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# Introduction:

## New Constructionist Approaches to Ethnicity

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Labour migrations, refugee flows, nationalist, regional and ethnic movements, along with mobilization of other kind of social categories as minorities claiming rights (e.g. groupings defined by age, sexual orientation, certain physical handicaps, etc.) have all contributed to making identity, especially in the sense of belonging to a group or a community, a major preoccupation of our era. The construction, reproduction and reshaping of identities has been the subject of important theoretical developments in anthropology in various national and cultural contexts and on different levels. A plenary session on these issues was held at the 1992 congress of the Canadian Anthropology Society in Montreal entitled "Identities: Movement and Change". Two French scholars who have contributed a great deal to the study of ethnicity and ethnic identity in recent years, Jean-Loup Amelle and Michel Oriol, were invited as principal speakers for the session. In what follows we touch upon some of the high points of their papers, which unfortunately could not be included in the present publication. A very stimulating commentary given to the two principal speakers' papers was offered by Muniz Sodré of the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. Many of the papers given in the symposia on ethnic questions, organized by Mauro Peressini

(Musée des civilisations, Hull) that followed the plenary centered around issues concerning the construction, reproduction and reshaping of social identities, ethnic or otherwise, as well as the relations between ethnic and other dimensions of identity (e.g., gender). Several of the articles that follow were derived from presentations in his session<sup>1</sup>.

Before going further, let us clarify certain terms as we use them here. Although the terms "ethnicity" and "ethnic identity" are often used indiscriminately, "ethnicity", as we employ the term includes not only ethnic identity but may also refer to the cultural patterns that characterize the group, some of which may serve to mark its boundaries, as well as the social networks, institutions, organizations, group activities and shared interests – economic and political – that may mobilize a social category toward becoming an ethnic group. (This definition is based mainly on that given by Breton et al 1990: 10; see also Spickard 1989: 12-14; for the distinction between ethnic category and ethnic group, see Cohen 1969). Ethnic identity, on the other hand, refers to individuals' sense of belonging to a group to which their "real or symbolic" ancestors belonged, as well as to the sense of uniqueness, unity, history and shared future of a community.

In numerous works concerning the French context, Michel Oriol has elaborated on the various levels at which ethnic and regional identities are constructed as well as on the "management" of such identities by the State (e.g. Oriol 1979, 1985, 1988). In Oriol's perspective, ethnic or regional identity as manifested by the individual may be of various sorts, whether attitudinal identity, somewhat similar to Gans' "symbolic identity" (1979) or "existential" identity, that are expressed in codes and practices operative in daily life. Unlike many other studies of migrants and of the second generation in France, Oriol's work on youth of Portuguese parentage in France attests that individuals may function comfortably with several ethnic identity referents, rather than experience plural referents as a "crisis" or "pathology" (e.g. Oriol 1984b, 1985). In his presentation to the Society, Oriol took his reflections a step further, elaborating on the precarious relationship between the identities of individuals, especially as these are elaborated in contexts changed by political factors, migrations and so on, and the objective, institutional expressions of these identities. He cites in this regard the paradox of young Maghrébines in France who seek aid and support from the French government to transmit a "better and purer" (*améliorée et épurée*) version of their cultural and religious patrimony to their children. In Oriol's words, "It is as though the institutional objectivation of the expressions of identity should protect (the individual) against the foreseeable weaknesses of his own will or the illusions of his own imagination." (Oriol 1992: 7).

Jean-Loup Amselle, long known for his work on migration in Africa (1974), has turned to the study of ethnicity in recent years. Much of his work has emphasized the role of the colonial state in creating artificially fixed boundaries that belied the fluidity and continuity that had characterized African societies (e.g., Amselle 1985). Based on his research among several groups in Mali, including the Fulani, the Malinke and the Bambaras, Amselle makes a convincing case for the constructed character of these societies as ethnic groups. Rather than clearly separated units, where culture, language, political boundaries and social grouping coincide, he proposes a "chain of societies", a labile continuum of cultural schemas and practices governed by what he calls a "logique métisse", that is

"a continuist approach that ... would emphasize the indistinctiveness, or the original syncretism" (1990: 10).

Thus the boundaries between groups may change according to the political context of the moment, just as may the identities of individuals. One is reminded, in this regard, of the change in individual identities from "French Canadian" to "Québécois", as well as the concomitant modifications of relationships between the latter group and French-speakers in the rest of Canada.

Amselle's contribution to the symposium elucidated the philosophical basis of his view of culture as ever-syncretic and enlarges his focus beyond Africa to other contexts. Among the issues he sees arising from the recognition of the historical, conjunctural nature of ethnic identities is that of their legitimacy. In what sense can they be considered "legitimate" if they are not based on primeval, "uncontaminated" traditions? Particularly pertinent for Canadians is the question Amselle raises as to the anthropologist's role, given that such identities are often the basis of claims to rights and resources.

A recent discussion by several French authors of the concept of ethnic identity in anthropology concludes with the assertion that this concept, unlike others in anthropology, has not generated "cumulative knowledge" but rather, repetitive sorts of questioning over the preceding decade (Bromberger et al. 1989). In one sense we can only agree; that is, many of the basic premises of the constructionist perspective are far from new. That ethnic groups are not given by nature but rather constructed by social actors dates as far back as Weber's discussion of the "ethnic community" in 1922 (Weber 1971). Certain notions that are only now gaining wide currency, such as that of "identity strategies" (e.g. Taboada-Leonetti 1990) have in fact been discussed under various rubrics by others for some time (Baxter 1976; Hicks and Kertzer 1972; see also Goffman 1959). The influence of changing conditions, whether political, or economic, or spatial (migration), on the formation and re-formation of ethnic groups - an issue most clearly elaborated by Amselle in recent years (1985, 1990) - has long been recognized, at least implicitly, by students of North American immigration. It has become something of a truism that Italians, for example, only came to identify themselves as such in the North American context, that in general, immigrants have identified initially with their village or region of origin. Glick-Schiller (1977) has described in some detail the construction of a Haitian ethnic group as the result of social and political factors encountered in the United States. Likewise, variations of ethnic

identifications by individuals according to context has been evident for some time; Nagata (1974), for example, has described ethnicity as "situational" in the Malaysian context she studied. (See also Hicks and Leis 1977).

In point of fact, for over two decades now, the concepts of ethnicity and ethnic identity have been intensively re-examined, with symbolic, constructionist and situational approaches coming to predominate over primordialist or essentialist ones. In affirming the primacy of boundaries over "cultural content", Frederik Barth (1969) opened a debate that is far from over. Abner Cohen's study (1969) of urban ethnicity in Africa emphasized political interests as the mobilising factor that could turn ethnic categories into ethnic groups. In other words, ethnicity could no longer be seen simply as cultural conservatism by a group in isolation but rather had to be seen as the product of interaction between social groups. Glazer et Moynihan (1963) had already documented the durability of ethnicity in the United States, despite the loss of cultural traditions. Later Gans (1979) would argue that symbolic ethnicity often replaces that based on the practice of ancestral customs that were once considered group markers.

Constructionist views of ethnicity have fairly deep roots, in short. Quite recently, however, these approaches have acquired much greater resonance than previously with broader anthropological debates. The understanding that ethnic identity is not "out of time" and cannot be measured by practices and representations that would serve as "objective" criteria (Bromberger et al 1989) now is situated in a context where many anthropological categories, including culture itself, are undergoing similar questioning and re-examination. Furthermore, the incessant hybridization of cultural content evoked in quite different ways by Drummond (1980,1982) and Amselle (1990) in their discussions of ethnicity is highly congenial to the postmodernist view of culture as "heteroglossia" (Clifford 1988:23). A number of earlier critics of Barth (e.g., Hicks 1977) argued that Barth had accorded too little importance to culture, but it is only recently that more culturalist views of ethnicity have been integrated into constructionist theoretical approaches. Clifford, for example, speaks of culture as "a deeply compromised idea I cannot yet do without" (1988: 10). However, for Clifford and others of postmodernist coloration, culture is no longer "a tradition to be saved" but rather "assembled codes and artifact

always susceptible to critical and creative recombination" (p. 12).

Fischer (1986), for example, defines ethnicity in cultural terms, but hardly as a fixed corpus of traits to be conserved or lost. In secular, industrial societies, immigration and cultural interaction produce, he believes, increasingly diverse cultural tapestries that are neither fixed in the past nor homogenized in a bland cultural present. For Fischer, ethnicity is not only a sociological phenomenon, but above all a "process of inter-reference between two or more cultural traditions" (p. 201). Far from being a depository of customs that perdure or disappear through assimilation (p.197), ethnicity refers to a reserve of values, to dynamic "intercultural knowledge" (p. 201) that can and should concern the future more than the past.

In this light, culture is an important constituent element of ethnicity, but as a plastic resource in a state of constant re-creation. Xenocostas' article shows how this applies to the domains of gender and illness in her article on "nevra" (nerves) among Greek women in Montreal. This illness, recognized as a diagnostic category in certain medical environments in Montreal, is a peculiarly Greek, mostly female, manifestation of certain stresses frequently experienced by immigrant women in general. In other words such stress is inscribed in the body in a peculiarly Greek and gendered way. Implicit in Xenocostas' article is the premise that understanding the responses of immigrants to the new society requires some reference to the mode of life and values associated with the milieu from which they come. As obvious as this may seem, surprisingly few studies of immigrant groups give serious attention to conditions or lifeways in the homeland. Also worth noting is the fact that Xenocostas' article, like the others, shows a certain variation in the behavior and perceptions among individuals who are confronted by similar conditions; that is, not all Greek women immigrants who experience the type of stresses described in her article develop *nevra*; rather this manifestation is a possible response and one that is comprehensible to others in the Greek-Canadian milieu.

That ethnic identity is often expressed in "culturalist" terms by social actors was noted by Marie-Nathalie Le Blanc in the paper she presented at the symposium. That is, subjects often speak of their own group in terms of traits seen or experienced as

primordial, as a kind of "second nature". Furthermore, as Amselle has pointed out on various occasions, the State may promote an essentialist view of culture. Canadians are by no means unfamiliar with this issue given the forms that "multiculturalist" discourse habitually takes; in Quebec, particularly, one notes the habitual use of categories such as "cultural communities" whereby immigrant groups are presented as reservoirs of exogenous cultural traits seen variously as retrograde, picturesque, admirable and so on.

Despite the predominance of constructionist approaches in recent years, analyses of specific problems within the field of ethnic studies remain surprisingly untouched by such developments in many cases and instead, continue to be based on essentialist premises, often under the cover of notions such as "modernity" or "assimilation". Whether it is gender relations, youth, the aged, mixed marriages or other questions, immigrant groups are still frequently conceptualized as units whose specificity can be reduced to the "traditional" culture of which they are seen as the bearers. This culture is seen as doomed to disappear in the face of the "modernity" attributed to the receiving society, thus leading to the cultural assimilation of the group to the majority and to its eventual dissolution as a distinct entity. In this light, mixed marriages have generally been considered as the final step toward assimilation of minority groups. However, recent studies in the United States show that such marriages often take place between two minority groups (Waters 1990) and that, furthermore, frequent unions between minority and majority group members do not necessarily lead to the disappearance of the minority (Spickard 1989: 368).

Rosenthal (1983) has demonstrated the impact of modernization theory on the conceptualization of minority aged. In general, it is supposed that the elderly hold a higher status in immigrant groups than in the rest of the society and that they are surrounded by a dense and supportive family network — until modernization and assimilation change all this. In fact, as Rosenthal points out, the situation of minority and immigrant elderly is a far more complex affair and varies greatly from one group to another and within ethnic groups. Similarly, Morokvasic (1983) has criticized the modernization perspective as applied to migrant women. Migrant women, she finds, have often been viewed as universally "oppressed" by patriarchal, "traditional" culture in the group of origin. Migration becomes, in

this light, a path to emancipation via the contact with modernity of the receiving society.

Youth of immigrant background present yet another area of research where "primordialist" discourse still prevails, as we have argued elsewhere (Meintel 1992). Given that such youth are seen as torn between the traditional culture of the parents and the modern one of the host society, they are easily conceived of as variously "corrupted" in their relation to ancestral tradition, as "torn" between two cultures or "rootless". Yet neither our research nor, as mentioned earlier, Oriol's on Portuguese youth in France finds such "pathology", suggesting that multiple ethnic referents may be less abnormal than suspected, a point to which we return shortly.

While identity is by definition synthetic, unifying and unitary (Devereux 1972), it is at the same time highly plastic in having many possible dimensions in varying relation to each other, and within each dimension, many possible referents. In reference to ethnic identity, Oriol speaks of "dimensions" and "types" of identity (e.g., 1979, 1985). Gallissot (1987) presents identity in terms of a "process of identification" (*procès d'identification*) characterized by "formidable" plasticity. At the same time, according to Gallissot (p. 16), identity referents are in great part determined by hegemonies of various sorts, such that this plasticity nonetheless has limits. The limits of this plasticity, as well the necessary concreteness of ethnicity as experienced by subjects, is a theme that warrants further exploration in future analyses. In regard to the question of the limits of constructionism as it concerns feminist theory, Fuss (1989) argues that a rigid commitment to extreme constructivism results, paradoxically, in a new form of essentialism.

The various dimensions of individuals' identity may change in prominence as well as in content and in their relations to each other. The text by Meintel and Peressini (herein) shows that different forms of identification may take prominence at different points of individuals' lives, in this case Italian-born women in Montreal. Also, as the authors note, the research process itself — methods, gender of the researcher — may also influence which dimensions of identity are expressed and in what ways.

In Giles' study of two generations of Portuguese-Canadian women in this issue, we see a shift in emphasis in women's political consciousness from workplace issues in the first generation to gender

issues related to the domestic sphere in the second. Giles' description shows how, in this case, the process of identity reproduction is characterized by both rupture and continuity. Not only does identity change over time, but sometimes it does so in disjunctive fashion. At the same time, parental projects for the younger generation influence some behavior that might appear to represent change and disjuncture, e.g., in young women's choice of "clean", if badly-paid, jobs over the factory jobs held by many of their mothers. Both Giles' research and our own on immigrant families in Montreal show that immigrant parents generally hope for their children to find "cleaner", less arduous work than what they were able to find themselves.

To return to the assertion of Bromberger et al (1989) that little incremental knowledge has resulted from years of debate on ethnicity, we would argue that, perhaps because of generally more congenial theoretical climate, certain new issues are emerging, or at least now present themselves with much greater clarity than before. If ethnicity is seen as a social construction that may change over time, several issues arise for the researcher, intellectual and political. Besides the theoretical problem noted above regarding how far one can go theoretically in the constructivist direction without inventing a new essentialism, constructivist approaches also cast a new light on issues concerning the social and political role of the researcher.

Amselle takes up the question of the role of the ethnographer who may be called upon to validate identity claims. How can he or she recognize such claims without falling into primordialist notions of ethnicity? This issue is in fact one of considerable immediacy for many Canadian anthropologists, given the tendency to claim and recognize rights to resource on primordialist bases. Does archeological evidence for the fact that the Iriquoians migrated to the region near Montreal later than some Native Canadians might believe invalidate their claims to recognition as a "founding people"?

For some time our own research has made us aware of yet another issue that constructionist approaches have brought to light; namely, the ease with which the researcher may create the "ethnicity" that he or she seeks to study. The very prominence being given to "ethnic" research at present owing large part to the demand on the part of the State and various social institutions for information that will allow them to better deal with ethnically plural

populations pushes researchers to accept ethnicity and ethnic groups as given objects, if only for the sake of expediency. Under the pressure to produce socially-applicable knowledge about "ethnicity", field workers easily fall into the tendency to orient their research in ways that create or foster the ethnic consciousness they purport to discover. A seemingly innocuous question such as "Do you identify as Greek/ Portuguese/ etc.", presupposes that ethnic identification is conscious and pertinent to the social actors. Further bias is evident in questions that create ethnic polarities: for example, asking whether the subject identifies as "Greek or Canadian". Peressini's (1991) research on Italian immigrants began with interviews where individuals were asked simply to tell him about their lives. In the free-flowing narratives that resulted, identifications of an ethnic sort, whether "Italian" or "Calabrian" were very rare. It seems to us that future research on ethnicity should, paradoxically, take as its point of departure the premise that neither the existence or form of its object can be presumed.

#### *Notes*

1. That all the articles included here focus on women was an accidental result of the final selection, rather than a reflection of the symposium's orientation.
2. We have adapted this definition from that provided by Isajiw (1990: 35).