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Ethnicity

The 1960s and 1970s mark a fundamental shift in the way that many people, including sociologists, analysed inter-group relations, or 'race relations' as it had been called up until then. The shift occurred because of the challenges that came from new social movements, especially in the United States, and by the altered circumstances of world politics. With regard to the latter, the 1950s and 1960s saw the creation of a large number of newly independent states and independence movements, especially in Africa and Asia. The change was apparent particularly in international forums, such as the United Nations where the number of African and Asian nations represented went from twelve at the end of World War II to 57 in 1964. These nations were highly critical of their former colonial masters and of the racism which was embedded in such colonialism. From these experiences a new and powerful generation of writers and leaders, such as Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, emerged. They combined anti-racist and anti-colonial arguments with a rejection of the dominance of Europe. Also in the 1960s, there were the new social movements in western countries, notably feminism and civil rights groups, which employed and expanded the arguments of writers, such as Fanon, in direct protest action. Like Fanon, these movements saw the necessity for decolonization to take place so that blacks and women could be freed from the encompassing and dominating oppression of the past. In particular, they sought to forge their own systems of thought and action and to create a more positive, liberating identity. In this sense, identity was politicized and new conceptions of self and group established. The old notions were challenged and 'race' was discarded in favour of a concept that was much more positive in its approach and which did not employ the biological determinism of the past. Ethnicity was the new term which was used by sociologists and others to acknowledge the *positive* feelings of belonging to a cultural group. In the 1990s, ethnicity has once again been combined with nationalism in both the capitalist and communist worlds for both positive and negative reasons.

Ethnic Groups and Ethnicity

Ethnicity is essentially an identity that reflects the cultural experiences and feelings of a particular group.

> An ethnic group is defined here as a collectivity within a larger society having real

groups for political purposes. Ethnicity could be adapted and modified to fulfill a number of purposes. But certain conditions needed to exist for this to occur.

First, as Schermerhorn notes above, there must be something that binds the group together. This could be a particular history of oppression as in the case of the Afro-American or Jew, or it could be something like the reciprocity that reflects certain commitments and relationships between kin. But some form of bonding is required and certain practices and beliefs are used to symbolize this difference.[1] In addition, for this bonding to retain its importance over time, there must be reasons for individual members to remain committed and involved. There have to be *advantages* for a person to claim their ethnicity. These might be positive in the sense that they confer an important sense of identity and well-being, or perhaps the combined economic resources of the ethnic group are shared so that there are very obvious financial advantages in being an active member of the group. Or the reasons could be negative to the extent that the group has faced or continues to face discrimination. Here ethnicity becomes a defensive means of providing support in a hostile environment. The group's resources can be used to protect members and to confront those outsiders who pose a threat. In both cases, ethnicity is a response to a competitive or hostile environment and members gain from retaining their contact with other members of the ethnic group and by pooling resources. Further, these collective resources can be used in the public sphere to confront others and to claim equity for the ethnic group. It is this latter phenomenon which became so apparent in the 1960s. Groups around the world battled for the right to use their own (minority) language, to redress traditional grievances about land and self-government, or to claim national resources for the welfare of members of the ethnic group. Ethnic identity was used in an expressly political way to protect group members and to argue publicly about resources and equity. I would like to talk about Māori activism of the 1970s and 1980s in such a way, but there are some aspects that need to be acknowledged before talking about New Zealand.

There is often an assumption that ethnicity is something traditional and unchanging. People talk about younger Māori activists as somehow separate from 'true' Māori culture, or that some new form of Māori practice is non-traditional and therefore neither authentic nor acceptable. The ethnic revival of the 1960s and 1970s has shown that ethnicity is an extremely malleable product that continually changes according to circumstances and requirements. Jewish ethnicity in New Zealand (see below) illustrates this point. In order to politicize ethnicity, it has to be made appropriate to *contemporary* conditions and, as a result, it is not uncommon to see traditional aspects discarded as redundant or even as a barrier, while other elements are emphasized or even new cultural symbols created. In this process of selection and rejection, the leaders of the ethnic group play a critical role. They guide and reinforce change and their ability to alter the ethnicity of the group without alienating members is important to the success of

politicizing a particular ethnicity. They also act as brokers in the wider society. They must have a base within the ethnic group and be able to claim to represent the group. But, typically, they also have skills and knowledge of the world beyond the ethnic group, and this ability to link cultural authenticity with non-ethnic skills confirms their leadership role (see Pearson, 1990, for a further discussion). They interact with dominant agencies and individuals on behalf of the ethnic group, and yet can still participate in the ethnic traditions of the group. It is often these brokers who convince others within the ethnic group to adapt and change the expression of their ethnicity.

Another matter which should be addressed is the invisible nature of ethnicity. It is difficult for an outsider to understand why ethnicity is important to members of a group or what actually occurs within the group. The experience of being culturally different or of facing a particular history of discrimination provides a set of memories and feelings that are not easily shared. The outsider may gain some understanding from participation in the activities of the group, or from accounts that are available in the media and other sources, but the experiences and attitudes of the ethnic group are still difficult to fully comprehend. It is confirmed by the way in which the outsider interprets the ethnicity of the group. Struck by the very different practices and values of an ethnic group, the outsider makes a judgement about the importance of these. From within the group, a quite different judgement about what is important, and what is not, could be made. If ethnicity is to be preserved, then many aspects must be kept within the preserve of the group otherwise the participation of outsiders and their knowledge of what occurs may weaken the group's strength. Some aspects of ethnicity will be available to outsiders, but others will not. Outsiders and ethnic group members will inevitably see a particular ethnicity in quite different ways.

Finally, people will differ in their commitment to a particular ethnicity. In the case of all ethnic groups, there will be some who are eligible for membership but who do not want to be seen as part of the group or to be involved in their activities. In the New Zealand Jewish community, for example, there have been some who have married non-Jewish people, who have anglicized their names and religion, and have not bothered to socialize the next generation into Jewish ethnicity. So there will always be people who decline to be identified as part of a particular ethnicity even though they are eligible to claim such an identity. Then within the group, there will also be different ways of practising ethnicity and different levels of commitment. As Macpherson (1984; 1991) illustrates with regard to the Samoan community in New Zealand, there are at least three different ways of acting as a Samoan, with quite different implications for things like language use or participation in ethnic events. No ethnic group is totally unified or in complete agreement about their own ethnicity (see the section on Jewish ethnicity below). In most cases, there will be some events and networks that bind the group together but there may be important distinctions within the group. Ethnic groups are as divided, or as unified, as any social grouping.

> or putative [supposedly] common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood. . . . A necessary accompaniment is some consciousness of kind [or ethnicity] among members of the group. (Schermerhorn, 1970: 12.)

For an ethnic group to exist, there needs to be cultural practices or beliefs that define it as different from other groups in society. These symbolic elements, as Schermerhorn refers to them, could reflect the particular kin structures, diet, religious beliefs, rituals, language, dress, economic activities, or political affiliation of the group. Typically, ethnicity would include different practices in a number of these areas. Who is included in an ethnic group is defined by the membership of that group according to certain agreed criteria. It is not like 'race' where membership of a particular 'race' is specified by others or dominant groups. In the case of an ethnic group, there needs to be some collective consciousness of difference and of being related to others who share those differences. For most, this difference is culturally defined and in ways that are not always obvious to an outsider. Indeed some ethnic groups are invisible to the wider society and it is only within the group that a feeling of ethnicity prevails.

The sociological approach to ethnicity was changed by the events of the 1950s and 1960s (see above). In particular, the political nature of ethnicity was given much more prominence in response to the way in which cultural identity was used in political struggles. The ethnic revolution, as Fishman (1985) calls it, was unanticipated by social scientists. It was assumed that in the industrialized societies of the western world, ethnic identities would disappear to be replaced by class or national identities. In countries like the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, it was thought that migrants and their descendants would abandon their ethnicity in favour of a new national identity (Australian, American) or one that reflected the occupational experiences of the economically complex capitalist societies. But in practically every western country, there was an ethnic revival in the 1960s which has continued on into the 1990s and, if anything, is gaining in momentum and importance. Native peoples and migrant ethnic groups from the American Irish to the Welsh or Basques asserted their traditional identity very forcefully, both in their home countries and in the countries to which they had migrated. Alongside these revivals, new ethnic identities were established (ethnogenesis). For instance, Afro-Americans asserted a new black consciousness and created a sense of unity where little had existed before. It was a consciousness that called upon the common experience of being an enslaved and oppressed people, which used certain symbols (religion, food, music) from both an American and an African past and which also created new symbols.

With these developments came the realization that ethnicity was still very much a viable and important aspect of social life which could be used to mobilize