

---

# The Politics of Ethnicity and Identity

ALETTA J. NORVAL

---

The theorization of ethnicity is bound up with political concerns and normative judgments so that it requires a genealogical approach. Traditional views range from primordialism to instrumentalism. Primordialists see contemporary forms of ethnic expression as a reactivation of older, sometimes biological, relations. Instrumentalists see ethnicity as a resource for different interest groups. Primordialism is essentialist: it ignores the complexity of the historical conditions under which ethnicity becomes significant and over-states the internal homogeneity of ethnic identities. Instrumentalism is nominalist: it suggests that ethnic identification is important only insofar as it is based on more material phenomena. The third main position on ethnicity is constructivism, emphasizing the historical and political processes by which it is formed and situating it in relation to other identities: racial, sexual, national, or gendered. There is a range of constructivist positions: Norval argues for a materialist poststructuralist theory against linguistic monism. She suggests that “the body” is important, but that markers of race and ethnicity are historical, social, and political rather than natural. Finally she discusses hybridity and postcolonial theories of identity concerned with diaspora, displacement, and the politics of cultural difference. Pluralism must be radicalized in order to democratize potentially exclusionary identities.

## ETHNICITIES OLD AND NEW

We are suggesting that a new word reflects a new reality . . . The new word is “ethnicity,” and the new usage is the steady expansion of the term “ethnic group” from minority and marginal subgroups . . . to major elements of a society.

*(Glazer and Moynihan 1975: 1)*

The new politics of representation . . . also sets in motion an ideological contestation around the term, “ethnicity”. But in order to pursue that movement further, we will have to retheorize the concept of *difference*.

*(Hall 1992a: 256)*

It is interesting to return at the end of the 1990s to the literatures that first alerted us to the presence of ethnicity as a novel form of identification. Such a return should be approached, not in order to rediscover its purported origins, but to remind ourselves that the theorization of ethnicity, multiculturalism, and the emphasis on a politics of identity/difference so acutely present in our contemporary world, all have long and difficult trajectories. A few remarks on these trajectories are necessary so as to situate current theorization in a proper context. In particular, it is important to note that the history of the theorization of ethnicity is not a progressive and cumulative one. Rather, it is intimately bound up with political concerns and normative judgments. Consequently, any attempt to reconstruct its trajectory should take a genealogical form. That is, it has of necessity to start from where we are, from our current concerns and our present commitments, making visible the conditions under which particular theoretical accounts of ethnicity emerged and became disseminated. It is not possible to achieve anything approaching a full account of the complex genealogy of the uses and abuses of the term "ethnicity." To do so would require an investigation of the structural, historical, and academic contexts of emergence and surfaces on which it has been inscribed, as well as a full critical assessment of the achievements and failures of the politics and theories of ethnicity. In its stead it may be useful simply to remind ourselves of some of the main outlines and features of this trajectory. In this chapter I will trace out the movement from primordialist and instrumentalist approaches to ethnicity, to a more general engagement with questions of difference. I will give particular attention to the contribution of accounts of difference, drawing on poststructuralist and postcolonialist theorizations, that treat ethnicity as one amongst many possible forms of identification. In so doing, I aim to supplement these approaches with a consideration of the politics of difference, and its implications for the treatment of ethnicity.

Traditional debates on ethnic identity can be situated on a continuum of views ranging from primordialism to instrumentalism. That is, from views that ethnic identity stems from the givens of social existence – blood, speech, custom – which have an ineffable coerciveness in and of themselves (Geertz 1973: 259), to a view that ethnic identity is nothing but a mask deployed strategically to advance group interests that are often economic in character. The *primordialist* thesis, first discussed by Shils (1957) and elaborated upon by Geertz in the early 1960s, was and remains quite influential in discussions of ethnicity. One of the most prolific commentators on nationalism and ethnicity during the 1980s and 1990s, Anthony D. Smith (Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 6), treats contemporary forms of ethnic identification as nothing but a resurgence of more primordial identifications associated with "ethnies." Despite the emphasis in his work on the symbolic dimensions of identity, such as myths of common origin and shared historical memories, Smith retains the emphasis on the enduring, and even premodern, character of ethnicity. That is, modern forms of ethnic expression are ultimately a reactivation of older, more primordial forms. Diverging from this more culturalist turn, the 1980s also witnessed a recasting of primordialism in a sociobiological form. Van den Berghe (1986), for instance, argues that ethnicity has to be understood on the basis of kinship relations. Ethnicity for him is a manifestation of nepotism between kin that has a genetic basis. Con-

sequently, ethnogenesis and transmission depends on “successful reproduction”: ethnicity “always involves the cultural *and* genetic boundaries of a *breeding population*” (1986: 256). Primordialist approaches have been criticized, in particular, for failing to account for change, for working with overly static conceptions of ethnicity, and for naturalizing ethnic groups (Jenkins 1997: 44). More specifically, while sociobiological approaches are questioned for their biological reductionism, ethnosymbolic primordialists have been taken to task for an over-emphasis on symbolic phenomena at the expense of material factors in the constitution of ethnicity. By contrast, an emphasis on the role of material interests stands at the heart of instrumentalist approaches.

*Instrumentalist* approaches treat ethnicity as a resource for different interest groups. Analytical emphasis, in this case, falls on analyzing and uncovering the processes through which elites mobilize groups so as to further their own self-interest. Instrumentalism, drawing its initial inspiration from the work of Barth (1969), treats ethnicity as essentially malleable and thus open to elite manipulation. Like primordialism, instrumentalism is not a homogeneous category. It encompasses both neo-Marxist and rational choice approaches. In the case of the former, ethnicity is viewed as an instrument to allow mobilization around interests that are, ultimately, grounded in social class (Wolpe 1988). Hence, ethnicity is reduced to and explicated in class terms. Something similar occurs in rational choice approaches where ethnicity is analyzed from the perspective of rational actors who choose to join groups to secure specific individual ends (cf. Hechter 1986). Both of these types of analysis signally fail to treat ethnic identification as worthy of analysis in and of itself. As a consequence, identity and identification are reduced to a level of analysis which is deemed to be somehow more fundamental and politically more significant than ethnic identity itself.

This somewhat stale debate between primordialists and instrumentalists may be recast in order to throw more light on what is at stake in the discussion, and to bring us closer to contemporary theoretical debates on identity in general, and ethnic identities in particular. In order to do so, it is useful to concentrate on the question of the “reality” of ethnicity. From this vantage point, it is possible to discern at least three diverging positions on ethnicity. In the first case, ethnicity is treated as natural, as a given and as a nodal point around which identity is organized. This nodal point has an ahistorical value: it is the core of identity, regardless of historical context; it acts as an indicator of a homogeneous group identity; it is politically, socially, and culturally salient regardless of the specific context under analysis. This *essentialism* is particularly evident in primordialist approaches to ethnicity. The main problems with treating ethnicity in an essentialist fashion consist in denying the complexity of both the specific historical circumstances under which ethnicity comes to be a significant phenomenon, and the lack of internal homogeneity of ethnic identities. In the second, ethnicity is not accorded any reality of its own. Ethnicity is merely a marker for deeper, more significant social divisions. Since it is something purely epiphenomenal, this marker is manipulable. Elites are held to be in a position to mold popular feelings through the use of ethnic symbols to achieve ends unrelated to those symbols. This *nominalism* about ethnicity is characteristic particularly of instru-

mentalist approaches. It suffers from a reductionism that naively suggests that the force of ethnic forms of identification arise entirely from external inducement. The obverse side of this assumption suggests that were we to understand this process properly there would be nothing of significance left to engage with: ethnicity will simply dissolve.

Since the mid-1980s there has been, primarily as a result of an increasing engagement with poststructuralist theories, a significant shift away from both axes of this debate. Both the primordialist/essentialist and the instrumentalist/nominalist positions have come under fire from a third position, namely, *constructivism*. Whilst there are many different forms of constructivism or contextualism, commonly held tenets include *inter alia*, arguments for a context sensitive theory which is attentive to the complexities of processes of identity formation, and to the hybridity of identities, while not ignoring the political significance of ethnic forms of identification. In other words, there is, first, a shift away from the assumption of the ahistorical and given nature of ethnic identity, toward an emphasis on the analysis of the historical and political processes and practices through which it comes into being. Second, there is a break with the assumption that ethnicity is in and of itself, always, the core organizing feature of identity. This pluralization has shifted attention toward other forms of identification, be they racial, sexual, national or gendered, in short, to a preoccupation with question of *difference*. Simultaneously, it has facilitated a more politically sensitive and nuanced approach to the question of ethnicity. Whilst not assuming that it always would be politically significant, there has been a break with the instrumentalism of the nominalist position. That is, the emphasis on the constructed character of ethnic identities has also led to an acknowledgment that whether or not such identities will be politically salient is an entirely contextual matter.

### FROM IDENTITY TO IDENTIFICATION

*Every social community reproduced by the functioning of institutions is imaginary. . . it is based on the projection of individual existence into the weft of a collective narrative, on the recognition of a common name. . . But this comes down to accepting that . . . only imaginary communities are real.*

*(Balibar 1991: 93)*

Despite these advances, much of the current theorization of the phenomenon of ethnicity have remained trapped in the strictures of a distinction, widely deployed in the social and human sciences, between the objective and the subjective. Separating the subjective and the objective on the grounds of the assumption that the former is “purely personal” and the latter is a “given,” simply reintroduces the problematic features of the primordialism/instrumentalism divide through the back door. What is needed is a rethinking of the relation between the subjective and the objective, so as to facilitate an engagement with the social and political processes shaping ethnic forms of identification.

Recasting this distinction has been made possible by a theorization of the imaginary constitution of society (cf. Anderson 1991; Castoriadis 1987; see Finlayson, chapter 26, in this volume), a view that contains the possibility of a break with the topographical conception of the social underlying the traditional subjective/objective distinction. On this reading, far from simply “given,” objectivity is nothing but that which is socially constituted, and which has become *sedimented* over time. The feature of “objectivity,” thus, may be attributed to any sedimented social practice or identity. Positing objectivity in this manner has the further consequence of opening the space for the thought of *desedimentation*: any sedimented practice may be put into question by political contestation, and once its historically constituted character is revealed, it loses its naturalized status as “objectively given.”

The consequences of this shift for the analysis of the phenomenon of ethnicity are far-reaching. Once the givenness and objectivity of identity is put into question, and a purely subjectivist account of ethnic identity is problematized, the way is open to develop a theoretical account of ethnic *identification*. As Ahmed (1997: 157) argues, when we can no longer assume that the subject simply “has” an identity in the form of a properly demarcated place of belonging, what is required is an analysis of the processes and structures of identification whereby identities *come to be seen* as such places of belonging. This recognition of the importance of identification should not, however, overshadow differences of approach amongst constructivist theorists.

### DIFFERENT FORMS OF CONSTRUCTIVISM: FROM LINGUISTIC MONISM TO POSTSTRUCTURALISM

Constructivist positions take many forms, ranging from linguistic monism where linguistic construction is taken to be generative and deterministic through instrumentalist accounts such as those discussed earlier, to fully-fledged post-structuralist approaches. The difficulties arising from linguistic monism are many. First, if the act of construction is understood as a purely verbal act, it is unclear how such an act would be linked to the materiality of the real, since ethnic markers place certain limitations on what could “constructed” verbally. Second, as with instrumentalist accounts, construction is still understood as a unilateral process initiated from above, thus reinforcing a top-down view of the production of ethnic identity which leaves little, if any, space for human agency and resistance. Third, both of these positions fail to account for the force of ethnic identification by treating it either as a matter of individual choice, or as a matter of elite manipulation.

In order to outline an alternative, poststructuralist account of constructivism, it is necessary to specify clearly what main features such a position would have to contain. As argued earlier, it has to break with the view of ethnic identity as either imposed or merely subjective. It must, therefore, provide us with an account of the subject and of identification which takes cognisance of wider power relations while not treating such identification as if it were imposed on passive subjects. It must, in addition, be able to address the complexity and

hybridity of identities, whilst avoiding linguistic determinism. It must, therefore, contain a plausible account of materiality and its role in the production of images for identification. The latter is especially important if one is to accommodate the force of radicalized identities without giving way to the spuriousness of a sociobiological approach.

### RADICALIZED IDENTITIES: THE QUESTION OF MATERIALITY

Theorists such as Wallman (1978) and Eriksen (1993) have argued that physical appearance should be considered as only one possible marker of ethnic boundaries amongst many, and that ideas of race may or may not be an important factor in ethnic politics. These insights resonate with those developed from within poststructuralist theorization of identity/difference more generally. Once one moves toward a constructivist analytic proper, neither race nor ethnicity can be treated as natural givens. Indeed, both result from complicated processes of production and identification. Whether such identification takes a radicalized or an ethnicized form or both, is a matter largely if not solely of historico-political circumstances (Mason 1999: 21). Omi and Winant (1986), for instance, concentrate on the radicalization of identities in the United States, while Hall (1996) treats the movement towards hybrid ethnic forms of identification in the United Kingdom, and Norval (1996) investigates the complex interpenetration of radicalized and ethnicized forms of identification in apartheid South Africa.

Two areas in particular have to be addressed if a constructivist analytic is to be deepened in a poststructuralist direction which emphasizes the need to avoid a pure contextualism. The first concerns the theorization of the presumed materiality of the body, and of any other “physical” markers. The second is related to the first. It concerns the theorization of the politics of ethnicity. In terms of the former, Alcoff’s work on racial embodiment and Butler’s on the body are particularly significant. The need to deal with “the body” arises, *inter alia*, from objections against early constructivists that seemingly ignore the material visibility of color and of cultural practices and tend to absorb them into accounts of the linguistic meaning conferred upon such phenomena. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler (1993: 30) argues that, in order to counter such linguistic determinism, one needs to recognize that the theoretical options “are not exhausted by presuming materiality, on the one hand, and negating materiality, on the other.” Rather, matter must be understood as always *posited or signified as prior*. The body signified as prior to signification, is then always already an effect of signification. In this manner, she puts into question the brute givenness of matter, and by implication of the body, and of color. In arguing that signifying acts delimit and contour matter she does not also suggest that the body, color, matter, does not matter. From this quite abstract starting point, it is necessary to move toward a more phenomenological approach to the body, an approach that would allow us to come to grips with the effects and the production of effects arising from embodiment.

It is here that Alcoff’s work is significant, for it begins to develop an account that is both less abstract and politically more sensitive to the issues at stake

(Alcoff 1999a; 1999b). She suggests that a phenomenological approach may render our tacit knowledge about racial embodiment explicit (1999b). It may, for instance, uncover the ways in which we, without being explicitly conscious of it, read and interpret bodily markers as significant. These markers are not in any sense natural or given. She concentrates on the visual registry of embodiment, a registry which, she argues, is historically evolving, culturally variegated but which, nevertheless, has a powerful structuring influence on individual experience. The account offered by Alcoff has the further advantage of being genealogical and thus critical in character. The phenomenological descriptions, far from naturalizing and consolidating racism, reactivate the contingency of the visual registry and have, at least, the potential to disrupt the naturalization of racialization.

Thus, to point to the formation of racial or ethnic identities in this sense, and to the fact that attention needs to be given to the materialization of categories such as the body, color and other ethnic markers as a result of political practices is not also to assert that they are unimportant or irrelevant. Similarly, to emphasize the contingency of socially inscribed identities does not mean that they are fungible, that they may be picked and chosen as if from a supermarket shelf. To the contrary, it directs attention to the historical, social, and political processes through which images for identification are constructed and sustained, contested and negotiated. One consequence of this shift toward identification is that the focus of analysis of ethnic identities is laterally displaced. It is no longer adequate simply to ask “in whose interest are ethnic identities constituted?” Rather, we need to inquire into the processes through which ethnicity becomes a significant site of identification that may or may not entail a construction of the “interests” of a particular group, and that may or may not become a site of political contestation. This is perhaps the most significant element of the politics of ethnic identification today. Claims and demands made in the name of ethnic groups cannot be understood without giving attention to the dimension of identification. And identification, while it may be closely associated with felt discrimination and the unequal distribution of resources in society, cannot be reduced to the latter.

### **HYBRID ETHNICITIES: RETHINKING PLURALISM**

The problem of reductionism occurs, not only where ethnicity is reduced to other modes of identification based, for instance, upon class but also where there is an over-concentration on the presumed homogeneity of ethnic identities. Such an emphasis on homogeneity, purity, and authenticity always occurs at the expense of the recognition of difference and diversity and it has its roots in the manner in which “plurality” was thought in early accounts of ethnicity. Jenkins (1997: 25) points out that the conceptual replacement of the “tribe” by “ethnicity” was accompanied by the development of the idea of a “plural society.” Both of these changes were related to the changing postwar world and the loss of empire. In particular, it addressed the need to conceptualize, within the colonial administrative and institutional frameworks, the convergence of separate insti-

tutions for “Europeans” and urbanized local groups on the one hand, and “tribespeople” on the other. Thus, while the term “ethnicity” was an analytical category within urban anthropology, with which to make sense of these new social and cultural formations (Eade 1996: 58), the term “plural society” (taken over from Furnivall’s analysis of colonial policy in South-East Asia in the 1940s) had to capture the institutional incorporation of different ethnic groups into a single state (Jenkins 1997: 26). The idea of a plural society was created in opposition to the European ideal of homogeneous nation-states. However, this recognition of plurality at the level of state institutions was based upon a homogenizing account of identity, both of the ethnicities of the colonized and of the nationhood of the colonizers. More recent developments in postcolonial theory have sought to overcome the problems associated with the assumptions underlying this model. In particular, new theorization’s have problematized the idea that only “minorities” or “Third world” peoples have ethnicity, as well as the assumption that European nations were indeed internally homogeneous.

Contemporary postcolonial theories of identity are explicitly situated within the context of contemporary concerns with diaspora, displacement, and the politics of cultural difference. So, for instance, one finds an emphasis on displacement as the starting-point for rethinking questions of identity in the work of Hall, Spivak, and Bhabha. Hall utilizes this perspective to extricate the concept of ethnicity from its anti-racist paradigm, “where it connotes the immutable difference of minority experience.” It then becomes a term which takes into account the historical positions, cultural conditions, and political conjunctures through which all identity is constructed. It becomes a concept connoting the “recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience . . . We are all, in a sense, *ethnically* located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are” (Hall 1988a: 5). For Hall, as for Juteau (1996: 55), what is important is to show the extent to which ethnicity is not the exclusive characteristic of the other. It marks every identity as such.

Bhabha, by contrast, continues to focus on the consequences of displacement for the *minority* subject. His development of the concept “hybridity” serves to act as a signifier of the irreducibility of cultural difference (1994b: 37). Before exploring this any further, it is worthwhile noting that as with other terms in this debate, that of hybridity has a longer history. As Papastergiadis shows, hybridity has shadowed every organic theory of identity, and was deeply inscribed in nineteenth-century discourses of scientific racism where it served as a metaphor for the negative consequences of racial encounters (1997: 257–79). However, for Bhabha, hybridity is precisely *not* to be understood as a mixture of pre-given identities or essences. Rather, it signifies the attempt to capture the non-purity of identity, the non-coincidence of the self with itself, and the unhomeliness of existence which arises as an effect of colonial power. The production of hybridization, moreover, “turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention.” (Bhabha 1994b: 171) It is from here that the concepts of homogeneous cultures and national communities, the very logic of identity conceived as pure, intact and self-sufficient, is being challenged and subverted. Bhabha thus moves almost seamlessly from a conception of hybrid identities –

exemplified in the experience of displacement – to a politics of resistance, based on transgressive discourses which aim to unsettle liberal multiculturalist and assimilative political strategies. Bhabha has frequently been criticized for his easy celebration of the condition of displacement, unhomeliness and hybridity, and for the naivete of the politics that follows from it (Ahmed 1997: 153–67; Papastergiadis 1997: 267; Norval 1999). Suffice it to mention here that the disruption of old certainties and traditional identities, by no means, lead inexorably to an acceptance of greater diversity.

The idea of hybrid identities does, nevertheless, have important consequences for our understanding of ethnicity. As Bhabha (1994a: 269) notes, it forms a response to the initial pluralism that marked the questioning of homogeneous identities. The shift away from “class” and “gender” as primary conceptual categories has resulted in an awareness of the multiple subject positions – generational, gendered, racial, locational – that inhabit any claim to identity. Thinking about identity in terms of hybridity moves beyond this pluralism of identities to focus attention on the “interstitial moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of ‘differences’.” (1994a: 269) As a result, the analytical questions that we seek to answer now are related to the formation of subjects that become possible in the overlapping and displacement of domains of *difference*. Difference here is not a reflection of pre-given ethnic traits set in sedimented traditions. Rather, it is to be conceived of as a complex process of negotiation, the outcome of struggles and antagonisms with dominant traditions that open up spaces through which dominant designations of difference may be resisted and recast. However, while Bhabha offers a theoretically sophisticated account of the inherently fissured nature of identity, he lacks the tools to address the complexities and ambiguities of the political struggles that emerge from these spaces. To be able to address these questions the study of ethnicity and identity must relinquish its isolation from political theory and engage with the wider theoretical concerns and conditions under which it may become politically salient.

### CONCLUSION: RELOCATING THE POLITICS OF ETHNICITY

The politics of ethnicity, all too often, is associated with a study of “conflict” and its regulation in “deeply divided societies” (cf. Lijphart 1977; Horowitz 1985; McGarry and O’Leary 1993). It presupposes ethnicity and sets out to develop mechanisms to “accommodate” it. The assumptions on which this paradigm rest have been problematized along with the conception of subjectivity which informs it (Norval 1993). Based upon a conception of homogeneous, given identities, treated as if they were of necessity incommensurable, this approach perpetuates rather than accounts for the myths which have fed conflictual relations. As Taylor (1999: 123) remarks, we need to break free of the belief that “race” and “ethnicity” are simply forces that we “encounter” in politics. Instead, we need to engage with the difficult issue of learning to distinguish between a politics that arises from the legitimacy of difference and a politics resting on coercive unity. This, in turn, necessitates an engagement with the question of democracy since a politics of legitimate difference can only avoid the

problem of coercive unity in so far as it is inserted into a *democratic* context, a context in which identity is open to challenge, negotiation, and renewal. While accepting that an understanding of the hybridity and ambiguity of identity in no way leads inexorably to a democratic politics, a democratic context – more than any other – facilitates accentuating “exposure to contingency and increases the likelihood that the affirmation of difference in identity will find expression in public life” (Connolly 1991: 193) .

This is where accounts of the need to move away from more traditional accounts of pluralism become pertinent (Norval 1993; Bhabha 1994a). The radicalization of traditional pluralism is akin to what Connolly (1995: xiv–xv) has called a process of active *pluralization* that seeks to turn an appreciation of established diversity into an active cultivation of difference. Pluralization, in this sense, would refer to subjecting static conceptions of “cultural diversity” based on categories such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity as givens, to the disruptive effects of a conception of difference as irreducible, and to actively cultivating the visibility of the deeply split nature of identity politically. Such an active cultivation of difference is necessary, first and foremost, because there is always the danger that ethnic forms of identification may become exclusionary and self-enclosed. This possibility arises from the very context in which ethnic forms of identification often emerge: in response to exclusionary and homogenizing nationalistic projects. There is, moreover, the danger that ethnic identifications *already* contain exclusions within them. That is why it is not enough to focus analytic attention on the articulation of ethnic demands against assimilative or homogenizing state projects. The democratic logic must go all the way down. All forms of identification must not only be open to critical interrogation, but if they are to be democratic, should foster and encourage it.

### Further Reading

- Alcoff, L. M. 1999a: “Philosophy and racial identity.” In M. Bulmer and J. Solomos (eds.) *Ethnic and Racial Studies Today*. London: Routledge, 29–44.
- Connolly, W. E. 1995: *The Ethos of Pluralization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hall, S. 1996: “Politics of identity.” In T. Ranger, Y. Samad, and O. Stuart (eds.) *Culture, Identity and Politics. Ethnic Minorities in Britain*. Aldershot: Avebury, 129–35.
- Jenkins, R. 1997: *Rethinking Ethnicity. Arguments and Explorations*. London: Sage.