

Standing the Test of Time – Barth and Ethnicity

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Abstract: Ethnicity remains an essential theory for understanding societies in the 21st century. This paper focuses on how well Fredrik Barth's 1969 analyses and insights in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* have 'stood the test of time'. Barth's theoretical framework sets out the subtle and sinuous frontiers of ethnic boundaries, the interconnectedness of ethnic identities and the continuity of ethnic groups. The messianic nature of this work will be explored by closely reviewing some of his less well cited assertions, including those regarding stigmatized identities, increasing structural similarities and the political organisation of ethnic groups. Considering the applicability of his theory in current times necessitates reflecting on what Barth may have omitted, oversimplified or exaggerated, such as the potential for multiple ethnic identities; the importance of the content of cultural practices, symbols and 'traditions'; conflict and power plays within nation-states. 'Looking back' at Barth's work on ethnicity assists in enhancing understandings of current social spheres and reconsidering the world around us. It also contributes to the early stages of the author's current PhD research which includes a focus on Catalan ethnic identity.

Keywords: Barth; ethnicity; Catalan ethnic identity

As a theory for understanding the dynamics, complexities and ambiguities of group identity and social organisation, 'ethnicity' retains its relevance for making sense of societies in the 21st century. Arguably, some of the most influential works on ethnicity are over three decades old (Barth, 1969; Leach, 1954; Moerman, 1965), and one of the most seminal of these works is that of Fredrik Barth as editor of the 1969 *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Barth and his collaborators rejected the then prevailing notion that ethnic groups were rigid and bounded entities formed through responses to ecological factors, ascribed via primordialist bonds (biologically determined), and defined by territorial boundaries and objective cultural traits. Instead, Barth's theoretical framework set out the subtle and sinuous frontiers of ethnic boundaries, the interconnectedness of ethnic identities and the continuity and transformation of ethnic groups.

This theoretical paper presents an outline of the work of Barth in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* in order to consider how messianic this work has been and in what ways it has 'stood the test of time': Do the insights on ethnicity from 1969 still assist in enhancing our understandings of social worlds today? In keeping with the theme of the 2012 congress held at the University of Barcelona, *Looking Back to Look Forwards* (in which the skeleton of this paper was presented), this article revisits the work of Barth in order to explore contemporary relevance and future applicability. The author acknowledges that Barth's chapters are not independent from the other substantive essays in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, yet a primary focus on Barth's 'Introduction' is justified in that it sets up the theoretical overview that is explored in further detail and different contexts throughout the book.

Engaging with Barth's work informs the emerging and preliminary theoretical framework of the author's PhD research which is focused on contemporary surges of ethnicity, transformations of ethnic identity and cultural revivals. Situated within the discipline of sociology, the project is particularly investigating the various *limits* of ethnicity through an exploration of Catalan identity within Catalunya, Spain. Although the bulk of work on ethnic groups has been situated in anthropology the use of theories of ethnicity is not restricted to this discipline. The main reason for 'ethnicity' being primarily deployed within anthropology is the discipline's long-standing focus on the 'Other' and indigenous peoples in the *non*-Western world. Sociology is particularly apt for exploring how people/s who are part of the Western world delineate ethnicity from other aspects of identity, and critiquing the usefulness of theories of ethnicity in relation to and in combination with a variety of other cross disciplinary frameworks.

The current transformations, tensions and ambiguity of Catalan ethnic identity provide a 'cauldron' (to use Nash's (1989) description) to explore some existing ethnic processes. Catalan identity is intensely debated and multi-layered, it is multi-faceted and a prime example of the 'messiness' Barth described. Catalan identity provides a rich terrain for observing the interplay between the nation and state, cultural resurgences and repressions over time, the politicization of language, nationalist agendas and political legitimacy, inter-ethnic tolerance, opposition and accommodation, claims to cultural uniqueness and debates on traditions and authenticity. To borrow Barth's (2007:15) words (used originally to describe Balinese ethnicity), Catalan ethnicity "is a cornucopia of diversity and creativity".

Beginning with a brief outline of the main points elucidated in the general theory of ethnicity espoused in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* this paper will then review some of Barth's more progressive ideas that have been arguably undervalued. The following section locates some caveats to Barth's central framework and the significant developments made since. The paper concludes with suggestions regarding the continued usefulness of Barth and the sustained utility of ethnicity in a case study of Catalan ethnic identity.

Changing the Course of Ethnic Studies

Barth and his collaborators changed the course of modern works on ethnicity. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* challenged the foundations of anthropology, and the social sciences more generally, providing the groundwork for what would later become the 'constructivist' approach (Verdery, 1994; Wimmer, 2008). At the time of the book's

release, the prevailing assumption was that ethnicity is culture, and culture is shared, however Barth's critical focus for better understanding ethnicity was on "the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses" (Barth, 1969:15, emphasis in original). His rich analyses, deep insights and acute perceptions advanced understandings of the complex social mechanisms that create and shape ethnic communities, as well as the emergence, constitution and persistence of ethnic groups. Although literature on ethnicity certainly did not start and finish with *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, this axial work is deserving of continued attention and critical reflection.

It is important to note that following WWII many liberals predicted that ethnicity and nationalism would decline in personal significance and political importance, as they anticipated that greater global flows of people, money, ideas and practices, would result in a situation in which the boundaries between each ethnic group, their distinctions, identities and uniqueness would fade and decrease, and eventually distinct cultural entities would disappear. Although it is true that some ethnic groups have disappeared due primarily to colonisation and modern institutions, the long-term liberal forecast has proved incorrect as ethnic groups have not only endured, but proliferated. Ethnic groups can, as Barth (1969:9) wrote, "promote their own, new cultural identity, even as their old identity is eroded." Ethnic groups have come to assert and affirm themselves more commonly in recent decades, especially utilising an international discourse of human rights (Bretons, Basque, Tamils, Palestinians, Sikhs, Quebequois, and the list goes on). Rather than groups disappearing into one big indistinct 'pot' of muddled and diluted traditions, symbols, practices, languages, and so on, ethnic groups spring forth, are revived and created (as well as selectively destroyed (Roosens, 1989)), and ethnic identities are asserted and maintained all over the world.

Literature from the 1970s, 80s and 90s that built on and critiqued Barth's work included, but was not limited to, Smith's (1981; 1986) 'ethnic revival'; Roosens' (1989) '*ethnogenesis*'; Linnekin and Poyer's (1990) identity, nationalism and ethnicity in the Pacific Islands; and Nash's (1989) charting the course of ethnicity in the modern world. This literature, based on extensive and diverse fieldwork case studies, continued with gusto into the late 20th century whilst simultaneously another theoretical trajectory became fashionable: multiculturalism (Kymlicka, 1995; Bennett, 1998; Taylor, 1994). Theorists taking this trajectory began developing critical new ways of understanding the mechanisms of the social 'melting pot', 'salad bowl' and 'cultural mosaic' of nations (to use some of the popular analogies that have fallen in and out of favour at different times). More recent works in the early 21st century, by Sider (2003), Brubaker (2004), Kaufmann (2004), Castells (2004), Eriksen (2010), and many others on 'rethinking ethnicity' have further expanded and advanced on the influence and importance of politics, economics and the nation-state, and considered the impacts of globalisation and modernity on ethnic identities.

The Launchpad for Understanding Ethnic Processes

In *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* attention was paid to people who changed their ethnic identity, enabling the authors to give priority to the processes involved in generating, reproducing and maintaining ethnic groups. The authors elucidated this global phenomenon via comparative case studies rather than starting with an all-encompassing grand theory and rigid typologies. *Processes* foregrounded the flux and non-linear development of the social organisation of groups, and shifted the investigative gaze away

from aiming to categorize contained and isolated social units. This approach informed generative models seeking to explain the often elusive frontiers of ethnic boundaries.

The three fundamental assertions Barth elucidated which fundamentally challenged the established anthropological conceptions of ethnicity were:

1. Ethnicity is *not* defined by culture but by social organisation.
2. Ethnic identifications are based on ascription and self-identification. They are situationally dependent and can *change*.
3. The roots of this social organisation are not cultural content but *dichotomization*, so that the ethnic boundary is a social boundary formed through interaction with 'Others'.

1. Ethnicity is *not* Culture

The dominant anthropological perspective encountered in the 1960s was one where the problem of *how* to identify and define ethnic groups was predominately addressed by attempting to locate 'objective' cultural traits. Barth and his collaborators disagreed, and sought to explicate that although ethnic categories *incorporate* 'culture' this is *not* a simple one-to-one relationship.

Barth described diverse and varied Pathan communities, living across wide geographical areas and political borders in Afghanistan and West Pakistan, as exhibiting cultural practices that would *seem* to objectively indicate belonging to completely different ethnic groups. However, even though one Pathan community's 'observable' culture may appear objectively indistinguishable from a *non*-Pathan neighbour, this does not actually locate ethnic membership, nor an ethnic boundary. If a Pathan woman changes her clothing and begins to dress in the Baluch embroidered tunics fronts, this does not mean that she 'becomes' Baluch (Barth, 1969:132). Cultural materials, such as clothing, are not necessarily deployed as signifying group membership.

Language, another critical cultural feature, provides a revealing example that culture and ethnicity are interrelated but *not* interchangeable concepts. Pashto language is a necessary attribute of being Pathan, but language alone is not sufficient to establish ethnic membership. Multiple ethnic groups can and do exist within the same linguistic category. Conducting fieldwork with Southern Norwegian mountain peasantry, Blom (1969:83) found that differences in speech are not sufficient for ascertaining ethnic identities, nor are they "responsible for the establishment and maintenance of social boundaries". The differences in language "*reflect* features of social organisation through a process of social codification, and thus serve as idioms of identification with particular group values" (Blom, 1969:83; emphasis not in original).

According to Barth, cultural traits are the *means by which* an ethnic group asserts and defines itself, but only a selection of the entire cache of cultural elements available are deployed as denoting membership of the ethnic group. Features and characteristics that groups use and regard as significant cultural symbols and emblems of their ethnic identity change over time, place and situation. Some of these traits are given primacy or are over-communicated while others are understated, denied or replaced, and perhaps reinterpreted and reintroduced at another time. The history of an ethnic group cannot be wholly understood by following the trail of cultural practices across time. Current 'objective' cultural traits may show little, or indeed no, similarity to cultural practices exhibited in the past - distant *or* recent (Barth, 1969:13-16).

Barth also drew our attention to the falsity of equating an ethnicity directly with a political-territorial border. Ethnicity 'spills over' the frontiers and borders that contain a territory or nation-state. Ethnic groups can and often do have territorial counterparts, but they *need not*, nor does the territory determine the group's *social* boundaries. Not all people within a geographical border belong to the same ethnic group, nor is everyone within a physical boundary ethnically homogenous.

2. Ascription and Identification

Two seminal works that Barth drew on regarding the ambiguity of ethnic boundaries were Michael Moerman's (1965) work with the Lue in Northern Thailand, and Edmund Leach's (1954) work with the Kachin in Burma. Moerman (1965:1222) found it near impossible to accurately and stably define the group boundary, finally concluding that: "someone is Lue by virtue of believing and calling himself Lue and of acting in ways that validate his Lueness". Not a fieldwork defeat, this lack of being able to identify distinct boundaries was extremely instructive and informative, demonstrating clearly the ambiguities of the boundaries and the centrality of social relations. Therefore, for Barth ethnicity was continually negotiated and *renegotiated* by both external ascription and internal identification. Ethnic identity is a matter of both self-ascription (I am 'A'), and ascription by others (recognised as 'A') via interaction informing cultural standards which signal how to judge ethnic co-members and outsiders (Barth, 1969:15).

Ethnic groups are socially determined, they are social constructions, and the ethnic boundary is a social boundary. Specific cultural features may be important in some contexts and not others, they may guide behaviour for one activity but not another (Barth, 1969:14). There are criteria for evaluation, "standards for judging the behaviour of self and others" (Blom, 1969:84) based on particular and restricted meanings attached to specific cultural acts and symbols. Ethnic identities are relative and situational, dependent on different spheres of interaction and behavioural management. In the case of Eidheim's (1969) research with the Coastal Sami (known as Lapp when Eidheim was conducting his fieldwork in the 1960s) and Northern Norwegians, interaction occurred in three distinct spheres, each with their own accepted behaviours, codes, characteristics and values: public; private Sami; and private Norwegian. Illustrating the inter-relationship across two of these spheres and the self-checking constantly being managed, Eidheim (1969:51) gave the example of language use by Sami workers, "On the quay among themselves and in direct interaction with the [Norwegian] crew on the quay edge, the local [Lap/Sami] men used Norwegian, inside the storehouse they used Lappish; they switched every time they passed the door". Eidheim observed that within the community everybody knew who was and who was not Sami, yet the persistence of over-acting in public continued. Eidheim (1969:55) referred to this as a "shadow play" because although ethnic status was not directly referenced in interactions between Sami and Norwegians, it nonetheless was all-pervasive in structuring these interactions.

Individuals, whole households, or whole groups can change their ethnic identity, and this change can involve physical relocation, different modes of subsistence and economic resources, altered political allegiances and varied family arrangements (Barth, 1969:24). But there are also limits to the alternative identities available to people (Barth, 1969:25) and membership change is not always two-way or reciprocal, or obviously advantageous. Although it is rare for someone to change their identity under adverse circumstances it does appear that identity change will occur in *adverse* conditions *if* there are large

numbers of people maintaining the particular identity, when another one is not available to them, or “when failure is a common and not very costly one” (Barth, 1969:134).

3. Social Boundary and Dichotomization

Ethnicity is the product of specific kinds of inter-group relations. An ethnic group cannot exist in isolation, its formation and continuation is dependent upon interaction with ‘Others’ (Barth, 1969). Barth focused on ethnic boundary maintenance, interaction and identity change *across* the boundaries, stating that:

categorical ethnic distinctions *do not* depend on an *absence* of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories.(1969:9-10; emphasis not in original).

Even as cultural features change and individuals transfer their ethnic membership, the ethnic group continues and is maintained via the “continuing dichotomization between members and outsiders”(Barth, 1969:14). What matters for the establishment of ethnic boundaries is “the assignment of particular social meanings to a limited set of acts” (Blom, 1969:74), social controls and sanctions, the construction of which is dependent on relationships with other ethnic groups - ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ - categories of inclusion and exclusion. The ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ exists by degrees, not necessarily in conflict and total opposition.

The ‘Us and ‘Them’ dichotomy is not solely produced by one ethnic group, “the sanctions producing adherence to group-specific values are *not only* exercised by those who share the identity” (Barth, 1969:18; emphasis not in original). Groups are mutually influencing and work to maintain their differences through this dialogue. Interrelationships however are not always balanced and even. Especially in terms of the control of resources and assets there can indeed be inequality and stratification (Barth, 1969:27). Drawing again on Eidheim (1969), the main reason for Sami identity being under-communicated in public life while their ‘Norewegianness’ was deliberately projected was a persistent social stigma of Sami inferiority, perpetuated by the majority Norwegians.

Ethnic identities are relative, situational and dependent on different spheres of interaction. Both context and interconnections remain crucial for the development and maintenance of groups and their boundaries. Indeed it is this interweaving that gives ethnic groups their capacities for reinvigoration and regeneration.

Advanced Insights and Barth’s Impetus

Many of the insights put forward by Barth and his collaborators remain current and progressive, and some are reborn as ground-breaking today. Below is a brief selection of such insights.

Stigmatized Identities

Eidheim's ethnographic fieldwork demonstrated how an ethnic group is socially articulated across *contested* social arenas and the ways in which a stigmatized ethnic identity is constituted and manifested in daily interactions. Hindered by the imposed stigma, it was near impossible for a Sami to permanently change his/her ethnic identity, even though there were few objective cultural differences. Sami identity was stigmatized and seen as inferior to Norwegian identity, with stereotypes of Sami as backward, dirty and stupid. Norwegian's stigma against Sami played a defining role in the behavioural standards of Sami in different situations, including school board meetings, travel on the coastal steamer, at the merchant's shop or work on the quay. Sami identity was expressed covertly and only amongst other Sami. Eidheim also observed that many Sami had internalised their inferiority and refused to 'handicap' their children by teaching them Sami language. The stigma of Sami inferiority compared with Norwegians was the main reason for "their miserable self image" (Eidheim,1969:44) and ethnic under-communication.

Political Organisation

Barth observed that the increasing political organisation of ethnic groups does *not* decrease ethnic identity, stating that:

The fact that contemporary forms are prominently political does not make them any less ethnic in character. Such political movements constitute new ways of making cultural difference organisationally relevant (Kleivan 1967), and new ways of articulating the dichotomized ethnic groups. The proliferation of ethnically based pressure groups, political parties, and visions of independent statehood, as well as the multitude of sub-political advancement associations (Sommerfelt 1967) show the importance of these new forms. (Barth, 1969:34)

This observation is particularly salient given the scholarly attention shown to nationalist discourses and politics over the decades since *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* was first published. As opposed to some theories which subsume ethnicity into nationalism, Barth believed that new forms of political organisation can be indicative of the processes and changes of ethnicity, rather than signalling a move *away* from ethnicity. Barth cautioned that nationalism does not replace or override ethnicity, and such a view can limit our understandings of the complexity of various social situations.

Structural Similarities

Countering the post WWII liberal belief that ethnic groups in greater global contact would eventually meld, Barth (1969:32-33) asserted that "a drastic reduction of cultural differences between ethnic groups does not correlate in any simple way with a reduction in the organisational relevance of ethnic identities". Barth did concede that cultural differences between ethnic groups can and do reduce (especially through, for example, national institutions that regulate and 'normalise' especially educational institutions and

economic systems) and that politically opposed groups become structurally similar. As political groups must engage within the same institutions, discourses and terms for their confrontation to be intelligible to each other, this “can only be implemented by making the groups similar and thereby comparable” (Barth, 1969:35).

Political ‘Innovators’

As politically divergent groups are mutually limiting in the cultural forms they can assert as their own ethnic hallmarks, for the political ‘innovators’ the selection of a few clear idioms is of serious importance (Barth, 1969:35). The assigning of hierarchy and values to certain identity signifiers necessarily requires the dual action of strategic suppression of other cultural diacritica. Those that can be glorified the most, especially via connection to historical ‘traditions’, stand the best chance of being exalted and demonstrating undeniable uniqueness. The impact and importance of selecting what traits to emphasize is key to mobilizing support, and is also the site for manipulation. Barth (1969:35) reminds us “there is no simple connection between the ideological basis of a movement and the idioms chosen; yet both have implications for subsequent boundary maintenance, and the course of further change”.

A Caveat to Barth

Barth’s work has deficiencies and has been critiqued in various ways over the years. The accomplishments and developments in the study of ethnicity since 1969 and the limitations of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* inform this section, highlighting some of the cracks and flaws identified in the foundational understandings laid by Barth. Some of the limits include not thoroughly considering multiple ethnic identities; power relations; and the importance of what Barth (1969:15) dismissed as “cultural stuff”, that is the content of cultural practices, symbols and traditions.

An area where Barth’s conceptualisations are particularly lacklustre is the consideration that ethnic identity can be multiple. In regard to his account of Pathan and Baluch, their ethnic identities seem to be able to transition and for a period operate as either depending on the context of the social interaction, yet the primary emphasis and assumption is on the permanent shift from one to the other rather than having or assuming a second, or multiple, ethnic identity. Barth acknowledges that we can have multiple *general* identities – such as gender and occupational role - but only one ethnic identity, which generally trumps the other identities in a hierarchy. What is lacking here is the *in-between-ness*, the partial belonging and partial ethnic identification (Bhabha, 1998). Individuals possess multiple identities, ethnic *and* otherwise, and it is problematic and reductive to limit the individual to having one superordinate ethnic identity. Interrelated factors in identity construction including class, ideology, money, language, locality, sexuality, gender, generation, religion, ‘race’, nation cannot be passed over in studies of ethnicity. There is struggle, antagonism and anxiety in figuring out the ‘fit’ between one’s several components of identity, how it works to be several different things, a multi-faceted self (Fischer, 1986). By reducing these pluralities we in turn risk reducing the dynamics, potential for creativity and future transformation and emergence of ethnic groups and identities.

Migrants, foreigners and strangers help to mark and explore “the outer limits of group experience; they provide a point of contrast which gives the norm some scope and dimension”(Sarup, 1996:12). Explorations of the migrant experience represent a significant and important turn in understanding ethnicity. Gilroy (1993) uses the work of De Bois to explore ‘double consciousness’, the state of being both within and without, inside and outside. Focused on the experiences (his own included) of African diaspora communities in Britain as they strive to be both Black and European, Gilroy particularly explores Black nationalism, ethnic absolutism, and the politics of ‘race’. The interrelations between ‘race’, class, memory, culture and ethnicity are critical considerations (Fischer, 1986; Verdery, 1994; Gilroy, 1993; Sarup, 1996). Gilroy (1993:1) explores the persistence of biology, whereby “the ideal of racial purity, the appeal of phenotypical symmetry and the comfort of cultural sameness have never been more highly prized as attributes of black social life than they are today.” The overarching *popular* metaphor for ethnic identity remains genealogical and the enduring concern with one’s ancestry. Barth (1969) left forms of descent in the background, yet ‘origins’ are not separate or independent from boundary construction or destruction, they too are built. ‘Race’, like ethnicity and culture, is a social construction but is presented as natural and inevitable, not chosen and malleable (Sarup, 1996). State organizations and institutions can be especially complicit in promoting rigid conceptions of identity based on biology. Linnekin and Poyer (1990:153-154) show that being able to determine your ‘Hawaiianess’ enables (or disables) claims for land, access to resources, group autonomy and self-determination: “Who I am now determines what I can and cannot do, can and cannot have, can and cannot be” (Linnekin & Poyer, 1990:13).

However, identities are not unlimited combinations, nor are they free-floating (Sarup, 1996), able to be transplanted from place to place. Using the work of Stuart Hall, Appadurai proposes that seeing ethnic identity as a project, and *projected*, enables us to view that identity as having “a future, without entirely giving up the idea that it is produced by historians that are marked, and that identities are particular, and cannot therefore be completely expansive” (Appadurai quoted in Bell, 1999:26-27). This view promotes the notion that groups are constructed, history and traditions are manufactured, and authenticity should be questioned, but also that ethnic identities are performed, projected and consumed and are future orientated, they have aspirations and goals.

Multiple ethnic loyalties can indicate inventiveness and ingenuity, and also potential conflict, antagonisms, and contradiction. A realisation of this allows for analyses of the hegemonic power of majority discourses, relations of control, as well as the subversion of alternative perspectives and politics within the domain of dominant ideologies. If internal social pluralism is denied, theory risks becoming complicit in overarching hegemonic control, and the processes of closure and reduction. Thus engagement with theories of power, especially via the work of Foucault (1980) (as well as Bennett (1998) and Bhabha (1998) just to name a few), promotes understanding power not just as crushing and dominating but as creative, enacting alternatives and often resulting in unintended consequences.

Barth leaned towards viewing ethnic identity as always positive, self-affirming and fulfilling which, as history in places such as the former Yugoslavia, Cambodia, Fiji and Ruanda for example has shown, is certainly not always the case. Nash (1989) does not think that ethnicity itself is a reason for various conflicts that occur around the world: “the problem lies not in ethnicity but in the political, economic, and human worth conflicts that get entangled with or use ethnicity as a rallying point.”(8) However, Barth’s failure

to adequately account for social closure and exclusion, coexistence and conflict parameters (Wimmer, 2008) restricted posing questions and considerations of the potential negative and regressive aspects of ethnic identity (Sarup, 1996).

Ethnic Groups and Boundaries considered 'the social organisation of culture difference' (the extended title of the book) and was deliberately not a summary of cultures in terms of their content but rather social mechanisms. But in 1969 did Barth limit the significance of cultural content too much? Culture (both material and intangible) is embedded in social organizations, political structures, cosmologies and moralities, and they are mutually influential (Sarup, 1996; Barth, 2007). The assertion that ethnic identity was *not* determined by shared culture or human biology, but by social organisation undoubtedly enabled more freedom and creativity in studying and analysing the processes of group formation and continuation (Verdery, 1994). However, as Barth's work 'released' the bind between ethnicity and culture and enabled theorists to "*problematize* the cultural side of ethnic identities instead of taking it for granted" (Verdery, 1994:41) what in some ways failed to come across in the 1969 text was that culture does indeed *matter*. Culture, ethnicity and politics are intimately entwined, evident is the persistent emphasis on "flags, symbols and rituals; there are parades, plays, and operas, music, films... Through art and ritual, memories are evoked and aspirations organised" (Sarup, 1996:178). Just because ethnicity is not defined by culture does not downgrade the importance of cultural forms, their vitality and variation, and how culture and ethnicity mutually stimulate identities and actions.

Using Barth's Work Today – A case study

The previous section does not obviate Barth's theoretical approach. Rather, a close reading of Barth's work has the potential to assist in questioning and further engaging with issues around ethnic organisation as they currently appear. His work incites questioning and deeper reflections beyond the 'objective' and 'observable' and into generative theory building. Therefore, this final section briefly suggests ways in which engagement with Barth's theoretical framework can be both instructive as well as limiting in the 21st century by integrating it to this author's own early stage PhD research, which includes a case study of Catalan ethnic identity.

Catalan ethnic identity is evolving, politically charged, emotionally invested, as well as taken-for-granted. It has ebbed and flowed for centuries, changing methods, agendas, composition and cultural hallmarks. The author's initial fieldwork in Catalunya has provided a rich domain for observing the interplay between the nation and state; autonomy and secessionist agendas; the politicization of language; the performance of traditions and claims to cultural uniqueness; issues regarding fiscal responsibility and perceptions of economic security; immigration and inter-group relations. Not only are these abstract theoretical issues, but more critically ethnicity is created and recreated in everyday interactions which have both perceived outcomes and real consequences. Being sensitized to some of the risks, passions, and emotional investment involved in ethnic identities better informs understandings of the complexity and volatility of Catalan ethnicity and groups relations in Catalunya. Ethnic identity in Catalunya frequently exists in multiplicities, as multiple crisscrossing and conflicting ethnic identities interact, as a person can identify as and 'feel' both Catalan and Spanish, as well as many other intersecting identities. Catalan is an excellent example of internal ethnic variation, as

centuries of human movement inside Spain and decades of global immigration have and continue to both alter and solidify how Catalan identity is asserted.

The current continuing Catalan 'revival' is not an entirely unique experience or an episode in the history of this ethnic group. The *Renaixença* was an important and well-organised Catalan movement in the early 1800s which attempted to define, select and create a surge in specifically (selected) Catalan culture, values and traditions. The *Renaixença* demonstrates an earlier Catalan re-emergence and the broader trend of ethnic revival that existed prior to the two world wars and the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Catalan ethnicity also once represented the antithesis of 'Francoism' and Catalan people and culture became an international symbol of anti-fascism. Catalan identity has moved beyond being a reaction to repression and is now responding in novel ways to unprecedented demands of the present, including the European Union and the continuing global economic crisis. Specific Catalan idioms chosen (ie not 'natural') for accentuation have transformed at different rates in response to various internal and external factors and triggers. Current modes and expressions of Catalan 'revival' are a focus of the author's PhD research, but they are also a gateway to comparison, to 'look back' and consider the subtle shifts in and across self and group consciousness and perception. Broader and longer-term considerations place more subtle social and cultural changes and formations at the centre of the analysis.

In many contexts the success or failure of ethnic groups to gain recognition and levels of autonomy continues to hinge on the ability to assert 'authenticity' as it is prescribed and understood within the terms set by the dominant group as well as the discourses of international human rights. The ability to authenticate current 'traditions' requires imbuing them with symbols and values that demonstrate continuity or links with past practices (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Ethnic groups can articulate a 'transformation' of their identity while often using 'the past' as an underlying claim to their legitimacy and validity: "A great amount of attention may be paid to the revival of select traditions to justify and glorify the idioms and the identity" (Barth, 1969:35). Catalan's general 'uniqueness' (from Spain) is organised around language, cultural heritage and territorial continuity (Castells, 2004). Attending a late night *Pessebre* ('live' nativity scene) in a small country town on 26th December 2012 popular signs and symbols of Catalan traditions were situated throughout the entire performative space. The purpose and use of the *Pessebre* was not solely about the telling of a religious story, but the telling of a selective story of Catalan people, specifically aspects of peasant society. Among other things, the highly distinctive and recognizable wearing of red felt hats and woven rope sandals showed a particular kind of 'Catalan' by harking back to a romanticised era of a unique and 'authentic' Catalan, further glorified through the (comm)union with the story of Christianity (drawn from author's fieldwork).

Catalan language is a diacritical feature of Catalan ethnicity, but it has not continued unbroken and unchanged over time. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and Franco dictatorship (1939-1975) Catalan language and culture were repressed in official life, in schools, in public spaces and literature. Catalan people who were children during the Franco dictatorship did not officially learn Catalan (some were taught subversively at home), and it is common to hear it said that there is a whole generation who cannot write in Catalan. In 1979, following the transition from dictatorship to fledgling democracy, the Statute of Autonomy was reinstated and Catalunya became officially bilingual with Catalan as Catalunya's own official language and subsequently the implementation of the 'Law of Linguistic Normalisation'. Language is a fundamental strategy, cultural and

political, in maintaining Catalan identity. Common rhetoric around language includes assertions that its persistence and contemporary widespread use is *against all odds*, “language is non negotiable” (a recent phrase used by the Catalan Education Minister), as well as the trend of ‘Catalanizing’ people’s names.

As a “trench of cultural resistance” (Castells, 2004:56), Catalan language is predominately distinguished *against* Spanish. Language perpetuates the ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ dichotomy at play between Catalan and Spanish ethnicities. The Spanish nation-state dominated by Madrid and Castilian Spanish is the ‘Other’. Catalan in many ways, especially in current political terms, is a reaction against dominant cultural values and power relations. ‘Madrid’ is commonly personified, and given the characteristics of being conservative, regressive and retaining ideology from the Franco era. Barth (1969) reminds us however that ‘dichotomy’ is not just in opposition, but in degrees. As such, the complex ‘language debate’ is not simply Catalan versus Spanish. The languages do co-exist, and an exploration of the different contexts for the use as well as the different values attached to each is an important area for investigation (Woolard, 1989). In some situations it is a radical binary opposite, as in common street graffiti, ‘*Catalonia is not Spain*’, and in other situations there is strong complementarity and shifting. Thus the Catalan-Spanish ‘boundary’ is fluid and flexible in some contexts and rigid in others.

Current and passionate debates around nationalism, autonomy and separatism are frequent in many forms in Catalunya. However, just as Barth (1969) warned, a focus on nationalism as the essence of Catalan identity is misleading in understanding its social identity and current articulations. There is little doubt that Catalan nationalism and the nation of Catalunya play critical roles, and it is vital to look at the popularization of politics, changing political allegiances and the consumerism surrounding the independence movement. Many towns within the region of Catalunya have symbolically (the legality is still being debated in courts) cut ties from Spain and declared their support for Catalan independence by removing the Spanish flag from their town halls and replacing them with the Catalan independence flag, the Estelada. At many public events attended by a variety of people, including at Football Club Barcelona (FCB, Barça) games and various cultural events, the call for independence is inserted via chants, banners, flags and street stalls selling all types of independence merchandise. Barth’s cautioning in 1969 does seem to advise that the loudest ‘voice’ is not necessarily representative, and current debates around nationalism and independence, although definitely not to be ignored, risk overshadowing or blinding us to other important social issues.

Conclusion

Ethnic Groups and Boundaries marked an epic shift in the study of ethnicity. The insights, necessarily critiqued, have by no means been exhausted over the past 40 years and still hold strong potential for enhancing our understandings of contemporary social worlds. ‘Ethnicity’ remains current in the social sciences and healthy debate on the concept, theoretical framework and application of the term continues as advances are made and new conceptual models developed. One of the main reasons why ethnicity remains such an exciting and fascinating field of study is *both* its elusiveness and durability.

Barth’s work was seminal in promoting the view that ethnic groups and their boundaries are blurry, uncertain and problematic, and that scrutinizing the complexity and fluctuations involved in group practices, stereotypes, motivations, competition and


maintenance provided insights into intercultural engagement, social organisation, individual and group identities. However Barth's theory was not faultless, there were issues that were neglected, underexplored and overemphasised, and some of these, including multiple identities and power relations, have been highlighted by later authors. An exploration of Catalan ethnicity as it is experienced, performed and challenged in Catalunya, Spain can expand on notions around both the applicability and the limits of Barth's theory. Using Barth's (2007:15) recent reflections, "the task is endless and ever self-transforming" and so it is a stimulating process of "watching and wondering", writing and discussing.

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