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Article · September 2018

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Ethnicity in Anthropology

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Ethnicity, commonly understood to be a form of group identity based on shared cultural traits, emerged as a central problem for sociocultural anthropology in the 1960s. The publication of Clifford Geertz's "The Integrative Revolution" (Geertz 1963) and Fredrick Barth's *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Barth 1969) sparked a foundational debate in anthropology between *primordial* and *situational* theories of ethnicity. Primordial theories emphasized the continued significance of premodern cultural traits to explain group attachment to their ethnic identity in contrast to situational theories that viewed ethnicity as relational and dynamic, a consequence of social interaction between groups. This debate continues to inform subsequent anthropological studies of ethnicity even as they carve out new theoretical terrain. The largely irresolvable debate persists because each resonates at different registers. The primordialists point to the explosion of ethnic sentiments and movements in the contemporary world as evidence to support their claim that ethnic identity is derived from affective ties that stem from the facts of birth or the givens of blood, race, language, and custom. The situationalists, on the other hand, point to the emergence of new ethnic groups demanding recognition and the incidence of individuals purposefully changing identities to suit their interests as evidence in support of their claim that ethnic identity is based on instrumental manipulation of culture, motivated by collective political and economic interests. While the two perspectives are not necessarily antithetical, they diverge significantly in their theorizing of culture in relation to society and the extent of individual agency in cultural continuity and change. There is also disagreement regarding the ontology of ethnicity, with primordialists leaning toward *essentialist* conceptualizations that naturalize ethnicity while situationalists foreground its provisional and contingent character.

The voluminous anthropological literature that has since emerged on the subject emphasizes a range of contexts in which to locate and theorize ethnic identity. Significant contributions include theories that situate ethnicity in relation to modernity, nation-states, politics of recognition, neoliberal regimes, globalization and its attendant patterns of consumption, and class and global inequalities. Studies foregrounding contexts, in turn, point to the centrality of history—specifically colonial and postcolonial histories. Historically oriented postcolonial theorists argue that the racial and cultural classification of humans has been integral to the exercise of power by colonizers and postcolonial elites, by naturalizing difference in hierarchical terms. Widening the frame contextually and historically beyond the immediate ethnic unit thus called on anthropologists to clarify the relation between ethnicity and other forms of organizing human

The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology. Edited by Hilary Callan.

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DOI: 10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea1948

difference, such as *race*, *minority*, *indigeneity*, and *nationality*. While these historical theories take more than one form, they generally tend to shy away from primordial explanations, opting for more dynamic analyses of the salience of ethnicity in factors external to the culture traits defining the ethnic unit. However, theories that emphasize the political, ideological, and strategic attributes of ethnicity fail to adequately account for the emotive dimension of ethnicity that drives people to act in ways that defy monocausal economic or political explanations. Primordial accounts, on the other hand, emphasize the emotive by locating ethnic attachments in the givens of birth, understood as nonnegotiable affinities with capacity to command loyalties irreducible to instrumental manipulation. Primordial perspectives complement common or lay understandings of ethnicity, which ascribe legitimacy to group identity on the basis of shared cultural origin, and locate the power of coercive, nonreducible bonds in such origins.

How anthropology came to study ethnicity and the way the discipline formulated the topic for ensuing debates were intimately connected to the history of the discipline. The demarcation of anthropological knowledge into world areas also informed debates where dominant regional concepts such as *tribe*, *plural society*, or *Creole society* functioned as gatekeeping concepts for Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean, respectively.

Disciplinary antecedents

Anthropology, along with other modern disciplines that emerged in nineteenth-century Europe, had to purposefully define areas of knowledge expertise by claiming authority over a subject, *cultures of the non-West*, through its discipline-specific method, *fieldwork*, and intellectual orientation, *holism*. Most other major disciplines, such as sociology, political economy, history, philosophy, and religion, focused on societies in the West, which were defined as complex and therefore warranting specialized knowledge to unpack facets of their complexity. As a result of this division of knowledge, anthropology inherited the rest of the world and this inheritance, in turn, brought with it certain assumptions about culture, society, and the native subject—the *other*—which profoundly shaped the way anthropology came to study ethnicity in the 1960s.

Prior to the 1960s, sociocultural anthropologists, with a few exceptions, focused on “traditional societies” that were assumed to be structurally simple and culturally homogeneous. Such societies, in contrast to “complex societies,” could be studied in their entirety as discrete wholes. These early anthropologists assumed that one society coincided with one culture and that members of that society shared the corresponding culture. The interchangeability of the social and cultural unit was further validated by representations of traditional societies as discrete units, isolated from outside influences. Anthropological studies of tribes in Africa, undertaken by British social anthropologists of the structural–functional school, epitomized this imputed coincidence of tribal identity, culture, and social and political organization, which Richard Fardon aptly describes as the “structural/functional heritage of coincidence of boundary phenomena” (Fardon 1987). Structural functionalists such as A. R. Radcliffe-Brown viewed society as a living organism and they used the concepts of structure and function to understand how a society worked. Structure was defined as the social relations linking parts of a system

and the relationship of these parts to each other in the maintenance and reproduction of the system in equilibrium; and function was defined as the contribution of the different parts of the system to the whole as well as their operation in the maintenance of the system. Structural–functionalist framing of “simple societies” treated each society as sociocultural wholes, made up of distinct but related institutions that operated in concert to satisfy the needs of the society to maintain it in equilibrium. The *unit of study*, the tribe, conceived as discrete and bounded, was conveniently collapsed to corollary units of the social, cultural, and the political. Models of society based on tribes created an appropriate field—a range of discrete, distinct, and self-sufficient tribal units that facilitated comparative study, a methodology that lent legitimacy to anthropology as a science. Models of bounded societies and their corollary cultures rendered the question of cultural difference a foundational criterion for any discourse on ethnicity peripheral to the discipline.

In contrast, major sociologists of the nineteenth century (Simmel 1908; Weber [1922] 1978) addressed ethnicity, curious to understand the persistence of traditional attachments in the face of rapid industrialization and modernization driving Western societies. Macrosociological analyses of modern society accounted for this seeming anachronism by positing a transition from communal societies, organized around traditional bonds such as kinship and religion, to modern, cosmopolitan, industrial societies governed by state bureaucracy and principles of rationality and efficiency. In the post-World War II period, this distinction was used by social scientists to explain the disenchantment and increased alienation characteristic of modern societies as a consequence of the erosion of traditional values and attachments triggered by rapid industrialization. Not all shared the assumption of an inevitable breakdown of primary social bonds. Political scientist Harold Isaacs’s much-cited *Idols of the Tribe* (Isaacs 1974) singled out the particular appeal of primordial attachments for modern society. Isaacs argued that primordial identities like ethnicity imbued an aura of descent which created a space of unquestioned belonging for people to retreat into from an increasingly alienating world.

In anthropology, the undisputed authority for the primordial argument remains Clifford Geertz’s seminal essay written in 1963, “The Integrative Revolution.” Geertz drew attention to the vitality of primordial sentiments unleashed by processes of decolonization in settings befitting the discipline—those of the non-West. The emerging new states of the former colonized world that captured Geertz’s interest, however, were anything but simple as the explosion of ethnic sentiments he sought to explain made evident. This does not imply an endorsement of earlier anthropological formulations of simple societies, but rather that the historical forces propelling new states magnified the complexities of cultural difference. Former native subjects of anthropology, and former colonized subjects of Europe, were now citizens of emerging postcolonial nations and they were killing, dying, crossing borders, and demanding recognition on the basis of cultural differences. Historical shifts marked by the strident pronouncement of cultural difference on the political stage, along with paradigm shifts, positioned ethnicity as a legitimate and urgent topic for anthropology.

Anthropology claims ethnicity

Significant changes in the global order, marked by the emergence of new states and critiques of colonialism and its classificatory systems such as primitive society, race, and tribe, shattered the one-society/one-culture model and forced a shift in paradigm from tribe to ethnicity. These shifts, which pushed ethnicity to the forefront, were also defining moments for the discipline as a whole. They called for a critical reevaluation of anthropology's conventional units of analysis and method. They also tested the limits of anthropology's badge of distinction as a discipline located at the intersection of the social sciences and the humanities.

Edmund Leach's ethnography, entitled *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (Leach 1954), was pivotal in anticipating such shifts. Schooled in structural functionalism, Leach was both sympathetic to and critical of its conventions. His critique of the one-society/one-culture model opened conceptual terrain on three fronts, which radically reoriented the study of ethnicity. They include: first, the observation that people change their identity categories according to their interests; second, that peoples' categories do not necessarily conform to observers' criteria; and, third, that the boundary, instead of a culture group, constituted the significant unit of analysis. The geographical site of Leach's research, the Kachin Hills area, considerably informed his analysis. The people Leach encountered were broadly categorized as Kachin and Shan. Kachin comprised a diverse array of hill peoples with distinct languages, territories, and political systems that melded into each other. Shan were hierarchically organized, Buddhist, wet rice cultivators. Leach's rich and novel theoretical insights were generated from the misleadingly simple observation that the people of the Kachin Hills area would not keep within the bounds of the respective categories. The tendency of Shan to assimilate Kachin, Leach noted, opened a dynamic space for identity manipulation of the two categories when it suited individual or group interests. As such, Leach concluded that members of a social group do not necessarily share a set of distinctive cultural traits and that social units are produced by *subjective* processes of categorical ascription. His major intervention was to suggest that difference in culture does not necessarily imply difference in social systems. He noted that in geographic areas lacking natural frontiers people in adjacent areas are likely to maintain relations with one another irrespective of cultural differences and they, therefore, belong to a single social system. Leach exposed the limits of reigning paradigms by posing a pointed question: "But, it may be asked, if social structures are expressed through cultural symbols, how can the structural relations between groups of different culture be expressed at all? My answer to this is that the *maintenance and insistence upon cultural difference can itself become a ritual action expressive of social relations*" (Leach 1954, 17; emphasis added).

While Leach did not use the term "ethnicity," his acute observation that cultural differences are both a product and determinant of social organization captured the fundamental dynamic that Barth later theorized as the defining feature of ethnicity, the boundary. By shifting the unit of analysis from the group to the boundary, or from

culture content to cultural significations marking relations between groups, Leach radically reformulated the relation between culture and society. Cultural differences were now integral to, and indicative of, social relations in a society.

The claim that a society can encompass heterogeneous cultural units was hardly new, having occupied sociologists of an earlier era. Indeed, it might even be considered trivial from the perspective of today's interconnected world. Yet, as a latecomer, the route by which anthropology came to study ethnicity revealed a complexity about the origins and salience of ethnicity that was bypassed in most other disciplines and masked in popular understandings of ethnicity. Situating ethnicity at the site of interaction undermined popular and academic understandings of ethnicity as a natural, universal, and perennial group identity based on shared ancestral culture. It also challenged unidirectional social-scientific (namely, sociology's and political science's) models of assimilation and acculturation that predicted the flattening of differences as societies increasingly came into contact. Most importantly, by linking the resilience of the boundary to individual crossings of the boundary, Leach underscored people's *agency* as driving ethnicity.

Leach's observation that native categories do not necessarily conform to observers' criteria provoked a debate in anthropology as to whether analytical units should be based on observers' (*objective*) criteria or indigenous (*subjective*) criteria, with the objective position aligning with primordial and the subjective with situational explanations of ethnicity. The debate reached its apogee in the exchange between Michael Moerman and Raoul Naroll. Naroll (1964) delineated six criteria for determining, objectively, the existence of an ethnic group. They consisted of the distribution of particular traits, territorial contiguity, political organization, language, ecological adjustment, and local community structure. Moerman's (1965) response, from a subjective perspective, argued instead for the relevance of indigenous or native categories even when they went against observers' criteria. This debate over ethnicity continues today, transformed and amplified, in the challenge the two perspectives pose for broader knowledge claims of the discipline. Contemporary anthropological debates over epistemology and ontology can be considered variants of this earlier deliberation about which knowledge should be privileged in relation to reality and truth claims—the knowledge of the people anthropologists study or the analysis of the anthropologist.

Within studies of ethnicity, the subjectivist perspective came to dominate anthropology with the publication of Fredrik Barth's introduction to his edited volume *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), which catapulted ethnicity into the forefront of anthropological inquiry. Barth developed many of Leach's cardinal insights, making the boundary, instead of culture content, the primary determinant of ethnicity. The essays in the volume are couched as empirical investigations into the character of the boundary, illustrating the persistence of boundaries despite a flow of persons across them. On the basis of this evidence, Barth concludes that ethnic distinction signified in the boundary is expressive of social interactions of the wider social system. He methodically undermines the objectivist perspective by arguing that the sharing of cultural traits is not a determinant but a consequence of ethnic group organization. Categories of ascription or identification that organize interaction, Barth concludes, are those defined by and relevant to the people as opposed to externally imposed categories based on trait inventories. The focus on boundaries that bear witness to

frequent crossings revealed the agency people exercised and the interests driving their choices. Barth's *situational* model came to be associated with later terminologies and theories such as *instrumentalism* and *constructivism* that emphasized agency and the provisional and contingent nature of social life. Likewise, primordial models too came to be associated with terms signifying universal and natural forms, such as essentialist and perennial identities that significantly shape social life.

Situating ethnicity

Historical transformations accompanying decolonization and the rise of Third World movements that questioned the legitimacy of global hierarchies also brought into view the workings of power. Anthropology's scrutiny of power attended to its complexity by situating the local micro field within the macro, national, and global fields and by theorizing power relationally. This intellectual orientation toward power, expressed in disciplinary parlance as the *structure/agency* problem, informed anthropological theorizing on a range of topics, including ethnicity. Scholars of ethnicity found Barth's situational model compelling, in large part because of his emphasis on individuals and their ability to choose identities. However, even those anthropologists who tended to agree with Barth pointed to a major shortcoming in his theory of ethnicity—that not everyone has the capacity to label themselves or others. Barth did acknowledge inequalities and power in some cases but, as variants, they did not inform his general theory. Structural inequalities of the world system, the emergence of new states and a new type of citizen (former colonized subjects glossed over as natives), large-scale movements of formerly colonized groups to the metropole, the neoliberal era and its celebration of cultural diversity and the concomitant rise of identity politics all called for a theoretical recalibration of agency, which accounted for systemic inequalities stemming from the unequal distribution of power. Addressing power disparities of these larger transformations, in turn, begged the question as to why identities based on *cultural difference* acquired urgency over other formations.

Geertz, in his early essay, provides an intriguing response. According to Geertz, the force of ethnic identities trump all others such as class, gender, or occupation because these are the only identities that threaten the nation itself—they demand not the head of Nehru or Sukarno but that of mother India or Indonesia. Indeed, while anthropologists' call to address and theorize power disparities that inform ethnicity vary significantly, the uniting factor is their engagement with the nation as the formative context for theorizing ethnicity. While scholars across disciplines are inclined to agree on the modernity of nationalism and nation-states, they remain divided on the modernity of ethnicity. Theories of ethnicity that underscore its premodern attributes fall into two camps. Anthony Smith's (1986) position that modern nations originated on the basis of premodern, culturally homogeneous ethnic groups, or *ethnie*, is representative of theories that account for the emotive aspect of nationalism, a modern political sensibility, in primordial and perennial attachments of ethnicity. In this view, premodern *ethnie* develop into modern nations. A contrasting perspective posits an antagonistic relation between ethnicity and nation. In this view, premodern attachments of ethnicity retard

the development of civil attachments necessary for realizing the full democratic potential of modern nations. Nations that continue to be riven by ethnic antagonisms, invariably characterizing Eastern European and postcolonial societies, are counterpoised to successful Western European nations, where primordial attachments have been transcended and supplanted by modern civic attachments of citizenship.

The general consensus in anthropology, however, is that ethnicity and nation are both modern phenomena, which announce their significance in premodern terms of ancestral origin. Despite their similarities, the common features displayed by various ethnic groups do not evidence an unfolding ethnic essence but, rather, is a result of partaking in a common political discursive field anchored in the principle of nationalism. The idea that it is a natural and universal right of each cultural group to possess their own state was elevated to a moral imperative during the consolidation of European nations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The national principle, once established, set the rules of the game for the rest. Aspirations for statehood and sovereignty became firmly tethered to proving authenticity through cultural difference. Framed this way, all ethnic groups, marked as they are by cultural difference in relation to national culture, harbor the potential to implode the nations they live within. The break-ups of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia bear out this irridentist logic. The dismal fate of Tamils in Sri Lanka or Uighurs in China, on the other hand, point to extreme measures required to arrest the maturation of this irridentist logic in the name of the nation.

Not all ethnic groups, however, are destined toward their own nationhood or even desire it. For the most part, nations constitute the overall system of social stratification, within which ethnic groups live and function. The precise relationship between ethnic groups and nation-states becomes apparent in the articulation of the principle of cultural homogeneity. In contrast to theories that view ethnicity as a precursor to nations, anthropologist Brackette Williams (1989) illustrates how ideological and material imperatives driving nation building give rise to the significance of ethnicity. For Williams, nations and ethnicities are contemporaries, mutually informing each other as they are brought into being. Williams anchors the process by which certain groups come to embody the nation in the principle of cultural homogeneity. It is in the pursuit of this putative homogeneity, founded on the symbolics of blood, that the dominant race and class come to establish a metonymic relation to the nation, relegating other groups as peripheral to the national symbolic core. These *others*, marked as *ethnics*, are positioned at a considerable material and ideological disadvantage vis-à-vis the nation-state in that while they possess the right to make claims on the state (as political citizens) their right to represent the nation is severely restricted by their marked status. Williams's theorization radically reformulates the relation of ethnicity and nation by suggesting that ethnicity, far from being precursor or impediment to nations, is in fact integral to the consolidation of nations. The principal means through which the dominant race and class secures ideological and material privilege is by fixing the appropriate cultural coordinates of civil society that establish their proximity to the nation while marking others as more distant and therefore less deserving of the nation's patrimony.

Ethnicity and globalization

The 1990s, marked by extraordinary changes, provoked heated debate over the viability of nations and ethnicities, both within and outside anthropology. The 1990s, heralding the end of the Cold War, was the period of globalization, marked by an intensification of flows of people, goods, capital, and information across national boundaries, of neoliberal economies, and new aesthetic sensibilities labeled “postmodern.” These historic shifts, and in particular those associated with global flows that transgressed national boundaries, prompted some anthropologists to reevaluate the significance of the nation-state, which they found to be anachronistic in the era of globalization. Accordingly, their analyses pointed to the declining relevance of nation-states and their legitimating principle of cultural homogeneity. Indeed, cultural difference emerged as the badge of distinction in the 1990s as democratic nations declared an end to assimilationist policies in their celebration of cultural diversity. The embrace of cultural difference became the new moral imperative. Ethnicity, set against a withering cultural homogeneity, acquired new significance and animated anthropological inquiry in a number of important directions.

The elevation of cultural difference, in part, had to do with early theoretical pronouncements that globalization would result in a flattening of differences. The world, instead of nations, comprised the theater for cultural homogeneity in the new global order. However, standardization of social, political, and economic institutions globally seemed not to thwart but add vigor to expressions of cultural difference. To understand the new significance attached to cultural difference, anthropologists have focused on neoliberal economic policies, and also theoretical conversations in the humanities, which spearheaded analysis of the postmodern condition. Analyses of postmodernity that emphasized attributes of fragmentation, flexibility, and resistance to metanarratives were adopted in varying degrees by anthropologists to theorize the new significance attached to, and people’s performances of, cultural difference. Ethnicity, in this post-nation context, acquired urgency as the national boundary became eclipsed by identities that extended beyond (macro) and below (micro) nation-states. The dramatic rise of ethnic and indigenous groups across the world claiming rights on the basis of their cultural difference, on the one hand, and the formation of the European Union, on the other, evidence these new developments.

The issue of cultural difference, signified by ethnicity in an earlier moment, was now reconceptualized in light of these larger historical transformations. A spate of terms was borrowed and coined to theorize this emergent state of cultural difference, such as hybridity, creolization, and *mestizaje*, and their corresponding identities, such as post-colonial, cosmopolitan, and diasporic. In their pursuit of new theoretical tools, scholars turned to geographical areas and subjects that were formerly marginalized by disciplines on the basis that they defied conventional categories of analysis. For example, the defining category for the Caribbean, Creole, which was long ignored as an exception because the term signified cultures and identities that emerge through mixing, became a central concept to theorize cultural dynamics of the world (Hannerz 1987).

Not all anthropologists assumed the death of nation-states and ideologies of homogeneity. Indeed, nation-states have been remarkably supple in adapting to their

new conditions. While many nation-states have abandoned overt nationalist calls for homogeneity (assimilation) in their embrace of multiculturalism, anthropologists caution against what they see as facile gestures. Policies celebrating cultural difference can obscure operations of power that severely disadvantage groups who are marked by cultural difference. Inclusion of ethnic and minority cultures in a nation's symbolic pantheon does not translate into economic and political equivalence. The celebration of African American culture in the United States and Afro-Brazilian culture in Brazil is illustrative of instances when a marginalized group's culture acquires national stature even as the group continues to be severely disadvantaged socioeconomically and politically.

Given the contemporary moment when identities based on cultural difference no longer seem to pose a threat and are instead embraced by the nation, anthropologists have turned their attention to the link between neoliberal economic directives and political platforms and how these in turn shape expressions of cultural difference. A crucial line of inquiry within this general trend is seen in the analyses of the heritage industry. Ethnicities have become immensely marketable and profitable not only for nations invested in the global marketing of tradition but also for ethnic groups (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). The marketing of tradition resurrects a vexing issue for anthropologists regarding cultural authenticity.

Barth's situational theory of ethnicity indirectly raised the issue of cultural authenticity when he emphasized the tendency of individuals to manipulate cultural claims on the basis of their interests. Indeed, anthropologists in general have adopted a view of culture that allows for considerable agency in effecting change in culture. Interestingly, when it comes to the question of identity, however, the recognition of cultural manipulation makes the cultural identity in question vulnerable to accusations of inauthenticity. The publication of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *Invention of Tradition* (1983), which powerfully illustrated the very recent origins of cherished traditions linked to distant pasts, opened all identities claiming cultural continuity to theoretical scrutiny and charges of inauthenticity. The voluminous anthropological literature on nationalism adopts this *constructivist* perspective in its analyses of culture in nation building. These studies suggest that identities based on culture are deliberate creations to forward group interests. Why *recognition* of cultural manipulation necessarily renders such expressions inauthentic remains unsettled in the discipline. Anthropologists, especially those working with indigenous groups, point to the critical political stakes in this theoretical position. The very moment when formerly subjugated people seem finally empowered—on the basis of their distinct identities—to make claims on the state, anthropological theories stressing the provisional and constructed aspects of culture threaten the legitimacy of such claims.

In the present global moment when human differences based on culture seem to be validated on all fronts, ethnicity is one among several terms used to signify such differences. The celebratory multicultural mosaic, which flattens identities such as race, tribe, or ethnicity as equivalents, is highly problematic because terminological shifts do not necessarily reflect structural ones. The political significance of the distinction between race and ethnicity in the United States and national policies of multiculturalism demonstrate the importance of recognizing such distinctions.

The politics of terminology

Some terminological shifts tend to be more problematic than others for anthropology. While the merits of the earlier shift from tribe to ethnicity remain unquestioned, US anthropologists bemoan a more recent shift from race to ethnicity. The terms race and ethnicity, anchored in biology and culture respectively, rarely manifest with clear distinction or consistency in any one context. In the United States, ethnicity has historically signified cultural distinctions of European immigrants while race was reserved for enslaved Africans and other dominated groups who were distinguished on the basis of phenotype. When ideologies of race came under increasing scrutiny as a colonial system of organizing human difference for purposes of exploitation, and its naturalizing discourse discredited, anthropologists began employing ethnicity. The positive connotations of ethnicity allowed anthropologists at least a rhetorical distance between their analyses and common discourses on race. Anthropologists working in the United States, however, persuasively argue against collapsing race and ethnicity because it grossly misrepresents the deep inequalities that define the life of those labeled as minorities or races. Irrespective of the academic debate over the reality of race, people whose lives continue to be defined by race need little convincing of the effects of race. Constructed categories can and do have real effects. In the United States, ethnicity connotes a privileged position because ethnics have the appropriate ancestry to represent the nation. The privilege is evidenced in the flexibility white Americans are able to exercise. They can choose to be invisible in some contexts and ethnic in others. Races or minorities, on the other hand, have little or no choice to opt out of the categories they are classified under since they carry the badge of difference on their marked bodies. In the context of this immigrant society, the flexibility, agency, and advantages of manipulating identity are applicable to some but not all groups. Ethnic choices are severely limited for those minority groups who never had the option to be immigrants, namely, African Americans and Native Americans. The enduring structural inequalities between ethnics and races in the United States is instructive of how liberal multiculturalism can reinforce inequalities.

The relation of ethnicity to multiculturalism was first articulated in former settler colonies, which like America fashioned their national identity around immigrants. Multiculturalism as a formal policy emerged first in Canada (in 1971) and then Australia (1973) primarily as a strategy for ensuring national cohesion by incorporating minority and immigrant groups as full participating members of society without risk of losing their cultural distinctiveness. Despite the egalitarian gesture of multiculturalism, those critical of such policies, including anthropologists, foreground the inequalities masked by a term that was formulated to describe, and manage, “new” kinds of diversity—coined as the Third Worlding of the First World—beginning in the 1970s. As such, the ethnicities of immigrants that formed the symbolic core of the respective nations are not marked and celebrated as a part of the multicultural spectrum. Instead, they form the invisible backdrop against which the new visible ethnics are measured and managed. Anthropologists have been particularly critical of multiculturalism because the term evokes assumptions about culture and ethnicity that anthropology

had effectively critiqued beginning with Leach; namely, essentialist and bounded conceptions of culture as determinants of group dispositions and behavior. This asymmetry, ironically, celebrates the diversity of those who also happen to be most subordinate in multicultural societies. Anthropologists working on indigenous groups provide sharp critiques of the politics of recognition. To win recognition, and thereby qualify for state resources, multicultural subjects are forced to perform “cultural traditions,” which are not only inauthentic in relation to their contemporary lives but also consolidates their subordinate position as permanent recipients of the state’s largess. The promised equivalence of multiculturalism remains largely symbolic and rarely translates into real economic and political empowerment for those ethnic groups whose national belonging is contingent on living up to impossible standards of cultural authenticity demanded of them.

SEE ALSO: Africa, Language Research in; Ardener, E. W. (1927–87); Barth, Fredrik (1928–2016); Bartolomé, Leopoldo José (1942–2013); Cardoso de Oliveira, Roberto (1928–2006); Citizenship; Class and Identity; Colonialism and the Museum; Conflict and Security; Consumption; Descent; Diaspora; Essentialism; Ethnicity, Multiculturalism, and Transnationalism; Ethnoeconomics; Gender, Nationalism, and Ethnicity; Genocide; Globalization; Identity in Anthropology; Immigration; Indonesia, Anthropology in; Interculturality; Interethnic Friction; Intergroup Conflict; Language and Identity; Modernity; Multiculturalism; Nationalism; Neoliberalism; Norway, Anthropology in; Poland, Anthropology in; Politics of Recognition; Social and Cultural Anthropology; Transnationalism; Violence, Structural and Interpersonal; Violence and Warfare

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