Ethnicity in history

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INTRODUCTION

Today, most people – academics and non-academics alike – accept the idea that mankind has always been differentiated into groups that share descent and culture, and are separated from other such groups by clear boundaries. These groupings have been referred to by various terms, such as 'peoples', 'tribes', 'ethnic groups/ethnies', or 'nations', and belonging to any of these collectivities has usually been referred to in terms of ethnicity. Ethnic communities are seen by many scholars as ubiquitous forms of social organization existing both in the past and the present all over the world (e.g. Jenkins 1997: 46–47, 74, 77; Eriksen 2002: 11; Gat 2013: 27–43). For example, Anthony D. Smith, one of the leading scholars of nationalism and ethnicity, suggests a strong continuity between many modern nations and premodern ethnic communities (ethnies) starting with the development of sedentary agriculturalists in the neolithic revolution in the Near East. Thus, he characterizes the ancient Egyptians and Sumerians, the classical Greeks and medieval Normans as ethnic communities ('ethnies') (Smith 1991: 28–30, 37–51; cp. also Gat 2013: 17, 19, 23, 71–110, 380). In his view, the 'ethnic revival' of the last decades is considered as "the recent phase of a long cycle of ethnic emergence and decline, which has been going on since the dawn of recorded history" (Smith 1981: 85–86; cp. also 1991: 39–43, 52; Gat 2013: 42). Consequently, ethnicity has been used as a comparative concept and employed for the analysis of past and present societies ranging from several millennia B.C. up until today. However, these views have come under attack by scholars who consider the phenomena referred to by the term 'ethnicity' as historically specific notions of difference that only emerged as a consequence of

the generalization of the nation-state model since the late 18th century.[1] Richard Fardon, for example, bluntly states that "there is no universal ethnic phenomenon", and argues that the "application of a concept of universal ethnicity is historical and obfuscates the course of historical change" (1987: 175).

Since any reflection on the presence or absence of ethnicity in the past presupposes a clarification of what one is talking about, I will first discuss the concept of ethnicity and argue for the need to differentiate among its several dimensions. Then, the question of whether ethnicity is a modern phenomenon will be addressed. In the final section, the notions of difference in precolonial Central Mexico will be sketched out to illustrate some of the issues raised in the more conceptual parts of the text.

ETHNICITY – A MUDDLED CONCEPT

The discussions about ethnicity are complicated by the diversity of usages of the term and its derivatives in recent academic discourse. Many authors employ 'ethnic group' merely to describe forms of socio-cultural differentiation *within* existing states (e.g. Fenton 2003: 52). Others consider the *ethnie* or ethnic group to be a forerunner of the nation, or the nation as a special variant of the ethnie, with nation characterized by its ideological reference to a bygone, existing or desired state (e.g. Gellner 1983; Elwert 1989; Nash 1989; Smith 1991; Jenkins 1997; Eriksen 2002; Gat 2013). Authors like Francis (1947), Rothschild (1981) or Brass (1991) do not make a systematic distinction between *ethnie* and nation, but instead consider the terms to be largely synonymous. Francis (1947: 397, 400), for example, employs 'ethnic group' to denote a minority within a state,

1 Rothschild (1981: 11–13), Fardon (1987: 177–178), Nash (1989: 1, 14, 124, 127), and Brass (1991: 8) relate the emergence of ethnicity to changes in the foundations of political legitimacy in state societies. Political domination in Europe and in other parts of the world, at least up to the 17th century, was legitimized 'from above' by referring to, among other things, divine right, noble descent, inter-dynastic marriage, or conquest. Only later did the idea that legitimacy was to be derived 'from below' and emanate from the will and consent of the ruled become widespread. Beyond this, the sovereign 'people' were thought to be unique, and united by a common history and culture. As Manning Nash argues: "Those people who were not politically dominant in the nation-state and who still had significant cultural markers of difference and sufficient social cleavages from the dominant political majority were 'ethnic' groups" (1989: 2).

e.g., French Canadians in Canada, as well as to refer to the French in France or the Irish in Ireland.

The conceptual differences sketched above notwithstanding, most scholars would probably agree that the term 'ethnicity' should be employed for a subclass of the 'we/they' distinctions people make. Thus, the question arises as to what features make such distinctions 'ethnic'? The debate about ethnicity has been considerably hindered not only by the diversity of usages but also by a vague and imprecise utilization of the term. Max Weber ([1922] 1980: 235–240) stressed that there was no one-to-one relationship between cultural differences and ethnicity. This insight was popularized by Fredrik Barth (1969) several decades later. However, in the older as well as in some of the more recent scholarship, cultural differences are equated with ethnicity.[2] The problem is particularly apparent in archaeological studies that have to rely entirely on material remains to reconstruct the past. Beyond this, all kinds of social groups and categories are referred to as 'ethnic' in the literature. Two examples will illustrate the problem:

In an otherwise sound article, Patrick Geary analyses supposedly 'ethnic' identities in Europe's Early Middle Ages such as 'Franci', 'Alamanni', or 'Burgundiones'. However, as he makes clear, these terms appear in the sources mostly in relation to kings or warriors. "The *gens Francorum* was the *exercitus Francorum*, led by its king or its *duces*. [...] Membership in the *gens Francorum* or *Burgundionum* in the sense of the exercitus did not depend on shared cultural, linguistic, or legal background" (Geary 1983: 22). Anthony Smith considers certain polities in antiquity and the Middle Ages as 'ethnic states' – that is, "state[s] dominated by a ruling class drawn from a particular *ethnie* which forms the majority of the state's population". He mentions ancient Egypt "at certain points in history" and Russia "before it acquired its empire", as examples (Smith 1991: 38–39, 44–51, 54–59).[3] However, Geary as well as Smith both subsume under the rubric 'ethnic' political collectivities constituted through vassalage. As such, they are not held together by horizontal bonds among the members of the collectivity, but through their individual relationship to the king or chief. Neither cultural sameness nor common descent among leaders and followers, or elite and masses, are implied.

Employing the concept of ethnicity in such a broad way deprives us of the possibility of distinguishing among quite different bases for categorization and social cohesion. It seems more fertile to differentiate ethnicity from other

2 Cp., for example, McInerney (2001: 52), for the discussion on ancient Greece. Cp. Gat (2013: 21–22, 24, 30-33, 49, 382) for a recent example.

3 Gat (2013: 85) even calls ancient Egypt the first 'national state'.

principles of social organization such as cohabitation (common residence), kinship, political loyalty, dynastic ties or religious cult membership, which often go beyond or crosscut linguistic or cultural boundaries. Thus, 'ethnicity' is understood here as referring to a phenomenon of social differentiation in which actors use cultural or phenotypic markers or symbols to distinguish themselves from others. It is a method of classifying people into categories which include individuals of both sexes and all age groups using (socially constructed) origin as its primary reference (Gabbert 2006: 90). The term 'ethnic' should therefore be reserved for social groups or categories that are founded on the idea of common descent, usually based on alleged cultural or phenotypic similarities. Such collectivities should integrate several families and kin groups (to distinguish ethnicity from kinship) (cp. Elwert 1989: 33), and integrate several residential groups (to distinguish ethnicity from cohabitation). While kinship has a gradual and segmentary logic – i.e. you can have closer or more remote kin – ethnicity implies a binary logic – you are either a member of the group or you are not. In this view, ethnicity refers to a particular form of social cohesion in groups that cannot be integrated merely by direct social, economic, or kin relationships. They are therefore, like nations, "imagined communities" (Anderson 1991: 6–7) because they are larger than face-to-face groups and lack the latters' particular means of enforcing compliance with social norms among their members (Elwert 1989: 32).

DIMENSIONS OF ETHNICITY

Ethnicity can be a means of reducing social complexity and of orienting interpersonal behavior (categorization) or a basis for social cohesion (the production of loyalty and community). In addition to the excessively loose usage of the term 'ethnic', tendencies to conflate different levels of analysis (social categorization, individual identification/identity, the integration of groups) have also complicated the discussion.[4] It is, however, of fundamental importance for any consideration of the concept's pertinence for more remote historical periods in general, and for its potential as a political resource in particular, to

4 A differentiation between the various levels of the phenomenon is not only conspicuously absent in most of the literature on preconquest Mesoamerica (cp. for example Smith 2003; Berdan 2008) but also in the otherwise sophisticated debate on ethnicity in ancient Greece. Cp. for example Hall (1995; 2005) and the Review Feature in the Cambridge Archaeological Journal (1998).

differentiate between these dimensions. Ethnic *categories*, the *groups* or organizations based on such categories, and the *individuals* using these categories in daily interaction must be kept separate, analytically. This analytical distinction allows for the tackling of a feature of ethnicity that Ronald Cohen addresses as its "nesting quality" (1978: 387), meaning that ethnic distinctions between 'us' and 'them' can exist alternately or simultaneously on various levels, and are actualized in certain interactions depending on those involved:

> "[E]thnicity is a historically derived lumping of sets of diacritics at varying distances outward from the person, so that each of these lumpings acts as a potential boundary or nameable grouping that can be identified or referred to in ethnic terms, given the proper conditions. [...] the division into an exclusive group is always done in relation to significant others whose exclusion at any particular level or scale creates the we/they dichotomy" (1978: 387).

In a similar vein Eriksen argues: "For ethnicity to come about, the groups must have a minimum of contact with each other, and they must entertain ideas of each other as being culturally different from themselves. […] ethnicity is essentially an aspect of a relationship, not a property of a group" (2002: 12).[5] Two caveats are necessary here; first, 'group' has to be understood in the broad sense as referring to any aggregate of people; and second, the ideas all 'groups' maintain of themselves and of others do not necessarily chime with one another.

An example of the mismatch between categorization by outsiders and self-identification is provided by the situation in colonial Latin America, where the Spaniards collectively referred to the native people as Indians (*indios*). This, however, ignored linguistic and cultural differences as well as political cleavages and identifications within the native population. Beyond this, it did not establish a common identification among indigenous people. Indigenous colonial sources rarely employed the term *indio*, and more localized units, such as the city-state in Central Mexico or the community in Yucatán, remained the predominant reference for social identification beyond the family and kin (Lockhart 1993: 13; Restall 1997: 15–19; Terraciano 2001: 348; Gabbert 2004: 26–36).

5 However, this view disregards the fact that, in addition to categorization, certain internal social and communicative structures are necessary for community formation.

IS ETHNICITY MODERN?

That people distinguish between 'we-group' and 'they-group' (or "others-group", as Sumner ([1907] 2002: 12) put it), and that attribution of these terms is generally associated with attitudes of comradeship and hostility respectively is probably as old as mankind. However, Sumner somewhat misleadingly called "this view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it" (ibid: 13) "ethnocentrism". 'Group-centrism' would be a more adequate term, since the idea is related to any kind of collectivity, and the principles on which it is based are not specified. Ethnographic and linguistic evidence shows that even relatively small groups in history considered themselves as 'men' (in the sense of human beings) or 'real people', while others were "something else – perhaps not defined – but not real men" (ibid: 14). Ideas about the 'others-group(s)' were frequently quite general and unspecific, often lumping them into such encompassing categories as 'cannibals'. In other cases, people were referred to in relative terms. In the Philippines, for example, *Subanun* means 'upstream people', and in what is now Tanzania *Sukuma* means 'north' (Southall 1970: 36–37). In many non-stratified societies kinship is the dominant conceptual model for understanding the social world. People were either kin (by birth or adoption) or non-kin, i.e. potentially dangerous aliens. Most of these categories certainly do not meet the defining criteria for ethnic categories proposed above. Group membership depended on being a member of certain kin groups, such as clans, lineages or families (by birth or adoption). Shared culture was "neither necessary nor sufficient" (Gellner 1964: 156).

The notion of ethnicity rests on a specific combination of ideas of common descent and cultural difference. The latter is taken as an indicator for the existence of the former by actors. However, the meaning and importance of descent and cultural difference have changed dramatically in the course of time, varying with social complexity and organization. As Gellner argued, for most of human history political units were "[s]mall tribal or village units; city states; feudal segments loosely associated with each other or higher authority; dynastic empires; the loose moral communities of a shared religion" (ibid: 152; cp. also Anderson 1991: 9–22). Political and cultural units rarely coincided, and "there is nothing to indicate that men have found this divergence either inconvenient or unnatural" (Gellner 1964: 152). For a feudal system, for example, there was no need for lord and peasant to speak the same language or to share a similar culture:

"In a highly structured society, culture is not indispensable. Where relationships are fairly well-known (because the community is small, and because the types of relationship are

small in number), shared culture is not a precondition of effective communication. In the stable repetitive relationship of lord and peasant, it matters very little whether they both speak (in the literal sense) the same language. They have long ago sized each other up: each knows what the other wants, the tricks he may get up to, the defences and counter-measures which, in the given situation, are available, and so on. […] [In modern societies] one's relationships and encounters […] are ephemeral, non-repetitive, and optional [...] communication, the symbols, language (in the literal or in the extended sense) that is employed become crucial. The burden of comprehension is shifted from the context, to the communication itself: when interlocutors and contexts are all unfamiliar, the message itself must become intelligible […] and those who communicate must speak the same language." (Ibid: 154–155)

In contrast to present-day concepts, until the 18th century in Europe as well as in other world areas, stratified societies were generally based on the idea of a fundamental difference between the rulers and the ruled, from the point of view of culture and descent. Ruling dynasties were of foreign origin, or were at least considered as such.[6] African chiefs and kings frequently claimed descent from lineages of alien hunters who arrived from abroad to rule over the local agriculturalists (e.g. Mair 1962: 125–137). In Yucatán, Mexico, the aristocracy considered conqueror lineages from distant places or gods to be their forefathers prior to the Spanish conquest (Roys 1972: 33, 59, 175–176). Social communities were not constituted on the basis of cultural or phenotypical commonalities, but rested on locality, kinship, or political vassalage. Political legitimacy was not derived from a cultural or biological tie between rulers, nobles, and commoners. On the contrary, it was based on the claim to a special relationship with God, or the gods, and on the idea of noble descent. Cultural and genealogical differences between rulers and commoners were not concealed or minimized, as the modern model of ethnicity and nationalism would require, but were stressed and openly demonstrated.

Smith, however, wants to keep such situations within the conceptual realm of ethnicity by suggesting a distinction between "vertical ethnie", including both the elite and the masses, and "lateral ethnie", restricted to the elite (1991: 52–59; 2002: 713–715). This would allow the aristocracies mentioned above to be considered as ethnic communities. Such a view, however, seems to be misleading. In the European Middle Ages, for example, the elites of different polities generally did not distinguish among themselves according to cultural

6 Cp. for example Gellner (1964: 152–153; 1983: 1, 10–12), Rothschild (1981: 11–14), and Anderson (1991: 19–22); Brown (1973) for Brunei and Sahlins (1985: 73–103) for Polynesia.

criteria, at least if they were Christian. Cultural differences, however, played an important role within political entities:

"The medieval knight had at any rate his smattering of Latin, and stood far nearer to the 'clerk' than to the tiller of the soil who could speak only in his local tongue. During the earlier Middle Ages [...] a French knight, like a French priest, had more in common with a knight or a priest from Italy or Germany than with a French peasant." (Royal Institute of International Affairs [1939] 1966: 8-9)

Beyond this, the nobles in the different polities generally did not see themselves as belonging to an ethnic community but rather, in a segmentary fashion, as part of a network of descent lines dispersed across the Christian world. As Anderson puts it for the French nobility during the *ancien régime*:

"To the question 'Who is the Comte de X?' the normal answer would have been, not 'a member of the aristocracy', but 'the lord of X', 'the uncle of the Baronet de Y',or 'a client of the Duc de Z'." (1991: 7)

Colonial bureaucrats and most of the early anthropologists, permeated by the ideology of the nation state, both had erroneously assumed that humanity was generally organized into ('modern') nations and ('premodern') tribes. However, since the 1970s anthropologists and historians, mostly studying societies in Africa, have shown that tribes, understood as political and cultural units, were generally recent creations of colonialism and not remnants of a distant past. They have also suggested that Africans had previously been organized in terms of various social forms such as dynastic kingdoms, age grades, marriage classes, socio-occupational groups, kin groups and networks (Southall 1970: 33–44; Ranger 1981: 18–32; King 1982: 27; Fardon 1987: 179–183; Elwert 1989: 25–31). The idea of clear cultural or social boundaries itself has to be questioned in many cases. As Frake puts it for the Subanun in the Philipines in the mid-20th century:

"It is impossible to draw clearly defined linguistic or sociological boundaries between any adjacent groups. There is, rather, an overlapping network of small socio-linguistic communities, whose boundary can be defined only from the point of view of each of the minimal discrete units of which Subanun society is built […] The maximal social group – the total society from the point of view of the individual – is non-discrete. Of Subanun social groups,only the family,the household,and the settlement are discrete." (1960:52–53)

This situation was quite typical for most non-state societies. The network of the various cultural, social and political intersecting and partly overlapping differentiations and political loyalties in which people were enmeshed was much more subtle and complicated than the simple, Eurocentric idea of clearly bounded socio-political units with their own culture – tribes or ethnic communities – would ever permit. Thus there is strong evidence to argue that ethnic groupings are not a ubiquitous form of social organization, in either non-state or stratified societies, and that European colonialism did much to generalize the concept of ethnicity around the world.

CULTURAL CATEGORIES OR HORIZONS

While I would argue that ethnic communities were rare or possibly even nonexistent before the age of nationalism, actors nevertheless recognized broad cultural categories or horizons in different times and places. Noblemen in the Middle Ages, for example, considered themselves to be part of either the Christian or the Arabic Muslim civilization. In antiquity a shared Hellenistic (elite) culture emerged in Greece. In each case a common lingua franca (Latin, Arabic, or Greek) developed. That differences in language and custom (i.e. in culture), were noted is thus obviously not a recent phenomenon. From a Greek or Roman perspective, "barbarians were all those who spoke unintelligible languages and lacked civilization, order and decency" in antiquity (Chapman/McDonald/Tonkin 1989: 12–13).[7] As Veyne makes clear: "'Barbarian' did not designate a living species different from the Hellenes; it was a xenophobic term of opprobrium of the sort that all peoples use to speak of foreigners" (1993: 351). He aptly summarizes the situation in the Greco-Roman Empire, which was "one unit of civilization with two international languages, confronting the barbarians":

> "Republican Rome had taken the culture of another people, the Greeks, as its own and had not felt that culture as foreign but as being civilization itself. Similarly, in the empire and even beyond its frontiers, Greco-Roman civilization was simply civilization: those populations were not Romanized or Hellenized as much as they were simply civilized. [...] 'Roman', 'Latin' or *peregrinus* [a foreigner from the provinces without Roman citizenship] designed a status, not an ethnic origin, and the Romans made no difference whatsoever between Roman citizens of Italian origin and those of provincial origin. Ethnic

7 Cp. Hall (2005) for a reconstruction of the complex history of 'Hellenism' and the concept of the 'barbarian' in Greek antiquity.

differences counted for so little that in late antiquity Romans showed no repugnance toward recruiting their generals from among the Germans." (Ibid: 365, 367, emphasis in the original)

Therefore, neither the Christian nor the Arabic or Hellenic civilizations should be regarded as ethnic communities, but rather as religious or cultural categories.

CONCEPTS OF DIFFERENCE IN PRECOLONIAL CENTRAL MEXICO

A similar juxtaposition of civilization and barbarity can also be detected in precolonial Central Mexico, where a common cultural horizon encompassing numerous deities, Nahuatl as a kind of *lingua franca*, and many other aspects of elite culture and world view emerged in the centuries after 900 AC. About 50 city-states (sing. *altepetl* = *atl*-water, *tepetl*-hill), each comprising an urban center and its more or less extended rural hinterland, were the basic political units in the region. Neighboring *altepetl* were linked by war, trade, political alliance, interdynastic marriage, and common participation in rituals (Smith 2003: 38–39, 148–149, 151–155). The city-state rulers (sing. *tlatoani*) were elected by a council from the male relatives of the deceased sovereign. Rulership was legitimized by the elite's claim to genealogical connections with the Toltec dynasty of the semi-mythical city of Tollan or Tulan (Tula) in central Mexico, who were renowned for being particularly cultured (Carmack 1981: 3, 43–44, 62–63, 68, 149; León-Portilla 1992: 50–53; Stark/Chance 2008: 33–34). As Berdan puts it: "The separation of nobles and commoners was quite marked: nobles and commoners were judged in separate courts, and behavior expectations were different depending on one's social station. Nobles and commoners also spoke the language differently" (2008: 128).

A distinction was drawn between the local sedentary agricultural societies, comprising several million people – sometimes referred to as "Aztecs" or "Nahuas" by researchers, though they lacked an encompassing term for self-identification – and groups of nomadic hunters and gatherers to the north, collectively addressed as "chichimeca" or "teochichimeca" (Sahagún 1982: 595–602; Alva Ixtlilxóchitl 1985: 289–291, 417; Lockhart 1992: 1; Smith 2003: 3–4, 36, 38; Berdan 2008: 114).[8] Beyond this the Aztecs used broad linguistic or

8 Chichimeca did not refer to a specific group but in most instances denoted a nomadic hunting and gathering way of life. 'Aztec' ruling lineages claimed that their ancestors

cultural categories to refer to larger, generally not self-defined populations, such as *Otomí* or *Huastec* (Sahagún 1982: 602–610; Stark/Chance 2008: 29). Languages other than Nahuatl were considered 'barbarous tongues' (Sahagún 1982: 608; Berdan 2008: 117). Such groups were ascribed certain cultural practices, such as clothing, hairstyles etc., and physical or character traits (cp. the list in Berdan 2008: 118–120). Terms such as *Totonac, Tlahuica* or *Otomí* were also used to indicate that someone was incompetent, stupid or coarse (Sahagún 1982: 603, 608).

Most terms referring to people were related to place. "From the names of provinces, cities, and settlements are derived the nouns signifying the natives and inhabitants of the said provinces, cities, and settlements" (Carochi [1645] 2001: 219 cited in Berdan 2008: 108). Groups were also named after their leaders (Berdan 2008: 109). As Sahagún put it for the Otomí: "The term *otómitl*, which is the name of the *otomíes*, was taken from their leader whose name was *Oton*, and his children and descendants, as well as the vassals he was in charge of, all were called otomites" (Sahagún 1982: 602, transl. W.G.). The fact that vassals are included into the category suggests that here a hierarchical and political relationship is indicated, and not an ethnic one of shared origin or substance.[9]

The altepetl itself was not a culturally homogenous entity. Most city-states were inhabited by members of different language groups (e.g. Otomi, Matlatzinca or Mixtec) as well as by Nahuatl-speakers claiming descent from different ancestors who had moved into central Mexico between the 12th and the 14th century AC (e.g. Mexica, Alcolhua, Chalca, Tlahuica) (Lockhart 1992: 25–26; Smith 2003: 148; Berdan 2008: 109, 116). Nahuatl sources show that the city-state was the main focus of identification even after the conquest by the Spanish. As Lockhart pointed out:

"'We' and 'they' divides along altepetl lines, not between New Worlders and Old Worlders". […] In most contexts, 'we' are the individual altepetl group and 'they' are all other humans, imagined as other altepetl groups. The Spaniards coming on the scene are viewed as one more such group. Their altepetl is Caxtillan and they are Caxtilteca (or

had migrated into central Mexico from the north. In some native accounts these immigrants are described as barbaric Chichimecs who became civilized in central Mexico, adopting 'Toltec' traits (Smith 2003: 35–37; Prem 2008: 29). Cp. Smith (1984) for a critical discussion of the Aztec migrations and possible meanings of the term *Chichimec*.

9 Some of the preconquest provinces in Yucatán were named after their ruling lineages (Roys 1972: 11).

other names meaning the same), just as there is an altepetl Tepoztlan, land of the Tepozteca. In other words, the Spaniards did not have the effect of creating a polarization between the indigenous inhabitants and the intruders. The Nahuas continued to see the world as they had before, divided between the altepetl group and all outsiders, be they indigenous or Spaniards." (1993: 14-15, 21)

Berdan did not find evidence that the Aztec empire made particular ethnic considerations in their choices or treatment of adversaries. "No special pattern, based on ethnicity, appears in a survey of tributary versus client subjects" (2008: 111). The same is true when considering marriages between the elites of different city-states (ibid: 128).

Stark and Chance (2008: 3–4) recently proposed the differentiation of a "soft" form of ethnicity, related to place and common history, from ethnicity in the "hard" sense, including ideas of shared descent. Consequently, they find evidence for the first in preconquest Mexico. This, however, runs the risk of fostering the already too common tendency to conflate different forms of categorization and group formation instead of providing analytical tools to differentiate among them.[10]

CONCLUSION

There is strong evidence that the nation concept and the idea of nationalism emerged in Western Europe no earlier than the 17th or 18th centuries A.D. As the idea that homogenous units of language, culture, and people were the natural form of social organization became generalized in Europe, it also became dominant in other parts of the world in the course of Western colonialism. Thus, people lacking their own state, and cultural minorities within existing states, were considered as ethnic communities. The trend to see peoples (tribes, ethnies, or nations) as the main actors both throughout history and in the present present has more recently been further strengthened by legal-political ideas such as the 'peoples' right to self-determination'.

To provide an example from Latin America: Tukanoans, as the indigenous riverine inhabitants of the central Northwest Amazon along the Brazilian-Columbian border are generally known, lived in patrilocal longhouses until

10 It also seems confusing to consider the male citizens of ancient democratic Athens an 'ethnic group', as Cohen (2001: 240–243) suggests in an attempt to come to terms with the fact that women were excluded from citizenship.

recently, when they began to settle in nucleated villages. Each community belongs to one of 16 different named language groups composed of anything from six to more than 30 patrilineal clans. To the astonishment of the Western observer accustomed to the 'unholy trinity' of one language = one culture = one people, Tukano individuals are obliged to marry someone from a different community and with a different primary language. Thus, multilingualism is generalized (Sorensen 1967; Jackson 1995). However, confronted with the need to be recognized as an indigenous people and adapt their discourse to Western understandings in order to obtain benefits from the government, NGOs or international development agencies, Tukano organizations have begun to present their 'traditional' language groups as 'ethnic communities', with their own culture and forms of social, political and religious organization (Jackson 1995: 12–15). Thus, as in the case of the African tribes, an ethnic form of organization may result as a consequence of Western influence.

However, although the European expansion and the rise of the nation-state did much to spread ethnicity as an ideology and a form of social organization, cultural or ethnic distinctions were possibly made in former times and outside of Europe, albeit far less than earlier accounts have suggested. In general however, these were merely categories employed by outsiders that rarely crystallized into self-conscious ethnic communities. Under particular conditions, gross categorical distinctions, such as those between 'civilized' and 'barbarian' peoples, were employed for political or other reasons. Thus, classical Greek authors tried to forge a military coalition among city-states (*poleis*) of Greek-speaking populations when confronted with an invasion by the Persian Achaemenid empire in the 5th century BC summoning a common Hellenicity against the 'barbarian' invaders (Hall 2005: 173–189). Nothing comparable happened in Mesoamerica. As has been shown above, Nahuatl-Speakers did not build an alliance against the intruders, even when confronted with the Spaniards, but the lines of conflict followed city-state or factional lines. However, even in the Greek case, Hall states that "Hellenic identity arose in the élite environment of the Olympic games during the course of the 6th century and that it served both to cement alliances between the ruling families of various regions and to promote the hegemonic claims of the Thessalians over their neighbours in central Greece" (2005: 227). The idea of Hellenicity was based on a genealogical model and referred to the supposed descendants of the mythical ancestor Hellen (grandson of Prometheus). This indicates, *pace* Hall (ibid: 7), not an ethnic identification but rather corresponds to a kinship model placing elite families and lineages into a segmented and hierarchical order, thus "validating high status through descent" (Renfrew in Review Feature 1998: 277). Later the concept was

defined in cultural and relativistic terms: Hellenes and barbarians did not constitute mutually exclusive categories in 5th-century Greece. Barbarians were viewed "as being situated at the other end of a linear continuum which did in fact permit category-crossing. [...] a barbarian could 'become' Greek by adopting Hellenic practices, customs and language" (Hall 2005: 8). Hellenicity thus became a term indicating participation in a particular civilization, but not an ethnicity.

To conclude, the study of ethnicity in history is facing immense methodological problems since we have to reconstruct the subjective meanings people attached to categories of thought and discourse as well as actions. These problems are especially acute when material remains are our sole source of information and when we lack any type of written records which could help in elucidating the meaning of artifacts. In contrast to scholars such as Jones (2002), I share Hall's (2005: 22–24) skepticism about the possibility of inferring ethnicity solely on the basis of archaeological data. As has already been mentioned above, there is no direct relationship between ethnicity and shared cultural traits such as costume or hairstyle. The significance of certain cultural traits for the construction of ethnic communities is not inherent, but depends on a complex process of interpretation and evaluation by the actors which is very difficult to reconstruct merely from material remains. The cohesion of ethnic communities does not rest on any objective likeness but, as Siegfried Nadel stated several decades ago, "hinges on a *theory* of cultural identity, which ignores or dismisses as immaterial existing variations, and ignores or disregards uniformities beyond its self-chosen boundaries". The ethnic community exists "not in virtue of any objective unity or likeness, but in virtue of [...] a likeness accepted as a dogma" (1947: 13).

Even in cases where contemporary texts are available, as, for example, with the ancient Maya in Mesoamerica or the European Middle Ages, these only reflect the views of the elite in most cases and provide little insight into how social categories were used in daily interaction. However, even if the debate might end up with the conclusion that ethnicity was never, or very rarely, present before the 17th or 18th centuries A.D., or else that this cannot be proven due to the lack of data, the concept is useful for historical studies. It can be employed as an ideal type with which to scrutinize the historical materials carving out the particular methods of classification, political integration and community-building in the past.

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