does not, and if a person learns early, deeply, and usually irrevocably to what group he belongs. If it is easy to resign from the group, it is not truly an ethnic group. (1994: 91)

His argument can be paraphrased thus: ethnic cultural differences are a function of 'group-ness', the existence of a group is not a reflection of cultural difference. Furthermore, ethnic groups imply ethnic relations, and ethnic relations involve at least two collective parties, they are not unilateral. Identity is a matter of the *outs* as well as the *ins*. A concomitant of this point of view is the injunction that we should not, for example, study a *minority* group – which is, after all, a relational notion – without also studying the *majority*:

> if the groups in question have enough relations to be a nuisance to each other it is because they form a part of a whole, that they are in some sense and in some measure members of the same body. (1994: 95)

In Weber and Hughes we can see the early sociological emergence of the social constructionist model of ethnicity which anthropologists have so strikingly made their own. From this point of view, ethnic groups are what people believe or think them to be; cultural differences mark 'group-ness', they do not cause it (or indelibly characterize it); ethnic identification arises out of and within interaction between groups.

The notion of ethnicity did not, however, come into widespread anthro-pological use until the 1960s, beginning in the United States. Within American anthropology, the increasing use of an ethnicity model was part of a long-term, and gradual, shift of analytical framework, from 'race' to 'culture' to 'ethnicity' (Wolf 1994). It can also be interpreted as a change – about which more in Chapter 2 – in the conceptualization of one of the basic units of anthropological analysis, from the 'tribe' to the 'ethnic group'. More recently, the unit of analysis in this respect has widened further, to reflect a growing concern with the 'nation' and the processes whereby ethnic groups and categories are incorporated into states (Eriksen 1993a; Verdery 1994; B. Williams 1989). It is now anthropological common sense to consider ethnicity and nationalism in the same analytical breath, although 'race', as we shall see, is more problematic. The study of ethnicity – and nationalism – has become one of the major growth areas within the discipline, 'a lightning rod for anthropologists trying to redefine their theoretical and methodological approaches' (B. Williams 1989: 401).

Being a growth area has encouraged a healthy diversity: the anthro-pological model of ethnicity is a relatively broad church which allows a wide range of phenomena under its roof. What is more, it remains firmly grounded in empirical research. In this field as in others, social anthropologists are most concerned to get on with writing in detail about everyday life in specific local contexts. This is what anthropologists see themselves as doing best (and in this they are probably right). There is little in anthropology to compare, for example, with the abstraction of a recent sociological debate about the relationship between 'race', racism and ethnicity (Anthias 1992; Mason 1994). At the level of meta-theory, however, it is perhaps worth noting that ethnographic texts about specific localities contribute, even if only by default, to the perpetuation of an

axiomatic view of the social world as a mosaic of discontinuous and definite cultural *difference*, rather than a seamless web of overlapping and interweaving cultural *variation*.

The strong ethnographic tradition notwithstanding, there is social anthropological theory and there are definitions. Perhaps the most general is the notion of ethnicity as the 'social organization of culture difference' originally proposed by Fredrik Barth's symposium *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969b), the seminal text from which stems much current anthropological conventional wisdom about ethnicity. In his 'Introduction' to that collection, Barth (1969a) outlined in detail a model of ethnicity which was intended as a corrective to the structural functionalist understanding of the social world – which was at that time still dominant within anthropology – as a system of more or less unproblematic, more or less firmly bounded societies or social groups, which existed as 'social facts', and were, *pace* Durkheim, to be treated or understood as 'things'.

Barth began with what actors believe or think: ascriptions and self-ascriptions. He focused not upon the cultural characteristics of ethnic groups but upon relationships of cultural differentiation; specifically upon contact between collectivities thus differentiated, 'us' and 'them' (Eriksen 1993a: 10–12). The emphasis is not so much upon the *substance* or *content* of ethnicity – what Barth called 'the cultural stuff' – as upon the social processes which produce and reproduce, which organize, boundaries of identification and differentiation between ethnic collectivities:

> we can assume no simple one-to-one relationship between ethnic units and cultural similarities and differences. The features that are taken into account are not the sum of 'objective' differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant . . . some cultural features are used by the actors as signals and emblems of differences, others are ignored, and in some relationships radical differences are played down and denied. (Barth 1969a: 14)

Barth emphasizes that ethnic identity is generated, confirmed or transformed in the course of interaction and transaction between decision-making, strategizing individuals. Ethnicity in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* is, perhaps before it is anything else, a matter of politics, decision-making and goal-orientation (and this is the ground over which Barth has been most consistently criticized: as materialist, individualist and narrowly instrumentalist).

Shared culture is, in this model, best understood as generated in and by processes of ethnic boundary maintenance, rather than the other way round: the production and reproduction of difference *vis-à-vis* external others is what creates the image of similarity internally, *vis-à-vis* each other. Barth and his collaborators ushered in an increasing awareness on the part of many anthropologists that culture is a changing, variable and contingent property of interpersonal transactions, rather than a reified entity, 'above' the fray of daily life, which somehow produces behaviour. As Barth has recently suggested, this point of view can be seen as anticipating the postmodern view of culture (Barth 1994: 12). Whatever one might want to

make of *that* idea, his understanding of ethnicity has certainly been central to subsequent anthropologizing about ethnicity.

Like Hughes, Barth had clearly read Weber. Having been a student at the University of Chicago in the late 1940s it is likely that he was also familiar with Hughes's work (and he acknowledges the influence of Erving Goffman, one of Hughes's students). Whatever the source – because intellectual lineage is never straightforward – the above quotation from Barth illustrates the striking affinities that the *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* model of ethnicity has with earlier sociological discussions of ethnicity. It can, in fact, be understood as their development and elaboration.

But Barth's arguments also had more strictly anthropological antecedents. Leach (1954), for example, talked about Kachin identities in Highland Burma as flexible rather than fixed over time, questioning the general utility of the notion of the 'tribe'. Later, Moerman's (1965) discussion of the situational variability of ethnicity in Thailand implicitly anticipated much of Barth's model, and Yehudi Cohen's apparently independent discussion of 'social boundary systems' (1969) is a good example of the extent to which the contributors to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* were part of a developing head of disciplinary steam.

Thus, although his is the most systematic model in depth and detail, the most securely grounded in wider theoretical arguments about social forms and social processes (e.g. Barth 1959, 1966), and has certainly been the most influential, Barth was not alone in establishing the current anthropological understanding of ethnicity. Nor is his the only anthropological model of ethnicity to have been influenced by Weber. Reflecting, on the one hand, the ethnographic concern with the everyday lives of concrete subjects – their 'actually existing' social relationships (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 190) – and, on the other, the pursuit of *verstehen* ('understanding') advocated by Weber and Simmel, Clifford Geertz has elegantly defined ethnicity as the 'world of personal identity collectively ratified and publicly expressed' and 'socially ratified personal identity' (1973: 268, 309). In this view, which will receive further consideration in subsequent chapters, ethnicity has to mean something – in the sense of making a difference – not only to *the people* one is studying, but also to individual *persons*.

What I have called 'the 'basic social anthropological model of ethnicity' can be summarized as follows:

- ethnicity is about cultural differentiation – although, to reiterate the main theme of *Social Identity* (Jenkins 1996), identity is always a dialectic between similarity and difference;
- ethnicity is centrally concerned with culture – shared meaning – but it is also rooted in, and to a considerable extent the outcome of, social interaction;
- ethnicity is no more fixed or unchanging than the culture of which it is a component or the situations in which it is produced and reproduced;

- ethnicity as a social identity is collective and individual, externalized in social interaction and internalized in personal self-identification.

A word about culture – and a minor caveat – is appropriate before going further. The implicit understanding of culture upon which this model depends is considerably narrower than the general-purpose model of culture – as the definitive characteristic of human beings, the capacity for which unites us all in essential similarity – to which neophyte anthropologists are quickly introduced, often in the shape of Sir Edward Tylor's famous and time-honoured omnibus definition. Here, instead of *culture*, we find a model of different *cultures*, of social differentiation based on language, religion, cosmology, symbolism, morality, and ideology. It is a model that leads occasionally to the problematic appearance that culture is different from, say, politics or economic activity (when, in fact, they are all cultural phenomena). In this, the model is revealed as the analytical analogue of everyday notions of ethnic differentiation. This should be borne in mind in reading the discussions of 'the cultural stuff' in subsequent chapters.

The general model of ethnicity I have outlined is supported to some degree by most social anthropologists interested in the topic. I will elaborate upon it in subsequent chapters, and introduce some important qualifications and modifications. However, it is not my intention to provide a comprehensive survey of the expanding anthropological literature about ethnicity. Several, generally complementary, essays into this territory are already available (Banks 1996; Cohen 1978; Eriksen 1993a; B. Williams 1989) and little would be served by competing with them. However, the fact that lots of anthropologists are talking to each other about ethnicity, combined with the disciplinary enthusiasm for detailed ethnography rather than theory, may lead to some things being taken for granted. Among these things are the definition of anthropology, and, more important, the definition of ethnicity, both of which have already been discussed. A further problem, however, is the perpetual need to struggle against our tendency to reify culture and ethnicity. Although we talk about them in these terms endlessly, neither culture nor ethnicity is 'something' that people 'have', or, indeed, to which they 'belong'. They are, rather, complex repertoires which people experience, use, learn and 'do' in their daily lives, within which they construct an ongoing sense of themselves and an understanding of their fellows.

One possible consequence of this reification is the construction of ethnicity as typically – or even only – an attribute of the Other. Ethnicity thus becomes something which characterizes other people rather than ourselves. We need, however, to remind ourselves all the time that each of *us* participates in an ethnicity – perhaps more than one – just like *them*, just like the Other, just like 'the minorities'. Some of us, members of those 'ethnic minorities', perhaps, or coming from ethnically marked peripheries – such as, in the British Isles, Wales, Ireland, or Scotland – may know this only too well. However, for others it can be a very difficult thing to appreciate. Yet its appreciation is arguably the first step towards understanding the ubiquity and the shifting salience of ethnic identification. Recognizing that ethnocentrism is routine and understandable, as routine and understandable as the invisibility of one's own identity, does not absolve us from the need either to struggle against it, or to make ourselves more visible (*to* ourselves).

Although, as good social scientists, we may pooh-pooh its reality or distance ourselves from it by recourse to irony, our national identity or 'character' may be easier to perceive than our ethnicity. Nationalism and the construction of national identity are, after all, explicit projects of the state. If nothing else, we have passports. The contours and contents of national identity are likely to be more visible, as are the contexts of its uses and justifications. And even if, as good anthropologists, we may not have to remind ourselves of the socially constructed character of national identity and sentiment, there is certainly a job to be done in keeping that idea as firmly in the public eye as possible.

Because that idea is undoubtedly important. Although it is welcome, we should not really *need* Eric Wolf's argument (1994) that 'race', 'culture' and 'people' are 'perilous ideas'. We *should* know this. Newscasts if not history should have taught us it long ago. Which is what makes anthropological research and teaching about ethnicity both urgent and troublesome. Because of its comparative global reach and its local-level research focus, its emphasis upon culture as well as social construction, its capacity to see individual trees as well as the collective wood, anthropology offers a promise to the world beyond the academy: to relativize notions about ethnicity and to resist the naturalization or the taking for granted of ethnic identity and nationalist ideology.

There is still some way to go, however, and some conceptual clarification, before we can live up to that promise. This book is offered as a contribution to that clarification. It should be read as part of an ongoing enterprise. It is, hence – and perhaps all theoretical texts should declare themselves in this way – self-consciously provisional (although this doesn't mean that it is merely tentative). I hope that the fact that it is something of a *bricolage* – a computer-age assemblage, manipulation and reconstruction of an existing body of papers – has not resulted in too much repetition or overlap in the arguments, and that the reader will bear with me where they occur.