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ETHNIC GROUPS AND BOUNDARIES TODAY: A LEGACY OF FIFTY YEARS.

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In 2000, 23 years ago, Anthony P. Cohen wrote that since the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* in 1969 „virtually all discussions in anthropology of ethnicity and boundary have referred back to this essay [i.e. Barth’s Preface], to acknowledge its influence and/or to take it as their point of departure“.² The book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries Today: A Legacy of Fifty Years*, published in 2019 to mark the half-century anniversary of Barth’s work, proves A.P. Cohen right — both in his evaluation and in the fact that the legacy in question actually only concerns Barth’s “Preface”.

The introduction, “***Ethnic Groups, Boundaries and Beyond***” by the book editors Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Marek Jakoubek outlines the circumstances of the original publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, describing the genealogy of the ideas developed especially in Barth’s introduction to the volume, but also giving an outline of the other contributions to the conference, including those which never made it into the book. The subsequent impact and significance of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* are then discussed, including its shortcomings, as well as an assessment of its importance for the study of ethnicity and identity politics more broadly today.

For British social anthropology, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* and especially Barth’s ‘Introduction’, was seminal. Previously, British anthropology largely took identity as a given, simply predicated on people’s structural connections to society. Barth’s focus on the malleability and manageability of ethnicity re-conceptualised ethnic identity as problematic. To make this shift, he and his collaborators drew on developments in American anthropology, sociology and social psychology of which their British colleagues were largely unaware. In later essays on ethnicity, Barth’s position evolved, reflecting both his own changing interests and increasing and unparalleled field experience, and wider developments in anthropology. In particular, he moderated his earlier underestimation of the significance of culture for ethnic identity. In the second chapter “***Barth, Ethnicity and Culture***” written by A. P. Cohen, the author examines the Introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* and two subsequent essays published over the following thirty years to situate Barth’s position in the wider and mainstream discourses of anthropology and cognate subjects. In this body of work, Barth portrays ethnicity as not just instrumental, but as experiential and, above all, as cultural and culturally substantive.

Working on his dissertation, writes Michael Hechter in his chapter “***Homage to Fredrik Barth***”, there were two theoretical texts about interethnic relations that he found particularly inspiring. The first was Fredrik Barth’s introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, and the second was Ernest Gellner’s essay in *Thought and*

1 In the following text, parts of the annotations of individual chapters written by their authors, which were part of the preparatory phase of the publication, but were not used in the final text of the book, are used without quotation marks.

2 Cohen, Anthony P. 2000. *Signifying Identities: Anthropological Perspectives on Boundaries and Contested Identities*, London: Routledge, p. 2.

Change, later developed in *Nations and Nationalism*. To understand why these two works made such an impression on him, the author sets the intellectual context he encountered in the late 1960s. In both undergraduate school (at Columbia College) and later graduate school (also at Columbia), Hechter's supervisor was Immanuel Wallerstein, who then was a relatively obscure Associate Professor in a star-studded sociology department. Wallerstein began his career in the 1960s studying nationalism in African colonies, and he taught a course on national liberation movements focused on that continent. At the same time, he was beginning to work on early modern European history, which culminated in the first volume of *The Modern World System*. The students in his nationalism course had to write a paper, and unlike everyone else Hechter chose a European rather than African example: namely, Ireland. Wallerstein was intrigued and suggested that Hechter also include Wales and Scotland. That was what he ended up doing.

If we believe that anthropology involves, in part, offering non-obvious accounts of social behavior, then Verdery's experience with utilizing the model of ethnic identity from *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* shows some consequences of employing theories that do not conform to the views of our research populations. In the fourth chapter "**The Dangerous Shoals of Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: A Personal Account**" Katherine Verdery summarizes what she sees as the main message of this canonical book and describes how certain "natives" reacted to her analyses that used it. Her examples include a discussion from a graduate seminar, experiences at a conference in the Soviet Union, and her own research on ethnic identity in Transylvania, Romania. The chapter concludes with some final thoughts about the limitations of the Barthian approach.

In the following chapter "**Winners, Losers and Ethnic Flux**", Ulf Hannerz dwells on two contexts in his own research where the handling of ethnicity in situations of flux and upheaval was of central concern. One was in a Black neighborhood in Washington, DC, a half-century ago, at a time of unrest in Afro-America, also involving a governmental "War on poverty" which importantly affected Black urban communities. Hannerz considered the concept of "Soul" which emerged in this period as central to an overarching Black identity. The other is the importance of ethnicity in Nigerian politics, most dramatically demonstrated in the Biafra war which was also fought a half-century ago, and remembered in the Nigerian town where he came to do field work some ten years later. In both cases, ethnic change involved understandings of winners and losers — and this is now relevant to current politics in many places.

In the sixth chapter "**Untangling, with Barth's Insights, Gypsy Ethnic Identity**" Judith Okely argues that Barth's Introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969) proved inspiring, indeed indispensable to the anthropologist's 1970s study and key publications on Gypsies in England. Through centuries, outsider labelling and stereotyping of Gypsies in Britain, especially as nomads, have contributed to their persecution and marginalisation. Definitions by the dominant society reflect changing ideologies and politico-historical contexts. Priorities vary from: alleged place of origin, whether Egypt, India or indigenous, presumed travelling patterns and visible locations. Other labels included imagined racial type whether invented 'pure' or 'half' blooded, then perceived occupations or projected criminality. Exoticised, centuries





old foreign origin has been privileged over ‘half-castes’ or demonized ‘drop-outs’ from the sedentary gorgio (non-Gypsy) population. While Barth’s Introduction does not mention Gypsies, his earlier study of Gypsies as pariah group in Norway was reproduced in *Gypsies, Tinkers and other Travellers* (1975) edited by Rehfisch, alongside an article by Okely. Key themes linked to self-ascription continue to resonate, e.g. in the recent recognition of Irish or Scottish Travellers as ethnic groups, without claim to foreign origin. Barth’s insights have further relevance for interdisciplinary controversies, including misrepresentations of social anthropology, in the ever-expanding ‘industry’ of Roma/Gypsy/Traveller studies enhanced by EU enlargement and its research funding.

In his chapter **“Boundaries, Embarrassments and Social Injustice: Fredrik Barth and the Nation-State”**, principally using illustrations from southern Europe and southeast Asia, Michael Herzfeld demonstrates that nationalist expropriations of the concept of ethnicity account for the frequent blocking of more flexible, anthropological interpretations. Treating the “cultural stuff” that Barth recognized as the core of ethnic self-ascription as, instead, an objectively invariant content, many national governments imagine ethnic groups to reproduce the reified self-imagination of the bureaucratic nation-state. This problem becomes especially acute in the case of official Greek reluctance to concede on the question of ethnic self-determination, which is grounded in an essentialist claim to having coined the terminology of ethnicity itself. In addition, post-colonial and especially crypto-colonial nationalisms are particularly inclined to use such definitions strategically. A useful development of Barth’s approach should thus take the form of inquiring into the instruments, rationalities, and procedures whereby national governments attempt to regulate the meaning of ethnicity and the responses to such formal devices by local groups that define themselves in ethnic terms. In other words, rather than treating the state as an intrusion into the processes of ethnicity, it should be recognized as a major player in such dynamics.

This approach requires a critical perspective on the process of translation; for example, we cannot ignore the impact of colonial models such as the entextualization of ethnic markers in hierarchies that then translate into national jockeying for regional power, or the territorial concerns of nation-states that often result in deeply entrenched resistance to more “relativistic” models of collective identity or to the evanescence of certain types of ethnic self-identification. Moreover, groupness implies a sometimes strong tension between collective display and collective self-recognition. The consequent importance of recognizing the sources of collective embarrassment (“cultural intimacy”) on the part of both nation-states and self-ascribed ethnic groups is something that Barth was perhaps not, at the time of the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, prepared to acknowledge, but helps us now in understanding the dynamics of the relationship between ethnicity and nationalism. Finally, the ethical dimensions of building a critical perspective of this kind — especially its potential impact on excluded minorities — are explored, not only because they are important in their own right, but also because they lead to further insights into the uses and abuses of the ethnicity concept in the interactions among nation-states.

In the eighth chapter “**From Ethnos to Ethnicity and After**”, Valery Tishov argues that after long and painful revisions Russian ethnology reached a situation, both in its empirical approaches and in conceptual terms, where ethnicity is perceived as one of the forms of collective identities with both single and multiple meanings as well as alterity character (Barth’s influence). It replaced the ‘Soviet theory of ethnos’ with its groupness and organic approaches. However, it was not a full victory because of the strong legacies of ethno-nationalism, which legitimized the break-up of the USSR and post-Soviet nation-building in newly emerged states. ‘Boundaries’ are still often interpreted in a special, territorial meaning (in Russian language, there is only one word ‘granitsa’ which mean ‘border’ and boundary’). Due to mental inertia and the effect of ethnic nationalism, the states of the former Soviet Union are having difficulty progressing from the concept of ethnonation to the concept of civic nation (against the Barthian vision). Modest academic revisions towards constructivist paradigm did not influenced seriously socio-political practices which follow traditional ethnic group approach in categorizing country’s population. Some steps to change census-taking procedure and to recognize multiply non-exclusive identities among Russian citizens have been initiated by anthropologists supported by field research in a domain of Russia’s cultural complexity.

Barth’s famous article on ethnic identity was ethnographically grounded in relatively stable interethnic relationships contained in single nation-states. But today information technologies (IT) have vastly extended social reach and its velocity. In the ninth chapter “**Barth and Brexit, Online, on Target**” Jeremy MacClancy exemplifies this contemporary capacity by a fieldwork-based study of the rise of the anti-Brexit movement, by British migrants across the Continent, especially in rural France and coastal Spain. The referendum result split families and sundered long-term relationships. In reaction British migrants, fearful of what Brexit will bring, have found new friends and new ways to organise. Within months they have learnt how to do politics: to coordinate activism, across the EU, predominantly online but also on the streets and in the courts. Their efforts show how IT-mediated acceleration today enables the remarkably rapid formation of politicized communities and just how very effective their efforts can be.

To this day, many scholars and students overlook the fact that *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, the seminal book edited by Fredrik Barth in 1969 (in which his even more seminal ‘Introduction’ was published), had a subtitle — namely, *The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. While Barth’s groundbreaking ideas about the nature of ethnic categories, social boundaries, self-ascription and ascription by others are rightly the most cited features of this book, we often lose sight of Barth’s interests in principles and processes organizing social interaction between people. These days, in seeking to understand contemporary social dynamics, there are many calls to move beyond the ‘ethnic lens’, or indeed to examine how ethnicity intersects with other, key social categories described broadly as ‘diversity’. In the chapter “**Barth and the Social Organization of Difference**” Steven Vertovec discusses key lessons we still can and should learn from Barth by way of conceiving and researching ‘diversity’, or what we might best call (explicitly invoking Barth) ‘the social organization of difference’.





If *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* deconstructed ‘culture’, as Fredrik Barth argued in a revision of his earlier Introduction, it nevertheless continued to promote an ‘ecological’ vision of boundedness, as relatively singular and fixed. As the title of her chapter **“Intersectionality and Situationalism: Towards a (more) dynamic interpretation of ‘Ethnic groups and boundaries’”** suggests, Pnina Werbner argues for a more dynamic view — first of the situational features of ethnicity, with boundaries ‘nesting’ within other boundaries, and second, for an analysis of the significance of the ways that ethnic and ethnic-like boundaries intersect in modern societies. Werbner draws primarily on her research on Pakistanis and other ethnic groups in the UK.

While Barth and his collaborators showed convincingly how ethnicity was a relationship, not a fixed quality of a person or a group, and gave numerous examples of flows across the boundaries — of meaningful signs, commodities and even people — the boundary itself remained relatively fixed and unperturbed. Drawing on a lifelong dialogue with Barth’s perspective, both in its original and its revised forms, as well as a long-standing research interest in creolisation and Creole societies, the chapter **“Beyond a Boundary: Flows and Mixing in the Creole World”** by Thomas Hylland Eriksen shows that the boundary concept needs critical interrogation — but also that the continued significance of boundaries is evident through their transgression. Eriksen nevertheless asks if Creoles in societies such as Mauritius and the Seychelles may be considered an ethnic group at all, given their criteria for membership, lack of rules of endogamy and openness to cultural impulses from outside.

Barth’s celebrated introductory essay to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* has profoundly shaped the way multiple generations of scholars across several disciplines think about ethnicity. Yet Barth’s injunction to focus on the nature and dynamics of ethnic boundaries rather than on the “cultural stuff” the boundaries enclose is necessarily flattening. The chapter **“The Social Organization and Political Contestation of Cultural Difference: Thinking Comparatively about Religion and Language”** by Rogers Brubaker makes the case for thinking comparatively about religion and language as different sorts of cultural (though also social-organizational and political) “stuff,” while at the same time recognizing the pitfalls of such “cross-domain” comparison. Brubaker argues that religion and language can be construed in ways that make them similar enough, in certain respects and for certain theoretical purposes, to make comparison possible, yet different enough to make comparison interesting. And he sketches six basic differences between religion and language (as understood and practiced in Western liberal democratic settings) that help explain why religious difference and linguistic difference are politicized in quite differing ways.

The fourteen chapter **“A ‘Hollow’ Legacy of Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. A critique of reading and quoting ‘Barth 1969’”** by Marek Jakoubek addresses the legacy and ways of use of the reference to “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries” (1969). It highlights the fact that the reference “Barth 1969” is often used without any regard to its actual contents, and in the last decades a short circuit has established: ethnicity (ethnic groups, identity etc.) = Barth 1969. “Barth 1969” thus became a kind of empty signifier or a “hollow” reference. One of the reasons for this is that Barth’s book became a victim of its own renown, and so its citations become almost mandatory and to omit it became nearly impossible, regardless of the actual context. Another reason is that



a great majority of works omit a deeper epistemological reflection of its theoretical position. In these works, ethnicity is considered to be an empirical phenomenon, waiting for a researcher “out there”, in the real/objective world. This assumption leads to a belief that ethnicity one writes about is still the same phenomenon Barth discussed, which makes the reference to his work (seemingly naturally) pertinent.

The book concludes with an interview **“Fredrik Barth and the study of ethnicity: Reflections on ethnic identity in a world of global political, economic and cultural changes”** with Gunnar Haaland, the only living contributor to the 1969 publication, by Marek Jakoubek and Lenka J. Budilová.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Marek Jakoubek managed to compile a collection of texts by contemporary leading experts dealing with the issue of ethnicity and related phenomena. As we have seen, the perspectives of the authors of the individual chapters differ, but they are united by the belief that publishing of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* fifty years ago represented a turning point in the study of ethnicity — a turning point whose legacy is still alive today. The publication *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries Today: A Legacy of Fifty Years* is already the second volume dedicated to the legacy of Barth’s work (the first being *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond ‘Ethnic Groups and Boundaries’* edited in 1994 by Hans Vermeulen and Cora Govers³ on the occasion of the 25th anniversary). It will be interesting to wait for the year 2044, whether, even after 75 years, the influence of Barth’s work will be alive enough to make it interesting for someone to publish a third book in a row dealing with its legacy.

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³ Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.