

# Ethnicity and the boundaries of ethnic studies

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## Abstract

On the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (ed. F. Barth 1969), the authors have taken the opportunity to pursue a critical revision of the reasons that have led to the great success of this work, which has played a key role in ethnicity studies within social anthropology and beyond the discipline. First, they look back at the time period when *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* originated and assess the book in this historical context. This leads them to several unexpected findings: Firstly, despite the fact that Barth's "Introduction" to the volume has become nearly iconic in ethnicity studies in the last 50 years, the term "ethnicity" itself does not occur there at all. It is also surprising that scholars and researchers of the period did not consider *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* to be a ground-breaking book. Apart from this, the acceptance of the book was, particularly in the U.S., delayed and only gradual. The view of Barth's publication through the eyes of his contemporaries thus does not correspond to the interpretation of its impact and significance that is widely held today. These facts led to a conclusion: If we insist on the fact that *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* is a key and ground-breaking contribution to ethnicity studies within social anthropology (and beyond), it is necessary to reassess the arguments that support this thesis.

KEYWORDS: ethnicity, ethnic groups and boundaries, Fredrik Barth, ethnicity studies

## Prologue: A half-century – time for (another) inventory

It is difficult to deal with classic authors and canonical writings in social science. As pointed out by Robert K. Merton, uncritical reverence often leads to 'intellectually degenerative tendencies' that manifest themselves either in the 'dedicated but, for science, largely sterile exegesis of the commentator' (Merton 1968: 30), or banalisation whereby originally innovative and important findings 'by being frequently expressed, preferably

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in unconscious caricature, by those who do not understand it' become 'a worn and increasingly dubious commonplace' (ibid.). For that reason, Merton advocates Whitehead's maxim that 'a science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost' (Whitehead 1916: 413, in Merton 1968).

On the other hand, social science suffers from one serious problem: amnesia. This phenomenon, omnipresent in the whole social science investigation, makes us rediscover and reinvent again and again what had already been discovered and invented long time ago, and the main reason is that we 'forget – consciously, unconsciously, or out of reluctance and incompetence – to read' (Petrušek 2010: 389). Thus, reinventing the wheel is a relatively common and popular discipline in social sciences.

Indisputably, both positions are, to a certain degree, legitimate. One of the possible solutions that might meet the claims of each is regular inventories – an inspection of both the actual content of the original work and its subsequent reception. It is this kind of move we try to make here with one canonical text. Moreover, it is not the first inventory of this book; it already faced a similar procedure at the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its publication (Vermeulen a Govers 1994; see below). Another 25 years have passed, and *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* has only been more affirmed as possessing the status of a canonical text. The half-century anniversary invites us to run another inventory.

## **B.B. / A.B.<sup>1</sup>**

'Reflecting ... upon the literature of anthropology, one is tempted to consider ethnic studies B.B. and A.B. (i.e., Before and After Barth, editor, 1969)' (Despres 1975:189). This declaration of the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (ed. F. Barth, 1969a) as a fundamental turn in ethnic studies was made, for the first time, more than four decades ago, and scholars have continued to support the statement by repeated references (cf. e.g., Bracker 2017: 50; Buchignani 1982: 5; Emberling 1997: 295; Lockwood 1984: 1).

In fact, the story has had a modest beginning – the slim (153 pp.) edited volume consisting of seven chapters and an introduction was the output of a symposium funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation held in Hotel Norge in Bergen on February 23–26, 1967. Eleven Scandinavian scholars participated in the symposium. The organiser, Fredrik Barth, sent his letters of invitation with a brief overview of the topic and a sketch of analytical concepts. Participants first drafted and circulated their papers in advance, and then discussed the texts at the meeting. After the symposium, a decision was made that edited papers would be published in a collection prefaced by Fredrik Barth's introduction. Seven original participants did send their revised texts for publication<sup>2</sup>, four others – Axel Sommerfelt, Klaus Ferdinand, Peter Kandre and Helge Kleivan – withdrew their papers

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<sup>1</sup> This and the next two subchapters stem from Jakoubek 2019a.

<sup>2</sup> Harald Eidheim: *When ethnic identity is a social stigma* (1969); Gunnar Haaland: *Economic determinants in ethnic processes* (1969); Jan-Petter Blom: *Ethnic and cultural differentiation* (1969); Karl Eric Knutsson: *Dichotomization and integration* (1969); Henning Siverts: *Ethnic stability and boundary dynamics in southern Mexico* (1969); Fredrik Barth: *Pathan Identity and its Maintenance* (1969d); Karl G. Izikowitz *Neighbours in Laos* (1969).

from the publication for some reason (Barth 1969b). In 1969, the book was published by the Norwegian Universitetsforlaget under the – as it proved later, very suitably chosen (cf. Banks 1999) – title *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*.

After some time, the book – and Barth’s *Introduction* (1969c) in particular – became one of the most-cited publications in ethnic studies and one of the best-known anthropological works beyond the discipline (Banks 1999: 45–6; Barth 2007: 10; Eriksen 2015: 96). It was translated into many languages, including Spanish (1976), Indonesian (1988), French (1995), Turkish (2001), Russian (2006) and Chinese (2014). In addition to this collection, separate translations of Barth’s *Introduction* into Italian (1994a), Portuguese (1998, 2000), Polish (2004) and Czech (2016) appeared. Although chapters by Eidheim, Haaland and Blom have attracted considerable attention, and are still widely read and cited (and, in fact, also offer better applications of theoretical positions presented in the *Introduction* than Barth’s own chapter (Barth 1969d)), it is Barth’s *Introduction* that is considered to be the essence of the whole volume and is used to represent it in many respects – references to “Barth 1969” are often in fact references to the *Introduction*. Actually, given the iconic status assigned to the Barth 1969 reference over the last fifty years, it is difficult to decide whether the object of reference is the whole book or its *Introduction*, and in many cases even the authors of the reference do not seem to pose such a question themselves (cf. Jakoubek 2019b). The *Introduction* is also the most frequently reprinted part of the book, and it represents the publication in many readers on ethnicity, ethnic groups and identities (e.g., Sollors 1996a; Smith-Hutchinson 1996, Jakoubek 2016), as well as in the anthology of Barth’s essays (Barth 1981).

The continuing interest in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* was manifested in the conference entitled *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: A Critical Review*, held in Amsterdam in 1993 on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the original publication, and the following collection of papers edited by Hans Vermeulen and Cora Govers which appeared under the title *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond ‘Ethnic Groups and Boundaries’* (1994).<sup>3</sup>

To come to the point, the public, as well as the leading scholars of the anthropological discourse and related disciplines, all presume that *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. *The Social Organization of Culture Difference* ‘sketched out the essentials of the model of ethnicity that has dominated discussion of the topic within European and North American anthropology in subsequent decades’ (Jenkins 2011: 19).

We do not wish to challenge the claim of the canonical status of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* nor of its impact on the study of ethnicity; after all, we accept both. Without questioning the widespread recognition of the publication, we would like to add several minor comments. Our critique draws upon the contextualisation of the publication, highlighting the wider context of the period in which it was written and focusing on the status of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* within the study of ethnic phenomena and processes.

<sup>3</sup> The editors were very fortunate to have Fredrik Barth himself as a contributor, who published his important paper entitled “Enduring and emerging issues in the analysis of ethnicity” (Barth 1994b), in which he recapitulates his own positions from 1969 and, at the same time, critically revises them.

Before we start, let us first summarise the main arguments proposed by Barth in his 1969 Introduction.<sup>4</sup> His position is based on several interrelated statements, so it does not matter where we start.

Barth questioned the assumption that ethnic groups are characterised by a shared culture (Wimmer 2013: 22). Ethnic groups do not “possess” a distinctive culture that makes them distinctive. Ethnic groups and cultural units are not the same things; i.e., ethnic differences do not correspond to cultural differences (Eriksen 2015: 102) – ethnic groups are constituted as *social* entities, not as *cultural* ones. The reason is that the features that are taken into account in regard to membership in an ethnic group are ‘not the sum of “objective” differences, *but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant*’ (Barth 1969b: 14; italics added). In other words, ‘Only those differences that are made relevant contribute to defining an ethnic relationship’ (Eriksen 2013: 294). So, one of the main arguments of the (Introduction of) *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* is that ethnic identity hinges on self-ascription and the ascription of others, not on objective cultural traits. What follows is that the only guide to delimit an ethnic group is the identification of the members themselves and their identification by others. Ethnic distinctions result from actor’s marking and maintaining ethnic boundary irrespective of objective cultural differences (Wimmer 2013: 22), that is, ethnic groups exist because individuals identify and are identified with them. From this point of view – since cultural content does not define ethnic groups – the crucial focus of the investigation ‘becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses’ (Barth 1969b: 115). The key point regarding ethnic boundaries, then, is that ‘boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them’ (ibid.). In other words, ethnic groups continue to exist even if persons change their memberships, i.e., their identity. This also means that ethnic boundaries, groups (and membership and identities) are socially constructed, not primordial and inborn. Another crucial thing regarding ethnic boundaries is that to describe a boundary is not only to describe a group that it encloses but to imply that there is at least one other that is excluded (Lockwood 1984: 4). As Banks puts it: ‘the boundary does not bound “something” off from nothingness, but rather it distinguishes between two (or more) “somethings”’ (Banks 1999: 12).<sup>5</sup> Said generally, ethnicity is people in contact. No ethnic group can exist in isolation. Ethnicity is essentially an aspect of a relationship, not a property of a group.

## How (and when) did it all begin?

The opening quotation by Leo Despres reflecting, to a great extent, the prevailing consensus, could imply that the critical work within the study of ethnicity started only with the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. In anthropology, as in the wider context of social sciences and even beyond, a shared assumption has been that the publication of the book ‘is widely recognized as constituting a real turning point in the analysis of

<sup>4</sup> Unless indicated by direct references to other sources, I draw in the following summary on Eriksen & Jakoubek 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Banks presents the phrase as a quotation from Barth 1969a: 14–5; however, such formulation does not seem to appear in the Introduction and could be considered Banks’ own phrasing.

ethnic groups' (Nestor 2010: 82), which led to the "paradigm shift" (Buchignani 1982: 5; Wimmer 2009: 250) and 'the transition to a new era' (Vermeulen-Govers 1997: 1) in ethnic studies. Today, we take such a view of Barth's work for granted. However, it seems that such an opinion was far from being common at the time of its publication. For instance, two years after the publication, Philip H. Gulliver writes in his review that although Barth's approach to the analysis of ethnic groups is 'worth fresh emphasis', it '*is scarcely the novel approach in social anthropology*' (1971: 308; emphasis added), and he adds that 'in general this is a useful contribution to the ongoing discussion, *although there is little that is theoretically new*' (ibid.; emphasis added). Similar opinions are voiced in later years. For example, when William G. Lockwood points out that Barth 'did succeed in ... focusing anthropological attention on the subject [of ethnicity]' (1984: 6), he does not hesitate to add that this happened despite the fact that '*there was little in Barth's essay that was really novel* or that had not appeared in one place or another' (ibid.; italics added). Moreover, even two decades since the publication, Thompson states that Barth's:

... major contribution was to reorient anthropological thinking away from the then dominant conception of "ethnic groups as cultural units" to ... view of ethnicity as social organization. This was much needed corrective in anthropology, *but this view was already accepted in the other social sciences* (1989: 7–8; italics added).

However, these voices weakened and became sporadic over time (cf. Nestor 2010: 82) and, gradually, the breakthrough impact of Barth's work is recognised more or less universally.

Likewise, William G. Lockwood presented an interesting observation regarding the reception of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* in the USA at the time of its appearance. He notes that '*Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* seems never to have been reviewed in *American Anthropologist* or in any of the major sociological journals in the United States' (Lockwood 1984: 5–6) and shows that the impact of the book in American anthropology was not immediate, to the contrary, it instead developed as a gradual and long-term process (ibid.). As Okamura puts it (2019), one of the reasons for such a delay might be the fact that at that time Barth was already (considered) an author inclining clearly to British social anthropology (cf. Eriksen 2010: 53; 2015: 14, 19). Be it as it may, our understanding of the impact of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* has developed very gradually, and it was not so self-evident as it seems to be today; in other words, we cannot presume that our view is the same as that of Barth's (mostly North American, for sure) contemporaries. This shift was accompanied with a certain kind of amnesia, in which the original not-so-enthusiastic response was forgotten for some reason, and the image we know so well, presenting the publication as the crucial event launching a new era of ethnicity studies, was fully established.

The (quite common nowadays) assumption that all relevant research of ethnic phenomena and processes starts with the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* – the manifestation of which is Despres' 'BB/AB' – ignores the fact that there had been many works before Barth's publication that not only seriously dealt with the research

problem, but also presented clearly formulated (and still relevant) theoretical positions. In this respect, it is undoubtedly worth mentioning the publication by Nathan Glazer and Patrick D. Moynihan entitled *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* which appeared in 1963. The authors show that in the USA ethnic groups are not artefacts of the mass migration era and cannot be explained mainly or exclusively through the notion of “cultural heritage”, but that these groups constitute a *new (only) post-migratory* social form (Glazer, Moynihan 1963: 16). They also claim that ethnic groups in New York City are, first of all, *interest groups* (ibid.), which is in their view ‘perhaps the single most important fact about ethnic groups in New York City’ (ibid.: 17). Glazer and Moynihan thus represent instrumentalist position within ethnic studies *avant la lettre*. To be sure, such perspective is quite distant from Barth’s position (although, in fact, some authors categorise him among instrumentalists, cf. e.g., Blanton 2015: 9177; Kimemia 2016: 103; Rex 2001: § 3.5).

Barth’s position is much closer to the writings of Michael Moerman (1965, 1968) on the (Tai) Lue in Southeast Asia. Both texts work on a seemingly banal question ‘Who are the Lue?’ He refuses the – at that time quite common (cf. e.g., Naroll 1964) – assumption that one could define “Lueness” by listing objective cultural characteristic, that is to say, he rejects the notion of an ethnic group as a group of people sharing a specific culture. One of the reasons is the fact that cultural traits understood as definitional by one group are typically shared with its neighbours, so the area of trait distribution is much larger than the unit they are supposed to delimit (Moerman 1974 *passim*).<sup>6</sup> Given the impossibility of using objective “cultural traits” to determine an ethnic group (that is, to answer the question “Who are the Lue?”), Moerman anchors his analysis in the process of *self-identification*: “Someone is a Lue by virtue of believing and calling himself Lue and of acting in ways that validate his Lueness” (Moerman 1965: 1222). Even such a brief summary clearly shows that Moerman’s texts on the Lue reflexively elaborate upon the key elements of the modern anthropological discussion of ethnicity, which is, however, conventionally associated with Barth’s publication. This is perhaps due to the fact that, in spite of the considerable theoretical part, Moerman’s works are above all detailed ethnographic descriptions, or analyses of a particular ethnic group, and not – as it is the case with Barth’s Introduction – a programmatic theoretical account proposing an abstract model, or a project for research on ethnic groups (cf. Jones 2003: 59).

## **On ethnicity without ethnicity (and with ethnicity)**

In this context, we should not omit works by Edmund Leach, published in 1954 (2004) and Max Gluckman (1958). The fact that both publications already contain many issues dealt with by Barth has been repeatedly pointed out (Banks 1999: 26–7; Cohen 1978: 396; Eriksen 2019); moreover, these works share one crucial feature with Barth. It is this aspect we wish to focus on now. There is one remarkable detail about the canonical

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<sup>6</sup> The 1968 work is entitled *Being Lue: Uses and Abuses of Ethnic Identification*. It was reprinted in Turner’s 1974 anthology under a new title *Accomplishing Ethnicity*. Nevertheless, (besides dropping one note of acknowledgment) it is the same text.

status of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* which is not – ironically – typically discussed in any explicit manner. It is the relation of the book to (the study of) ethnicity. Let us once again begin with a standard consensual claim that Barth ‘implied a paradigm shift in the anthropological study of ethnicity’ (Wimmer 2009: 250). Here, we are not interested in the question of “paradigm shift” (see above), but in the second part of the statement – the relation of Barth’s work to ethnicity.

We can say that *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A study of Kachin social structure* by Edmund Leach (2004), Barth’s Cambridge supervisor (more on the topic see in Eriksen 2015), plays the most prominent role among the books published before *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* we mentioned above. The main reason is the direct link between the two books: Leach’s book was an important source of inspiration for Barth and it ‘constituted one of the central terms of reference’ at the Bergen symposium in 1967 (Eriksen 2015: 21).

The status of Leach’s monograph within the study of ethnicity is specific in another respect as well. Virtually everybody refers to it, and everybody considers it to be a significant and critical book. Moreover, everybody finds the same key difference between this publication and the texts appearing later (Barth’s one including). The difference lies in the fact that ‘nowhere in Leach’s work can one find the word “ethnicity”. In other words, he had not felt the need of specific model or paradigm to deal with ethnic phenomena’ (Lockwood 1984: 1; italics added), or: ‘in this work, which could quite reasonably be classified as a study of “ethnic processes,” the term *ethnicity* is nowhere to be found’ (Nestor 2010: 79, with the reference to Olsen – Kobyliński 1991; italics in original). To put it simply – Leach does not write about *ethnicity* (yet).

Several other prominent publications have suffered the same fate as *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. When discussing the Manchester School, that is the authors who are *inter alia* ‘responsible – perhaps more than any other anthropologists – for bringing about the terminological shift ... from “tribe” to “ethnic group”’ (Banks 1999: 25) in one of the hugely successful introductions to the (anthropological) study of ethnicity *Anthropological Constructions* (1996), Marcus Banks writes:

My study starts with a brief look at three works *which do not mention ‘ethnicity’ at all*: Max Gluckman’s ‘Analysis of a social situation in modern Zululand’ (1958 but first published in 1940<sup>7</sup>), Clyde Mitchell’s ‘The Kalela dance’ (1956) and Philip Mayer’s ‘Townsmen or tribesmen’ (1971 but first published in 1961). All three works are important for the present study, however, in that *they allow us to see the development of the ideas that would later be explicitly acknowledged as ideas about ethnicity* (1999: 25; italics added).

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<sup>7</sup> This information is not precise. Analysis of a social situation in modern Zululand consists of three essays. The first one The Social Organization of Modern Zululand was originally published in 1940 in Bantu Studies (Gluckman 1940). The third chapter Some processes of social change illustrated from Zululand was published in African Studies in 1942 (Gluckman 1942).

The reason that the works of Gluckman, Mitchell and Mayer do not belong to the study of ethnicity in the proper sense of the word (and only allow us ‘to see the development of the ideas that *would later* be explicitly acknowledged as ideas about ethnicity’ (ibid.)) is the fact that, as in the case of Leach, the authors do not use the term *ethnicity*.

We can thus say that the reason for not including Leach, Gluckman, Mitchell, and Mayer into the ethnicity studies canon and attributing them only the status of “predecessors” is clear and seems to be relatively reasonable. One does not belong to the club of “ethnicity studies” unless he or she writes about ethnicity. He or she can, at best, serve there as an usher. However, such reasoning is tricky, because Barth is – tacitly and seemingly naturally – considered to belong to the next period of the study of ethnic phenomena and processes: the one in which the concept of “ethnicity” is consciously applied. In other words, if the authors cited above say that Leach, Gluckman, Mitchell, and Mayer do not (yet) use the concept of ethnicity, they (implicitly) say that they do not do it, *unlike Fredrik Barth*. Alas, none of Barth’s texts in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, neither the *Introduction* nor his chapter dealing with the maintenance of Pathan identity (1969d), contains even a passing reference to “ethnicity”; it is not there (see Okamura 2019: 38; Banton 2015: 89). Moreover, we can add – it is not there in the same manner as it is not in Leach, Gluckman, Mitchell, or Mayer (and many others).

Let us consider the situation in greater detail. The oldest of the mentioned texts (1940-1942), Gluckman’s *Analysis of a social situation in modern Zululand* contains neither the term *ethnicity* nor the adjective *ethnic*. Leach’s *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, published in 1954 includes a few instances of the adjective *ethnic* (e.g., 2004: 35) or the adverb *ethnically* (ibid.: 59), the instances are nevertheless scarce. Although Mitchell’s *The Kalela Dance* (1956) does not operate with ethnicity yet, it is, however, full of ethnic groups, diversity, origins, differences, etc. (1956 *passim*). Although Mayer explicitly refers to Gluckman’s text and to Mitchell’s, he employs the terminology of the former and does not use ethnicity, nor any other “ethnic” lexical forms.

Arranged chronologically, the next published works were the above-mentioned contributions by Glazer and Moynihan (1963) and Moerman (1965-1968), in which ethnicity occurs as a standard term.<sup>8</sup> It might seem that the explicit application of ethnicity was, strictly speaking, a North American matter – and that this could explain why Glazer and Moynihan or Moerman do use the term, while Barth, who follows British social anthropology (see Eriksen 2015: 14, 19), does not. Such interpretation would, however, be misleading; in the very same year of the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, another book appeared by a Manchester school member, Abner Cohen, entitled *Custom*

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<sup>8</sup> It should be mentioned that Glazer and Moynihan themselves consider the question of the first occurrence of “ethnicity” highly relevant. They introduce their 1975 publication: “Ethnicity seems to be a new term. In the sense in which we use it – the character or quality of an ethnic group – it does not appear in the 1933 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, but it makes its appearance in the 1972 Supplement, where the first usage recorded is that of David Riesman in 1953” (Glazer & Moynihan 1975: 1). Sollors (1996b: x), however, detects the term in the first volume of the Yankee City Series, which appeared much earlier (Warner & Lunt 1941). We can add that ‘according to Oxford English Dictionary, the expression “ethnic group” entered the English language in 1935 when Huxley and Haddon (1935) recommended it as a substitute for one of the senses of the word “race”’ (Banton 2015: 88).

*and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns* (Cohen 1969). This monograph is full of ethnicity in all grammatical forms, including substantive.

There clearly was a shift from ethnic(ity)-free terminology through the use of ethnic adjectives and adverbs to the application of the ethnicity substantive. However, in this respect, the radical shift did not take place in 1969 with the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Alternatively, if the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* did bring a breakthrough, it did not take place at the level of terminology. We could even say that in a certain sense Barth was rather behindhand when compared to the wider field of social science (and beyond) dominated by this shift. North American authors and scholars were more progressive in terms of including ethnicity to their theoretical apparatus, and it was there where the shift really took place for the first time (cf. note 9), but many of their British colleagues had already joined the trend at the time of the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. It is difficult to identify the moment when Barth withdrew from his terminological position without ethnicity and adopted ethnicity in his repertoire. Moreover, there is no way to find out what the reason for this adoption was or why this change in his position did not occur earlier. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Barth himself retrospectively comments on his earlier works from 1969 (cf. Barth 1994) but also 1967 (cf. Barth 1995: 77–8) as if he already did use ethnicity at that time; that is, he projects ethnicity on those texts (though it is not there).

However, to mention Abner Cohen only with regards to the question of terminology would be quite unfair to the author and his position within the study of ethnicity. Cohen combines his theoretical position with his ethnography (remember that Barth's theoretical position presented in the Introduction contradicts his chapter on his research among Pathans in several respects; cf. e.g., Blu 1980: 222–3; Fardon 1987: 185; Gulliver 1971: 308; Lockwood 1984: 3; Okamura 1981: 459). Cohen's book focuses on Hausa traders in the Yoruba city of Ibadan, and he studies the way by which they managed to establish a monopoly over the long-distance trade in kola nuts and cattle between northern and southern Nigeria. According to Cohen, one of the main means to achieve this goal was ethnicity, or the directed process of *retribalisation* ("ethnicisation"). Cohen defines retribalisation as

... a process by which a group from one ethnic category, whose members are involved in a struggle for power and privilege with the members of a group from another ethnic category, within the framework of a *formal* political system, manipulate some customs, values, myths, symbols, and ceremonials from their cultural tradition in order to articulate an *informal* political organization which is used as a weapon in that struggle (Cohen 1969: 2, italics in original).

Cohen views ethnic groups – with explicit reference to Glazer and Moynihan – as *interest groups* (ibid.: 191–2), as *informal* interest groups that 'do not form part of the official framework of economic and political power within the state' (ibid.: 200). Cohen also points out that the process of retribalisation is not the product of continuity and conservatism; although it uses "traditional" customs or elements of a traditional ("tribal")

culture, it nevertheless operates within the *contemporary* political context which leads to the emergence of a *new* culture. The local Hausa do not consider a newly arrived Hausa migrant to Ibadan who came from Hausa tribal territories and speaks their language as ‘one of them,’ they must first “learn” to be Hausa’ (Banks 1999: 32–3). To be Hausa in Ibadan is not an ascribed (innate) attribute, but an attribute that must be *acquired* (or, if you wish, constructed) – and it is therefore accessible also to a person of different “tribal membership” (cf. Wallerstein 1960). The process of Hausa retribalisation in Ibadan is not a manifestation or a transformation of their primordial “Hausaness”. The principal reason for Hausa retribalisation in Ibadan was the establishment and maintenance of the monopoly over long-distance trade, which involved keeping the dominant Yoruba out of the corresponding trading activities. The ideology or ‘the myth of [Hausa] cultural distinctiveness’ was used for these utilitarian purposes (Cohen 1969: 101); the Hausa political organisation was established on the principle ‘Our customs are different; we are Hausa’ (ibid.: 22). The “traditional” Hausa customs are used exclusively as idioms and mechanisms for political alignment (ibid.), they did not constitute the *reason* for its birth. Men stick together, Cohen says, not because of shared customs but for *common interests* (ibid.: 200) and the Hausa in Ibadan ‘are united vis-à-vis the Yoruba because their unity is essential for their livelihood’ (ibid.: 200). In general, it is evident that ‘ethnicity is the result of intensive interaction between ethnic groupings and not the result of ... separatism’ (ibid.: 198).

We could object that Glazer and Moynihan are sociologists, but the core of ethnic studies belongs to anthropological discourse. We could also object that Moerman’s contributions appeared exclusively as partial studies in journals. However, Cohen’s *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa* offers a theoretically developed concept of ethnicity presented in the ideal form of a fieldwork-based monograph published in 1969, that is, in the same year as *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*.

To summarise the above comments, we arrive at several remarkable conclusions. An unexpected paradox occurred: on the one hand, ‘Barth’s essay ... has played a pivotal part in delineating the field of enquiry in the anthropological study of ethnicity’ (Eriksen 2010: 44), on the other, we need to add that it reached the position without ever mentioning ethnicity. It turned out that (at least some of) the reasons for the prestige of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* as a crucial and ground-breaking publication are not as valid as we might think. In other words – if we wish to maintain the validity of the assumptions associated with the publication, we must revise some of the sources it usually draws upon and, most probably, look for some others. It is also clear that no mechanical repetition of claims stating the book’s significance, nor further automatised citations in texts on ethnicity, ethnic groups and identities, would help us understand the publication and its legacy. Thus, the prestige and success of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* constitute a research problem in its own right, a question we still need to answer. Half a century since the publication is an extraordinarily good occasion for such purposes.

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## Povzetek

Ob 50. obletnici izida zbornika *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (urednik F. Barth 1969) so avtorji izkoristili priložnost za kritično revizijo razlogov, ki so privedli do velikega uspeha tega dela, ki je igralo ključno vlogo v etničnih študijah znotraj socialne antropologije in izven nje. Najprej se ozrejo na časovno obdobje, ko so nastale *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, in knjigo ocenjujejo v tem zgodovinskem kontekstu. To jih vodi do več nepričakovanih ugotovitev: prvič, kljub temu, da je Barthov *Uvod* v zbornik v zadnjih 50 letih postal skoraj ikonična v študijah etničnosti, se sam izraz etničnost tam sploh ne pojavlja. Presenetljivo je tudi, da znanstveniki in raziskovalci tega obdobja *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* niso šteli za prelomno knjigo. Poleg tega je bilo sprejetje knjige, zlasti v ZDA, zapoznelo in le postopno. Pogled na Barthovo publikacijo skozi oči njegovih sodobnikov tako ne ustreza interpretaciji njenega vpliva in pomena, ki je danes razširjena. Ta dejstva so privedla do zaključka, da če vztrajamo pri tem, da so etnične skupine in meje ključni in prelomni prispevek k študijam etničnosti znotraj družbene antropologije (in izven nje), je treba ponovno oceniti argumente, ki podpirajo to tezo.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** etničnost, etnične skupine in meje, Fredrik Barth, etnične študije

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