Ethnicity
Second Edition
Key Concepts

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## Contents

*Preface to the First Edition* ix  
*Preface to the Second Edition* xi  
*First Edition Acknowledgements* xiii  
*Second Edition Acknowledgements* xiv

**Introduction** 1  
   The ontological status of the term ‘ethnicity’ 2  
   An example of groups and names 4  
   Fixed categories and diffuse identities 4  
   Do people act by reference to their ethnic identity? 6  
   Ethnic cleansing or racial segregation? 7

1 **Ethnos: Descent and Culture Communities** 12  
   Shared references 13  
   Stock, type, people, breed 15  
   Nation 16  
   Race 17  
   The demise of race 18  
   Culture and ethnicity are not the same 19  
   Defining the core and the divergences 22  
   Summary 23

2 **Multiple Discourses of Ethnicity: Differences by Country and Region** 24  
   The USA 25  
   Immigration to the USA 27  
   Changes of the late twentieth century 30
vi Contents

Ethnicity and changing ideas of race 30
Where have all the races gone? The case of the UK 36
Discourse of races in postcolonial Malaysia 38
Asia and Latin America 44
Ethnic classification across the world 47
Summary: ethnicity and nation in their place 49

3 The Demise of Race: The Emergence of ‘Ethnic’ 51
Ethnic group (ethnie) and nation 52
The demise of race 53
Scholarly, popular and political ideas 54
Lloyd Warner and American ethnic groups 57
The scholarly tradition: Max Weber and ethnic groups 60
Anthropology and social anthropology 63
Real groups 65
Summary 69

4 The Primordialism Debate 71
Primordialism 71
‘Primordial’ as a sociological concept 74
Edward Shils and primordial, personal, sacred and civil ties 75
Clifford Geertz and the integrative revolution 78
After Geertz 81
Judith Nagata and mobilized identities 82
Summary: primordial ethnic groups 86

5 How Real are Groups? Political Ethnicity,
Symbolic Ethnicity and Competition Theory 88
Cultures and boundaries 89
Competition theory 92
Class as a complicating factor in ethnic competition analysis; ethnicity as a complicating factor in class analysis 106
Critiques of groupism 110
Summary 112

6 Migration and Ethnicity 115
Forced migrations 115
Migrants and plural societies 116
## Contents

World migration 117
Internal migrants 119
Professional migrations 120
Undocumented workers 122
Migration, gender and family 123
Questions of integration and citizenship 124
The case of the USA: migration and ethnicity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries 126
America’s growing Hispanic population 127
Hispanics and Mexican Americans: social profiles 128
Likely futures for new migrants and their families and for American ethnicities 130
The renewed debate about the concept of assimilation 132
Occupational structure: the hourglass labour market 135
Summary: the opposing views 137

### 7 Social Conditions of Ethnicity: Global Economy and Precarious States 139
Theorizing the conditions of ethnic action 139
Features of the contemporary world 140
Postcolonial economic conditions 143
William Julius Wilson and the disappearance of work 144
Economic change and Hispanic migration into the USA 146
Precarious, factionalized, democratizing states: unstable geopolitical conditions 152
Ethnic conflict, violence, insecurity and the state 156
Ethnicity and geopolitics 161
Post-Soviet Russia 164
Summary 167

### 8 Ethnic Majorities and Nationalism in Europe: Globalization and Right-Wing Movements 169
The nation 169
Nation, class and resentment 171
Nation and majority 174
Contents

Class, welfare, the state and immigrants 175
Right-wing movements in Europe 177
Multiculturalism and identity politics 181
Summary: reflections on nation, resentment and identity 184

9 Ethnicity and the Modern World:
General Conclusions 187
A theory of ethnicity? 187
Ethnicity as theory 188
Sociology of ethnicity: identity and action in context 190
Late capitalism and the modern social world 191
The contradictions of late capitalist modernity 193
Individualism 195
Two worlds – the liberal and the authoritarian 195
Four principal problematics 196
Modernity and ethnicity 198
Ethnicity in its place 199

Bibliography 204

Index 221
In this book I have sought to meet the aims of the Key Concepts series. This is to provide an introduction to a key concept in the social sciences; to discuss some of the main literature in this field; and to provide a commentary on important debates within the subject. All this I have sought to do with respect to ethnicity. In addition, I have tried to establish a framework for thinking about ethnicity within the context of ‘modernity’ or ‘late capitalist modernity’. This is an attempt to resituate ethnicity within a much broader sociological canvas.

In the early chapters I argue that an understanding of ‘ethnicity’ must be set alongside our understanding of ‘race’ and ‘nation’. The meanings of these words are not the same as that of ‘ethnic group’ but they cover a great deal of the same terrain and it is important to acknowledge this.

In looking at important debates and literature I concentrate in chapters 4 and 5 on the debates surrounding ‘primordialism’ or the idea of ‘primordial identities’; and on the debates about the work of Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan which set the tone for much of the discussion of ethnicity in the USA. Although many examples are taken from the USA and the UK, I have drawn on materials about Malaysia to show how discourses of ethnicity are articulated in different ways in different social contexts.
Preface to the First Edition

In the later chapters, I look at some aspects of ‘late capitalist modernity’ and the place of ethnicity within it. This includes global migration, local and global inequalities, the strength of the state, the theme of individualism, and the question of national identity and majority ethnicity. I have tried to cover key areas in ways which will help new readers as well as providing something for more experienced readers.
Preface to the Second Edition

The main purpose of the changes I have made to *Ethnicity* (2003) for this second and revised edition has been to update the material. This is with regard both to new published work and to the social changes of the recent period. The opening chapters are the least changed because they remain as a fundamental review of the key concepts and ideas in the field. In chapter 2, I have added to the discussion of ‘discourses of ethnicity’ by adding the cases of Japan, Brazil and Singapore, and a world study of ethnic terminology.

Larger changes come in the later chapters. Chapter 5 had previously been an assessment of some key moments in the ethnicity literature, and the 1960s and 1970s work of Glazer and Moynihan formed a large part: this discussion is now much reduced. In the second edition, more space is given to a vital strand in ethnicity conceptualization – the idea of ‘threat’ or ‘competition’. This is well suited to the general argument of my book – that we must look carefully at the material contexts of action, where action is ethnically ‘aligned’. I explore the work of Edna Bonacich, who argues that we can understand ethnic antagonism within a context of class conflict and competition. The examples in these case studies are mainly from the USA so that these additions have the secondary effect of examining studies of the historic relationship of ‘black’ and ‘white’ in American society.
In chapter 6, I have concentrated on updating material about migration, especially reflecting on increased migration to the USA from Central and South America. The debates about segmented assimilation are connected to the question of Hispanic or Latino migration. New migration to the USA is also apparent in the changes I have made to chapter 7, where the focus is on political and economic power and inequalities. It is in chapter 8 that I have, perhaps, most shifted the argument. In the 2003 edition the emphasis was on ethnicity, racism and the ‘discontents of modernity’. Although elements of this argument remain, I am less convinced of it than I was then. If we are to show how and why action comes to be informed by ethnic identities and interest – especially where it is marked by a high degree of antagonism – then we must be more specific about which aspects of the modern world make for a more ethnicized or racialized world. Put another way, we need to show which dimensions of modernity impel actors to act along the lines of ethnic divisions.

The economic and political uncertainties are, in 2009, greater than ever. If I were pushed, I could essay a forward view of the implications of these present uncertainties for ethnic divisions and antagonisms. But that is not my principal purpose here – and may give too many hostages to fortune. I hope the reader of this book will have a broader understanding of the field and the tools with which they can make such judgements themselves.
First Edition
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Steve Fenton, 2009
For a term which only came to be widely used in the 1970s, ‘ethnicity’ now plays an important part in the sociological imagination, and in policy and political discourses. It is worth attempting to be clear about it. In the present volume I have tackled this question along two different lines. The first task is to establish how we might sensibly use the terms ‘ethnic group’ and ‘ethnicity’. The second is to explore the social conditions under which ethnic identities become significant in social action. The first requires being clear about what it means to speak of a person’s ‘ethnic identity’ or ‘belonging to an ethnic community’. We should not assume that all people do either of these things. In many cases, people would look at you quite blankly if you asked them to speak about their ‘ethnicity’. The second task requires exploring a wide range of circumstances which influence whether people are at all likely to make ethnicity a relevant category of social action. In pursuing the first task, I have looked at the explicit and implicit meanings of the terms ‘ethnic’, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic group’, and the related terms ‘race’ and ‘nation’. In the second task, I have outlined, sometimes with full knowledge and sometimes speculatively, the circumstances under which ethnic identities become an important dimension of action. The first part of the book addresses the questions most valuable to new students of the field; the second part will, I hope, appeal to new and experienced students alike.
2 Introduction

With regard to the definition of ethnicity, a key debate is whether, for the purposes of sociological theory, the terms ‘ethnic group’ and ‘ethnicity’ refer to sociological realities which are substantial, embedded in group life and individual experience; or whether these terms point to some rather more diffuse and ill-defined identities which have fleeting moments of importance, and should be understood as ‘socially constructed’ rather than profound and ‘real’. In theorizing the conditions under which ethnicity becomes sociologically important – even decisive – I conclude that a theory of ethnicity has to be a theory of the contexts under which it is situationally relevant. This conclusion is diffused through the book, but it can be rehearsed at the beginning as well as recapitulated at the end. I conclude that:

As a general rule it should be understood that there cannot be a theory of ethnicity, nor can ‘ethnicity’ be regarded as a theory. Rather there can be a theory of the modern social world, as the material and cultural context for the expression of ethnic identities. This is to reject all separation of ‘ethnicity’ or ‘racism’ or ‘national identity’ from the social and theoretical mainstream. It is to re-position the interest in ethnicity within the central domain of the sociological imagination – the structuring of the modern world, class formations and class cultures, and the tensions between private lives, cultures, and the cohesion of communal and public life.

Much of the rest of this book will be an exercise in filling out that argument.

The ontological status of the term ‘ethnicity’

The very natural supposition of those who read about ethnicity, or class or nation for example, is that the word refers directly to something ‘out there’. The student’s wish is to find the definition which is the most precise in capturing this ‘thing out there’. In practice, it is rarely as simple as this. One text on ethnicity suggests that the best way of thinking about it is as an intellectual construct of the observers (Banks 1996). And a scholarly article on the ‘nation’ (Tishkov 2000) advises
that we should stop using the word: ‘forget the nation’ Tishkov writes. Of course, to say that something is an ‘intellectual construct’ is not the same as saying it doesn’t exist. Rather it is reminding us, as Banks rightly does, that whilst something is happening – people march under banners, form associations, kill one another, dress up and dance and sing, follow guidance about whom they should marry – the particular term or terms used to describe these things are the observers’ elaborations. These elaborations can take on a life of their own. This is not, however, to think ethnic groups or nations out of existence: it would be dispiriting to think that you were writing a book about something which doesn’t exist.

I do think there is something ‘out there’ which corresponds to what observers call ‘ethnicity’. At the same time, I do not believe that ethnicity is anything more than a broad and loose denoting of an area of interest; it is not, on its own, a theoretical standpoint, nor is it likely that there can be a unitary theory of ethnicity. We can make a start by thinking of ethnicity as referring to social identities – typically about ‘descent’ and ‘cultural difference’ – which are deployed under certain conditions. A further step or two would be to say that ethnicity refers to the social construction of descent and culture, the social mobilization of descent and culture and the meanings and implications of classification systems built around them. People or peoples do not just possess cultures or share ancestry; they elaborate these into the idea of a community founded upon these attributes. Indeed, it is entirely possible for people to elaborate an idea of community despite the fact that claims to sharing descent and culture are decidedly questionable. Two books on national ‘descent and culture communities’ have had great impact with their titles of the Invention of Tradition and Imagined Communities (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Anderson 1983). For all that there is a difference between ‘imagined’ and ‘imaginary’, these words ‘imagined’ and ‘invention’ have loomed large in the study of ethnic groups, nations and nationalism. Nations and ethnic groups are frequently viewed as socially constructed, imagined or invented, and certainly not as merely groups who share descent and culture. So when we start with this phrase ‘descent and culture communities’, we should
recognize the danger of over-concretizing the communities. But in another sense, there really are white Americans of European descent; there really are Malaysians of Chinese descent. When it comes to viewing groups as ‘real’ and viewing them as ‘constructed’, we want to have our cake and eat it. An example may help.

An example of groups and names

In a report on Sarawak’s population – Sarawak is part of Malaysia in the north of the island of Borneo – in 1968, Michael Leigh listed some 25 ethnic groups and 47 sub-groups (Leigh 1975). Leigh nowhere uses the term ‘Dayak’ to describe the population although many of the references he cites do. Dayak, a Malay word meaning ‘up-country’, certainly continues to have currency but is a very loose descriptor for peoples living both sides of the Malaysia–Indonesia borders. When in 2001 local groups in Kalimantan, Indonesia (on the southern and Indonesian side of the border in Borneo), fought and killed to drive out Madurese immigrants, these local groups were widely referred to, in the international press, as ‘Dayaks’ or ‘Dayak tribesmen’. On the Malaysian side of the border in Sarawak, it is common to hear people described as, for example, Iban or Bidayuh – two ‘Dayak’ groupings – but the broad term Dayak is often used too, and one of the state’s political parties is the Parti Bangsa Dayak Sarawak – the Dayak People’s Party of Sarawak. In what sense, we could ask, are ‘Dayaks’ really an ethnic group?

To put the same question in the western world, we could ask – in what sense are ‘Irish Americans’ truly an ethnic group?

Fixed categories and diffuse identities

How fixed are these ethnic categories and what do they rely upon? In the Sarawak case they could be said to rely on some of the characteristics of the groups themselves – the language and dialect differences, for instance, are actual and
important; people of a particular grouping are identified with certain areas ‘up-country’, and there are, for example, more Bidayuh to the south of the capital Kuching and more Iban in the districts north and east of Kuching; and traditionally there are differences of custom in, for example, the style of construction of longhouses. Certainly, an individual Iban or Bidayuh will describe herself or himself as such, although intermarriage across these groups is common. In some respects, the real boundary is with Malays and the real sustaining of the boundary is through Islam; thus the distinction between Malays and other Sarawak native peoples is between Muslim and non-Muslim – leaving some eight Chinese dialect groups out of the equation for the moment. But about two-thirds of one ‘native’ group – the Melanau – did adopt Islam when other ‘Dayak’ peoples resisted, and this has made the Melanau an important group whose elite political players may in effect identify with Malays, especially when in peninsular Malaysia.

But, partly, the answer is not in the characteristics of the groups but in the behaviour of political elites. If there are occasions for appealing to all Dayaks then an astute political leader will do so. No single group – say Bidayuh – is really a large enough group on which to build a political career. So politicians may appeal to Dayaks, or to bumiputeras (indigenous ‘sons of the soil’), a status which native peoples of Sarawak share with Malays. So if we think of groups as classifications marking one from another, there is any number of boundary lines involved: between Iban and Bidayuh, between Malay and non-Malay, between Muslim and non-Muslim and between bumiputeras (groups considered to be ‘native’ to the country which would include Malays and Dayaks but not Chinese) and non-bumiputeras. Just which boundaries are important will depend on social context and sometimes on political or other advantage. Judith Nagata made this point about Malays and non-Malays in a classic study of Penang (Nagata 1974). All this impels us to conclude that ‘groups’ are both actual and constructed. It is a mistake to argue that there is ‘nothing there’ – there clearly is. But at the same time it would be a mistake to think that the ‘groups’ are self-evident population and community sub-sets with a clear line drawn round each one. And it would also be wrong
to think that, for all this ethnic complexity, people’s lives are governed by something called ‘ethnicity’.

**Do people act by reference to their ethnic identity?**

As well as addressing what ‘ethnicity’ is and what ‘ethnic groups’ are, we are bound to address the crucially important question that follows: how important are ethnic groups thus defined and in what sense is ‘ethnicity’ a causal factor in societies and social action? ‘How causal is ethnicity’ could be rephrased as ‘do these identities and social attachments which we call ethnic play an independent part, even a leading part, in social action?’ If people assume an ethnic identity, does it in any sense become a real guide to action? How important are markers of ethnic difference in social transactions?

The answer to both these questions is conditional. To the first we would say ‘under some circumstances, people take cultural and descent identities very seriously, in some societies these types of group boundaries play a key role in the social order; in other circumstances, they are trivial, unimportant and barely surviving’. To the second question we would say ‘do not be misled into thinking that, because something called “ethnic groups” are involved, that action, conflict and social relations are primarily determined or “driven” by ethnicity’. A very straightforward illustration would be the intense conflict which was played out throughout the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia, and persists into the new millennium. This was very commonly described as ethnic conflict with the more or less clear assumption that the differences and dislikes between the groups were the causes of the conflict. This is almost implied in simply using the term ‘ethnic conflict’. As Michael Banton has pointed out, the danger with the term ‘ethnic conflict’ is that we assume that the conflict referred to is primarily ‘ethnic’ in nature and cause (Banton 2000). Often it is not. In the Yugoslavia of 1990 we would at least have to answer the question as to why these same suspicions and dislikes had
not caused conflicts in the preceding forty years on anything like the scale of the ‘break-up period’.

**Ethnic cleansing or racial segregation?**

One of the notable things about the conflicts in Yugoslavia is that the press – in English – always referred to *ethnic* conflict and *ethnic* cleansing. But conflicts in the US which bear some similarities (without being full scale civil war) are described as *racial* conflict and *racial* segregation. Is there some special feature which makes American conflict racial and Yugoslavian conflict ethnic? There are, of course, real differences in the circumstances of America and the former Yugoslavia, but there is no obvious reason, in describing these conflicts, why one is racial and the other ethnic. The answer lies in the fact that different countries, regions and contexts have given rise to different discourses to describe ‘local’ events and history. In the USA, a race discourse is very powerful and the word ‘races’ continues to be used routinely, despite the discrediting of all social theory based on ideas of racial difference. This difference of discourse (cf. Fenton 1999) has elsewhere been described as an ‘idiom of race’ and an ‘idiom of ethnicity’ (Banton 2000). To these two idioms we must add the idiom of nation. Race, nation and ethnic group belong together in a family of concepts and bear strong family resemblances. They do not all ‘mean the same thing’ but they do share a common reference to the idea of a people, or ‘people of this kind’. Furthermore, social attitudes, social groups and cultural meanings which have been described as ‘racial’, ‘national’ and ‘ethnic’ are *not* a series of distantly related or unrelated topics. They ‘sit together’, in fact, in theory and in everyday discourse.

In particular, in **chapter 1**, we look at the English-language etymologies of race, nation and ethnic group. No amount of peeling back the layers of meaning of these terms reveals a decisive set of markers. Rather, there is a core and shared meaning among all three, with each having particular connotations which are not fully shared with the others. In
**Introduction**

Chapter 2, we examine the way in which particular countries develop discourses of ethnicity which are peculiar to the history and circumstances of that country. To show that even an English-language discourse of descent and culture communities can vary within different national traditions, the British and American discourses of race and ethnicity are compared. The case of Malaysia is examined in order to illustrate a non-English-language discourse, along with the interesting cases of Japan, Singapore, and Brazil.

In chapter 3, we examine some aspects of the usage, within sociology and anthropology, of the terms ‘ethnic’ and ‘ethnicity’, with an inspection of related terms such as ‘race’ and ‘tribe’. The last two gradually but irrevocably lost favour. In the case of both race and tribe, the long-run tendency has been to replace them with ‘ethnic’. We begin by looking at the gradual demise of the term ‘race’ as critiques of its nineteenth-century scientific meaning of ‘anthropological classification’ began to mount.

In chapter 4, we look at a number of leading controversies in this field of study, and the principal one – by some distance – is the dispute surrounding the word ‘primordial’. This is not just an extension of defining what ‘ethnicity’ is, which we treat in chapters 1 and 2. It goes right to the heart of how we think about ethnicity within sociological theory and how we think about society. The simplest way of thinking about ‘primordiality’ is to think of ‘first order’ as the word implies: sentiments, ties and obligations and an unquestioned sense of identity which are embedded in the individual from an early age and remain as a fixed point of reference. This is contrasted with a view of ethnicity as a matter of circumstance, convenience and calculation – a kind of ‘English when it suits me’ or ‘Serbian when it benefits me’.

On this circumstantialist view, ethnic groups are not simply groups of people who share a culture and have a shared ancestry. Rather, ideas of descent and culture are mobilized, used and drawn upon to give force to a sense of community, of ‘group-ness’ and of shared destiny. But if groups are, in some sense, socially ‘constructed’, we are bound to ask who does the construction? If myths of group belonging are being created who is doing it? One simple answer would seem to be: the people themselves who belong to the group.
Curiously, this is often a misleading if not frankly wrong answer. There are at least three other prime suspects.

One is that the idea of a group is not constructed by ‘us’ but constructed ‘for us by others’. In colonial situations, a powerful settler or ruling group established the names for ‘natives’ and these created groups came to take on, over a long period, a distinctive and actual character. Wherever we look in the postcolonial world, we find groups whose names and formation are a direct consequence of the colonial encounter. Even in relatively ‘free’ migrations, as in workers and families from Europe to the USA in the nineteenth century, new immigrants were categorized and often despised by those established in the country (Jacobson 1998). Second, the building of a group identity may be not so much the work of all members of a group, as of an elite within it, or of a party and organizational leaders. The third possible answer is that groups are formed as a consequence of state actions, power and administrative fiat. Many constitutions of states in the contemporary world contain laws and executive guidelines and regulations which have the function of, if not quite creating groups, giving them a kind of permanence and substance as socio-legal realities. If you pass laws bestowing privileges or rights on indigenous peoples, you must have some way of deciding who is indigenous and who is not. If you forbid marriage or sexual relations between As and Bs, you must be able to define the As and the Bs.

Ethnic categories are frequently put to some political purpose. In chapter 5, we explore the literature to see how the idea of ‘ethnic groups’ has been applied, beginning with the anthropologist Fredrik Barth’s view of ethnic groups as constituted by the maintenance of ‘boundaries’ between socially contiguous groups. The ideas of ‘group boundary’ and ethnic group interest are imported into competition theory. On this theoretical view, action is seen to be ethnically motivated if (people in) group A respond to perceived threat or competition from Group B. This theoretical view partially overlaps with Bonacich’s (1972) class-based model of explaining ethnic antagonism. Brubaker (2004) has captured the ‘non-groupist’ conception of ethnicity in his book titled precisely that: ethnicity without groups.