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Ethnos: Descent and Culture Communities

Shared references

Ethnic group, race and nation are three concepts sharing a single centre – or ‘core’ – with some notable and important differences at the periphery. Common to all is an idea of descent or ancestry and very closely implicated in all three we find ideas about culture. These ideas about culture will typically include myths about the past, beliefs about ‘the kind of people we are’, and the idea that ‘culture’ defines a group in that it may be constituted by language, dress and custom. In this sense they may all be described as ‘descent and culture communities’. Ethnic group, race and nation are all viewed, by themselves or by observers, as peoples who have or lay claim to shared antecedents. This idea of shared ancestry may not be as precise as the genealogies of extended families – though how can we tell how many imprecisions are concealed in family trees? – but there is nonetheless a repeating theme of ‘people coming from the same stock’. In English this word ‘stock’ is mostly used with reference to animals so in its use with reference to people it has a strong biological sense, a strong sense of genealogy and type. This sense of shared ancestry can certainly be found in dictionary definitions (below from the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993) of all three of these terms:

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Race: a group of persons (animals or plants) connected by *common descent* or origin; a tribe, **nation**, or people regarded as of common stock. [*my emphasis*]

Nation: an extensive aggregate of persons, so closely associated with each other by *common descent*, language or history as to form a distinct race of people, usually organised as a separate political state and occupying a definite territory. [*my emphasis*]

Ethnic: (an adjective) pertaining to nations not Christian; pertaining to a **race or nation**; having common racial, cultural, religious or linguistic characteristics especially designating a racial or other group within a larger system. [*my emphasis*]

Ethnic, the only adjective, refers to the previous two by listing race and nation and ‘common racial, cultural, religious or linguistic characteristics’. The definition of nation refers to common descent and a distinct race of people. And that of race refers to common descent and tribe, nation or people. Clearly all three occupy very much the same meaning territory; not precisely the same but so close as to make it impossible to consider them separately.

Much of the sociological literature on these terms has been concerned to distinguish them by means of separation, that is by distinguishing them in such a way that one makes a clean break from the other. It is far better to start by saying that all occupy the same terrain. Having said this, the next step is to show the respects in which, as we move from the core outwards, they diverge. What they all convey is a sense of a people. This is precisely the meaning of the term in which ‘ethnic’ has its origins: the classical Greek word *ethnos*. The word has preserved this meaning in modern Greek covering the English sense of both nation and ethnic group (Triandafyllidou et al. 1997).

Liddell and Scott’s *Greek–English Lexicon* (1897), the authoritative source on classical Greek usages, cites a number of meanings which are shifts in emphasis in different contexts and at different periods of ancient Greek history. They are:

Ethnos: Number of people living together, body of men; particular tribes; of animals, flocks; (after Homer) nation, people; (later)

foreign, barbarous nations; non-Athenians, (biblical Greek) non-Jews, Gentiles, class of men, caste, tribe.

The adjectival form *ethnikos* has two principal meanings: national and foreign.

So, the Greek *ethnos* has the meanings which are attached to the modern English usage of 'nation', as well as terms such as 'peoples', especially foreign peoples, or tribes and castes, plus the adjectival national and foreign. For tribe we might now read 'ethnic group'. We could have added race in its pre-nineteenth-century forms when it had similar connotations of nations and peoples, and even classes. It was the rise of biological and anthropological science in the nineteenth century which gave to 'race' its special meaning of grand divisions of humankind.

The word 'ethnic' found its way into English (after a number of early spellings such as 'aethnycke') and appears to have long had the sense of 'foreign' and of being distinguished from Jewish (i.e. Gentile) and distinguished from Jewish *and* Gentile (i.e. heathen). In fact the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (1993) states that 'ethnic' derives from the Greek *ethnikos*, 'heathen', citing this heathen sense despite the fact that the Greek adjective also clearly had the more neutral sense 'national'. Once 'ethnic' or equivalent established itself in English, with the first citation from a written work of 1473, it regularly has the meaning of 'heathen and foreign'. The *Oxford Dictionary* then cites a second set of meanings, mostly dating from the nineteenth century when it becomes generalized, losing the special 'heathen' sense. Thus we have this definition: 'ethnic', *pertaining to race, common racial or cultural character*. By 1935 they are citing Huxley and Haddon (of which more later) and their famous argument for the abandonment of the term 'race' and its replacement by 'ethnic'. The *Oxford Dictionary* also cites the term in its combination with (ethnic) minority group and as a *noun* meaning one who is not a Christian or Jew. In both the USA and Britain the noun form 'ethnics' is used to mean something other than majority.

Before leaving the Greek dictionary we should note three other ancient Greek terms which have a meaning approximating to people or 'class' of people. One is *phylon* for which

Liddell and Scott give the meaning 'race, tribe or class', followed by a second meaning 'nation'. *Phylon* too has a meaning as a class within the animal kingdom. *Genos* is defined as 'race, stock or kin'. This term has a closer link to the notion of family, offspring and descent. But it too can mean tribe 'as a sub-division' of *ethnos* and can mean classes in the animal kingdom. All these words – *ethnos*, *phylon* and *genos* – cover shared meanings of people, tribe, nation and class, with shades of difference between them. The word for people in Greek which moves away from all these three but nonetheless could be translated as 'people' is *demos*. It is, in Liddell and Scott, given a first meaning of district, country, land, but subsequently 'the people, the inhabitants' of a district or land. It has two further meanings. One is its meaning as 'common people' as against aristocracy, the people of 'the country' by contrast with the elite people of the city. The other is 'in a political sense' the 'sovereign people, the free citizens', this being the sense which modern English users know in the word 'democracy'.

Stock, type, people, breed

Four things are of special interest in this examination of one language (Greek), a language which happens also to be the source of a good deal of modern terminology. *First* is that all these terms mean something like 'people' and all except *genos* were used in ways which today might be translated as nation. *Genos's* meaning as specific descent group and sub-group being less than a nation is fairly clear. However, *genos* and the Latin equivalent *genus* have provided the English 'genus' which has been used in biological sciences to mean 'stock, race, kind'. *Second*, all of them, bar *demos*, could have the meaning of a 'class' of animals or people; in the animal and plant kingdom, modern biology has adopted *phylon* and *genos*, neither of which, in common usage, has given us words meaning anything like people or nation. *Genos*, though, appears in 'genocide', 'the deliberate extermination of an ethnic or national group'. *Third* an idea of cultural difference is conveyed by the way in which these words for

people, and particularly *ethnos*, were used to mean *other* peoples, who spoke other languages, lived in different countries, and in a later context, were not Jews, or were neither Jews nor Christians. *Fourth*, the words make distinctions which had significance within the societies and periods from which they emanate. The Greeks in general and the Athenians in particular expressed this strong sense of difference between themselves and other peoples. Later, distinctions of Jew, Gentile or Christian and others became important. And in the word *demos* for people, the distinction between citizens (free) and unfree persons was the important one.

Nation

The word 'nation' came into English via French from the Latin root *natio* which has provided the word for nation in virtually all Romance languages. It too has an original meaning of a 'breed' or 'stock' of people who share a common descent or were regarded as so doing. The fact that it has something to do with descent is betrayed by the word *natio*'s own root in the verb *nasci* 'to be born'. The *Oxford Dictionary* gives references to usages of 'nation' as early as 1300. The idea of common descent and the idea of people of a territory were both present. Its earliest uses were not solely – as some have implied – in the context of student groups (*nationes*) in medieval universities, identified by country of origin (cf. Greenfeld 1992). The Latin *natio* is clearly quite close in meaning to the Greek *ethnos*. It even shares the biblical sense of *ethnos*; the *Oxford Dictionary* cites English usage of 'nations' meaning 'heathen nations' in biblical use as early as 1340.

The first part of the *Oxford Dictionary* section on 'nation' essays a general definition that we cited earlier:

An extensive aggregate of persons, so closely associated with each other by common descent, language or history as to form a distinct race of people, usually organised as a separate political state and occupying a definite territory.

The source goes on to say that early uses showed more of 'the racial idea' and later uses, the political. Early (1300–86) references described Englishmen ('Ingles man') as a nation. And the *Dictionary* cites Fortescue in 1460 referring to the King being compelled to make his armies of 'straungers' such as 'Scottes, Spanyardes . . . and of other nacions'. In a history of Carolina in Colonial America (1709) the writer says that 'two nations of Indians here in Carolina were at war'. But 'nation' has also had the meaning of a class of persons, or even animals. A 1390 cited work refers to lovers, or gentle people, as a nation ('Among the gentil nacion love is an occupacion') and similarly describes schoolboys as a nation in late seventeenth-century usage. An early eighteenth-century usage refers to animals as 'the nations of the field and wood'.

Race

Finally of this trio we come to the word 'race', again a word which appears in most Romance languages and is cited as derived from the French *race* and the earlier French *rasse*, matched by the Italian *razza* and Portuguese *raça* (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1993). Its earliest uses in the sixteenth century have a sense of 'breeding', persons of the same family or bred from the same ancestors and, like many of the other words we have traced, it could be applied to animals as well as humans. In 1600 it was used meaning 'a nation or tribe of people regarded as of common stock' and there are indications that it was used to mean simply a people of a land or even just a class of people, as in 'a race of heroes'. It was not until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that it began to acquire the meaning of 'one of the great subdivisions of mankind'. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century it had become the key term in a whole science of classifying the divisions of humankind into physically defined races which were also widely believed to be the basis of differences in ability and temperament in a global racial hierarchy (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Banton 1987; Fenton 1999). After challenges to this race science in the early part of the twentieth century, by the 1950s the term 'race'

was in retreat. The 1986 *Oxford Reference Dictionary* states that the notion of 'race as a rigid classificatory system or system of genetics has largely been abandoned'.

Looked at etymologically and historically the usages of these three terms 'ethnic', 'nation' and 'race' support the suggestion that all three have a great deal of common ground. Contained in their past and present usages are ideas of common descent, a common belief in shared descent, ideas of class or type, and about the people of a place, country, kingdom or other form of state. Closely associated or implicated in these terms – and especially in *ethnos* and ethnic – are notions of cultural character, language, and difference, and foreignness. It is remarkable to consider that race, nation and ethnic group are frequently considered to be quite different topics: race and racism, nation and nationalism, and ethnic groups and ethnicity. One recent publication dealing with 'racism' states that it does not 'deal with "ethnicity"', a topic covered by a different volume' (Bulmer and Solomos 2000).

The demise of race

We have referred to the decline of the term 'race' and this is certainly true by contrast with what may be regarded as the high point of racial terminology and race-thinking – somewhere in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth. The Nazi regime in Germany, through to the end of the Second World War in 1945, adopted race science as the guide to its genocidal politics, although academic and scientific attacks on race-thinking had already begun. Race-thinking had four main characteristics: *first*, that it was possible to classify the whole of humankind into a relatively small number of races defined primarily by physical and visible difference; *second*, that races so defined shared not just appearance type but also temperament, ability and moral qualities; *third*, that there was something that could be called 'racial inheritance', whereby the physical and moral qualities of the race were preserved through racial descent; and *fourth*, that the races of the world

were hierarchically ordered with something referred to as the White race, the Caucasian race or sub-divisions of these (Nordic, Anglo-Saxon) being superior to all others.

All four of these 'propositions' are now either rejected or not regarded as having any social scientific value. Although physical characteristics (such as skin colour and eye and hair formation) are clustered in particular populations, the attempt to arrive at final classifications of races has largely been abandoned. This is both because we know that there is significant variation within populations referred to as 'races' and because of the sheer difficulty of determining boundaries between races, not least because of the movement and mingling of populations. It is, however, the second and third propositions that are most roundly rejected – the idea that racial difference 'predicts' social and moral qualities. There never was anything but speculative support for such arguments and anthropology and sociology now adopt the contrary argument – that social and cultural qualities are socially and culturally transmitted. All these first three taken together were components of the fourth proposition, the equally discredited white supremacist line of argument. (Students who wish to follow some of the points raised here should consult Malik 1996; Barzun 1965; Banton 1977; Jacobson 2001.) It is also important to understand that this basic set of propositions about races, and the very idea that racial difference was so important, made other subsidiary propositions possible. Most significantly the belief among 'white' Western populations in the superiority of the Caucasian race was important in supporting two positions: that white peoples had some historic destiny to rule over or even supersede and eliminate lower races, and that race mixing was dangerous.

Beware: culture and ethnicity are not the same

We have referred to 'descent and culture' as common points of reference, but they are not of equal weight. Descent, the belief in common descent, and the importance attached to common descent are unmistakably components of race,

nation and ethnicity. Culture is more problematic. Nations and ethnic groups are not, for example, 'culture groups' in the sense that the boundaries of some cultures are co-terminous with the boundaries of the nation or ethnic group. Cultures are both wider and narrower than, for example, nations. This can be seen if we think of culture and religion. We can distinguish analytically between cultures and religions, the first referring to custom and practice often with reference to a particular group, and the second referring to communities of faith. In practice culture and religion are very much bound up with each other, and are implicated in the definition of boundaries around groups. Thus religious cultures such as Islam and Christianity are part of the cultural definition of some nation-states; but they have also a global presence in the shape of Christians or Muslims *beyond* any particular nation-state. But cultures may also be *narrower* than nations in the sense that all societies, or rather nation-states, are not comprehended by a single culture. They are divided and differentiated by class and regional cultures and differences of language and religion. And it is also possible to speak of culture without attaching it to groups defined by descent, as in civilizational culture, youth culture and class culture. The conflation of 'ethnicity and culture' is nicely put by Danielle Conversi:

In the literature on nationalism, the terms ethnic and culture are often confused. . . . By ethnicity we refer to a belief in putative descent. Ethnicity is thus similar to race. Culture is instead an open project. . . . [but] since culture is necessarily based on tradition and continuity, it is often confused with ethnicity. (Conversi 2000, pp. 134–5)

The proper emphasis on descent is certainly confirmed by the etymological discussion above – the theme of *descent and common origin is much more central than culture*. However, whilst Conversi is technically correct, some compromise is needed. The association of 'ethnic' and 'culture' has become very familiar and the claim to share a culture is so commonly a key component of the claim to 'sharedness' alongside common descent. People, or nations, or ethnic groups are saying, in effect, 'We are the people, we come from the same

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stock, we live(d) in the same place, and our customs and beliefs are these.'

In this volume we shall continue to deal principally with ethnicity but only whilst understanding that the topic cannot be separated from the other two, race and nation. So with a primary focus on ethnicity, we will continue to be drawn towards 'race, racism, nations, nationalism'. We shall also be dealing with these three representations of 'descent and culture' in the *modern* world; in several respects they are very much modern topics. Ethnic group identities or ethnicity have taken on new and important meanings in modern nation-states; 'race' was the popular, political and scientific word for most of the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth, and racism (as the attribution of inherent and unequal qualities to peoples) remains important, however much a classificatory and biological idea of 'race' has lost its force. Nations and nationalism are a product of modernity, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' dominance of the 'nation-state' as a political form is the key to this. Anthony Smith, for example in his *The Ethnic Origin of Nations* (1986), has long argued for the pre-modern origins of ethnic groups or nations but he also is very clear about the link between 'nation' and 'ethnicity'; the latter is important because of the importance of the former:

Nationalism extends the scope of ethnic community from purely cultural and social to economic and political spheres; from predominantly private to public sectors. To make any real headway in the *modern* world, ethnic movements must stake their claims in political and economic terms as well as cultural ones, and evolve economic and political programmes. . . . Even dominant ethnic groups must turn a latent, private sense of ethnicity into a public manifest one, if only to ensure the national loyalty of their members against the claims of other groups. . . . Nationalism has endowed ethnicity with a wholly new self-consciousness and legitimacy as well as a fighting spirit and political direction. (Smith 1981, pp. 19–20)

This is not to say that 'descent and culture communities' are new or specifically modern, as Smith has brilliantly shown (1986). But the representation of descent and culture com-

munities in this modern and political language of nation, race and ethnicity is new. In the summary below we clarify the exact nature of the shared terrain of the three concepts.

Defining the core and the divergences

Race refers to descent and culture communities with two specific additions:

- 1 the idea that ‘local’ groups are instances of abstractly conceived divisions of humankind, and
- 2 the idea that race makes explicit reference to physical or ‘visible’ difference as the primary marker of difference and inequality.

Nation refers to descent and culture communities with one specific addition:

The assumption that nations are or should be associated with a state or state-like political form.

Ethnic group refers to descent and culture communities with three specific additions:

- 1 that the group is a kind of sub-set within a nation-state,
- 2 that the point of reference of difference is typically culture rather than physical appearance, and
- 3 often that the group referred to is ‘other’ (foreign, exotic, minority) to some majority who are presumed not to be ‘ethnic’.

Summary

In this chapter we have traced the meanings of race, ethnic (group) and nation, mainly through the etymological history – the record of usages and meanings recorded in dictionaries. We have concluded that the idea of an ancestry group, of

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a people linked by common descent however loosely that is thought of, is the core idea of all three terms. These terms also have connotations which are peculiar to the individual word – a core of shared meaning and some word associations which are not shared. Only the word ‘race’, for example, has a strong association of biological difference linked to a universal classificatory system. The meanings of the words have also changed and some new meanings are relatively recently acquired. In the next chapter we turn to a related theme – the fact that the actual import of the words is found to be different in different societies. By import we mean the force of meaning which the term carries, the emphasis and importance contained within the term. In different cultures and contexts, the import of the words varies accordingly. This we examine by looking at discourses of race and ethnicity in the USA, the UK and Malaysia.