Are ethnic identities immutable or created?

The definitional problem of ethnicity stems from its association with the idea of race, its unreliable relationship with culture and its widespread use beyond the social sciences in popular constructions of identity. Its relevance seems more secure than its definition. Far from being an anachronistic sentiment which has no place in the modern age, Jonathan Friedman points out the implicit complementarity of identity politics and modernity – "[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"[1]. Professor Marcus Banks disingenuously writes that "ethnicity" can be regarded as, "a collection of rather simplistic and obvious statements about boundaries, otherness, goals and achievements, being and identity, descent and classification, that has been constructed as much by the anthropologist as by the subject"[2]; and Thomas Hylland Eriksen comments that "ethnicity is a social and cultural product which anthropologists contribute to creating. If we go to Mauritius, the Copperbelt or to the Peruvian highlands in search of gender, we shall no doubt find gender"[3]. Kevin A. Yelvington meanwhile writes: "[E]thnicity is a social identity characterized by fictive

[1] Jonathan Friedman, 'Being in the world: Globalization and localization', *Global Culture*, ed. Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1990), p.311; cited here from Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p.9
[2] Marcus Banks, *Ethnicity: anthropological constructions* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.177
[3] Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p.177

kinship"[4]

If culture can be thought to exist even in the absence of an Other, ethnicity necessarily involves a reflexive identification in the face of difference – it is the appropriate term for what can emerge from relations between two or more groups. Eriksen proceeds by identifying some of the characteristics of ethnicity:

> Ethnicity is the enduring and systematic communication of cultural differences between groups considering themselves to be distinct. It appears whenever cultural differences are made relevant in social interaction, and it should thus be studied at the level of social life, not at the level of symbolic culture.[5]

There are certainly many traits by which people can be distinctly grouped together. What distinguishes an ethnic grouping from, for example, a trade union, is that whilst members of both groups may share interests, in the case of a group which is ethnically united, the common interests are secondary and arise as the result of shared culture. This supposition is true by definition since ethnic identity is conceived of as one of a number of axes along which people may form trait-based combinations: age, gender, sexuality, intelligence, class, health; and one which is capable of subsuming more readily than others the following traits under its purview: religion, "race", culture. Why it might be that certain categories of traits lend themselves to better defining and unifying a group of people than others is a valid question and one to which I will later return suggesting that the aura of

[4] cited here from Banks (1996), p.4
[5] Eriksen (2002), p.58

immutability in these traits allows ethnicity-framed claims to muster more political legitimacy. For the purpose of defining ethnicity, the important point is that it perhaps should be seen as a question of degree. Some groups are fairly ethnic, others more so. By consensus, whilst Abner Cohen would see London stockbrokers as a (largely endogamous) ethnic group, many would resist the claim, suggesting that this group is not especially an ethnic group evaluated by cultural distinctiveness. The conflict between Chechnya and Russia is arguably less an ethnic conflict and more a religious conflict today than it was at its outset. The ethnicity of fox-hunters as a group in Britain could be plausibly posited, but as the debate has not been framed in such terms, using the category would not immediately garner widespread recognition.

The debates between primordialist and instrumentalist understandings of ethnicity illuminate the immutable / created argument. This dialogic structure therefore underpins what follows at the expense of chronology. Emic accounts of ethnicity can seem to be primordialist or at least essentialist. The ethnic categories used in self-ascription are frequently seen to be real, unproblematic and historical; delineating areas of what Yelvington epigrammatically referred to as “fictive kinship”[6] and Eriksen terms “metaphoric kinship”[7]. This is the “cultural intimacy”[8] of Michael Herzfield which

[6] Banks (1996), p.4
[7] Eriksen (2002), p.45
[8] ibidem, p.77

sent Benedict Anderson in chapter eight of *Imagined Communities* into rhapsodies of an altogether different idiom – poetry, folksong and lullaby. *Amor patriae* finds part of its fondly imagined, pre-emptively nostalgic sense of community through the action of "that language, encountered at mother's knee and parted with only at the grave", in which "pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed"[9]. Cohen sees in ethnic ideology – in part – an answer to the "perennial problems of life" in that it provides origins, belonging, purpose and destiny. In this view, we have a tendency to seek out and intimate intimacy with those who share our cultural traits not just because of the lower transaction costs of interacting with closely overlapping value and category systems; but because from the fictive kinship of ethnicity we receive a grand narrative with which to contextualise our lives.

Fredrik Barth was engaged in debate by Abner Cohen who took issue with the former's primordialist view that ethnic ascriptions classify a person "in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background"[10]. Cohen's position was that ethnic groups are a type of informal political organisation and ethnicity invokes cultural boundaries in order to secure a group's resources or its "symbolic capital"[11]. An instrumentalist approach to ethnicity sees the word "ethnic" as

[9] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1991), p.154
[10] Eriksen (2002), p.53
[11] ibid.

misleading since the circulation of symbols and codes such as banners, flags, eagles, oaks, censuses and license plates generates affinities which allow political actors to manipulate large numbers of individuals into overcoming collective action problems. Cohen refines this view by arguing that *Two Dimensional Man* finds reason to value the "organisational vessels" which Barth coins not merely because they have a purpose and a political end which will reward allegiance, but also because they resonate intuitively with a psychological appetite for belonging and meaning.

In Cohen's description of Hausa trading in the kola nut in The Quarter, Sabo, Ibadan, "Yorubaland", western Nigeria, strikingly, the political and economic power derived from strong ethnic association is able to overcome weak communication and transport links to establish a monopoly controlled by the migrant community. We note that part of the structure of this ethnic identity serves to enforce accountability internally whilst legitimising group autonomy externally: "Our customs are different; we are Hausa"[12]. The Hausa trader who lives as a tenant in Sabo under a *mai gida* is a member of a "moral community" such that "To the northern dealer a man from this category has a fixed 'address', and a well-defined status, within the intricate context of Sabo society, which exercises continual moral and political pressure on the man and makes him honour

[12] Abner Cohen, 'Politics of the kola trade', *Africa*, vol. XXXVI, (1966), p.33

his financial obligations"[13]. In the context of a territorially weak state that cannot enforce contract law, the existing structure of Hausa society serves to ensure full confidence can be placed in distant anonymous executors by virtue of strong social control premised upon a distinct ethnic identity.

Whilst there is a strong quotient of instrumentality here, it is salutary to observe that Hausa long-distance trade and its attendant landlord system is a centuries old indigenous tradition[14]. One of the features of the political status of the Hausa communities in Yorubaland is that the ethnic nature of their claims to internal policing or demands for a civic clampdown on vagrancy appear more convincing than they might otherwise be coming from a hypothetical single interest lobby group. Is this perhaps because ethnic groups such as the Sabo Hausa can benefit from the reflected legitimacy of lifelong faith affiliations and transgenerational traditions bestowing sincerity and conviction onto an ethnically-framed campaign and thereby displacing self-interest to a second order phenomenon?

To the extent that ethnic identity is a social category, all ethnic identity is created. Michael Banton's comment that "'[t]he coloured man' is a creation of Europeans"[15] underlines the necessarily arbitrary epistemological boundaries at which the semantic is

[13] ib., p.26
[14] ib., p.22
[15] cited from Banks (1996), p.94

mapped onto the empirical. However, the false opposition within the question stems more fundamentally from the implication of mutual exclusivity. An actor may, as Robert E. Park suggested, be able to situationally select a self-maximising identity. Yet to paraphrase Marx, is it not more realistic to suggest that people make ethnicity, but not under circumstances of their own choosing[16]? The mutability then, of differing kinds of self-identification over time should perhaps be seen to lie on a spectrum whereby from immutable to mutable would stretch such traits as physiognomy, body markings, skin colour, faith, humour, kinship patterns, accent, language, posture, etiquette, dress and diet.

[16] after Eriksen (2002), p.56

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