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This is an electronic version of an article published in:

Ålund, A., (1999), Ethnicity, Multiculturalism and the Problem of Culture, *European Societies*, 1(1), 105-116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.1999.10749927>

Original publication available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.1999.10749927>

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ETHNICITY, MULTICULTURALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF CULTURE

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Abstract: This article discusses the complex meaning of ethnicity and identity in the multicultural society of today with reference to Swedish society. Sweden, a pronouncedly multiethnic society, is today undergoing division along ethnic lines. Social inequalities tend to be understood in terms of cultural difference. This development seems to be characteristic of most European countries. Culture is usually connected with ethnicity and race and understood as pure, as an 'essence', as related to some original and eternal ethnic core. In this way important aspects of cultural dynamic in multicultural society are left unobserved. What is usually not recognized are cultural crossings and the emergence of composite identities. Within the framework of multicultural society new cultures, identities and ethnicities are created. Departing from some general features of the dominant discourse on ethnicity, its historical roots and its relations to culture and multiculturalism, I discuss problems of cultural essentialism.

Key words: Ethnicity; multiculturalism; Sweden; culture; essentialism; hybridity

The interest in studies of ethnicity has intensified, both internationally and in Scandinavia. Ethnicity's charged character and its many contemporary expressions today reflect global tensions and social conflicts: north/south, east/west, supranational/national and national/local. Boundaries are drawn and erased. 'Festung Europa' and 'the Mediterranean wall' separate imagined civilization from imagined barbarism. Fleeing people knock on the closing door. They flee from ethnically defined nation-states where old traditions have been newly invented, and ethnicity associated with biological authenticity, cultural purity and ethnic cleansing. They flee to a western Europe seeking its own identity.

We live in a time when 'old' traditions are invented in the name of ethnicity, as Hobsbawm and Ranger (1993) point out in *The Invention of Tradition*, and Sollors (1989) in *The Invention of Ethnicity*. The experiences of ethnicity are many; they are created, negotiated, accentuated or

weakened – but in any event they are constantly changing, as they arise and evolve in relations between people and in the multifaceted game of social, power relations.

The cultural expressions of *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983) contribute to fortifying the feeling of belonging – often in a fashion which is contrastive and exclusive *vis-à-vis* those who do not belong. The homogenization of the ethnic terrain is accompanied by hierarchical differentiation and a shift in the relations of power – in which the subordination of ethnic minorities assists the building of the nation. As Benedict Anderson (1983) points out, imagined communities are very real. But just as the ‘imagining’ of pure cultures and communities of origin can be experienced as genuine, the new crossed and mixed ethnicities emerging in the multiethnic Europe are experienced as genuine too.

The cities of Europe are seething with new composite identities and new ethnicities (Hall 1992/1994). Cultural boundaries are crossed, not least through immigration and the expansion and ‘creolization’ of ‘world culture’ (Hannerz 1987). In ‘the global city’, variations are created – of cultural diversity, transformation and amalgamation – that can inspire in us a vision of new possibilities. Boundary-crossing and cultural fusion characterize Sweden, like other multicultural and multiethnic European societies (Gilroy 1987, Jones 1988, Hannerz 1990, Ålund and Schierup 1991, Hewitt 1992, Vertovec 1995). The relation between social subordination, cultural resistance and the emergence of new cultural expressions and solidarities is a recurrent theme.

In suburban communities which are ethnically composite as well as politically charged, one may encounter expansive cultural developments with political undertones expressed in text, tone and image (Ålund 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997). Strains inspired by reggae and hip-hop exhort the listener to affirm solidarity, pride and self-respect, and to demand equality. The development of youth culture in the multiethnic city is closely related to the experience of social exclusion.

In this article I shall discuss the complex meaning of ethnicity and identity in the multicultural society of today with reference to Swedish society. Sweden, a pronouncedly multiethnic society, is today undergoing division along ethnic lines. Social inequalities tend to be understood in terms of cultural difference. However, this development seems to be characteristic of most European countries. Culture is usually connected with ethnicity and race and understood as pure, as an ‘essence’, as related to some original and eternal ethnic core. In this way important aspects of cultural dynamic in multicultural society are left unobserved. What is usually not recognized are cultural crossings and the emergence of composite identities. Within the framework of multicultural society new cultures, identities and ethnicities are created. Departing thus from the

problems of cultural essentialism inherent in Swedish multiculturalism, some general features of the dominant discourse on ethnicity, its historical roots and its relations to culture and multiculturalism are drawn.

Ethnicity and multiculturalism

The concept of ethnicity does not refer to a uniform phenomenon. It carries a lingering vagueness; what qualifies as 'ethnically' determined social behaviour is not given beforehand, as Max Weber pointed out at the turn of the century. Most scholars in the field of ethnicity agree that the concept refers to group formation, the drawing of cultural and/or social boundaries between 'us' and 'the Others', identity, the feeling of belonging, symbolic community, etc. However, lingering disputes about the role of culture and social structure illustrate the diversity not only of interpretation but also of expression in the area of ethnic phenomena. Does ethnicity concern something original and (mono)cultural? Or something variable and socially created? Can it also be seen as a transcultural phenomenon?

The old Greek word 'etnikos' – which in ancient times meant heathen or savage, and denoted cultural outsiders (Sollors 1986, Fitzgerald 1992) – appears to have retained its original meaning in the contemporary view of the stranger. The original reference to the Others, the outsiders – those belonging to 'non-mainstream culture', or reckoned religiously as 'heathen' – has been kept and handed down even to the present day, and to the situation of the modern stranger in 'multicultural' society (Ålund 1995).

This static definition of ethnicity has – notwithstanding far-reaching criticisms of its limitations and consequences – become widespread in both everyday and institutional settings in Europe, and not least in multicultural Sweden. Public debate in Sweden is marked by a static view of ethnicity. Reduced to something eternal which seems to have always already been in existence (cf. Sollors 1989), ethnicity is often associated – especially in the mass media – with tradition-bound and foreign immigrant cultures (Ålund 1993, 1997). Immigrants are considered deviant, and they are subjected to segregation and discrimination in almost every social sphere: housing and work, child care and education, social services and health care, etc. The focus on 'cultural' and 'ethnic' differences creates ethnically defined groups and distinct social positions. The collective appropriation builds on and promotes a hierarchical dichotomy between 'ethnic' and 'Swedish', traditional and modern. The concept of integration is associated with development or modernization. Cultural

diversity is related in an ethnocentric manner to a superior 'Swedish culture', thus implying a 'natural order'.

This view of 'culture' as baggage and inheritance closely corresponds to what has been termed 'racialization'. This means, Robert Miles writes (1993a, 1993b), that 'the Other' is constructed as biologically self-reproducing social collectives with distinct histories and unique, distinguishing characteristics. These special features are understood as given by nature, and they assume the function of designating difference. The features, believed to constitute difference – biological or cultural signs, traces and markers – set limits to what 'the Others' can become. The symbolic marking of divergence becomes a fact, preventing 'them' from achieving equal status with 'us'.

Colonial images live on, promoted by modern forms of separation and by characterizations of people as culturally distinct, as possessed of greater or lesser value. Ultimately these images help to justify and uphold inequalities in society. Thus boundaries are expressed in the assignment of subordinate positions to certain groups of people – not just in the labour market but in all important societal spheres. In this way hierarchy is maintained; it is this which social and cultural boundaries concern, in both their symbolic and real forms.

The terms 'blackhead', 'foreigner' and 'immigrant' – with their attendant exclusion and cultural degradation – are related to this issue. Discrimination on the labour market has made us aware of divisions in society with different kinds of citizens, some of whom are more equal than others. This is our contemporary 'multicultural' climate in Sweden. 'Cultural encounters' between immigrants and Swedes are typically described in terms of cultural conflict between the civilized/modern and the primitive/traditional. The cultivation and polarization of cultural differences fuels the increasingly common political discussion about more and less appropriate, more and less adaptable, and more and less 'foreign' immigrants and refugees. Herein lies the basis for distinguishing between people and selecting among them in cultural terms; in the long run, this contributes to legitimizing 'Festung Europa', with its inner and outer walls.

Modern multiculturalism – not least as it is practised in Sweden – embraces a series of paradoxes (see Ålund and Schierup 1991). These are associated with what Milton Gordon (1970), in reference to the US, calls 'structural pluralism'. This refers to a pattern of social inequality that tends to be explained in terms of culture and diversity. Tendencies in the labour market point increasingly to discrimination, the categorization of people along ethnic lines, and the appearance of an 'ethnic division of labor' (Schierup and Paulsson 1994). Immigrants with Swedish degrees have lower incomes than Swedes with similar qualifications (Wadensjö

1995: 3). In the 1980s, qualified immigrants who had lived in Sweden since the 1960s found themselves in jobs beneath their qualifications (Schierup and Ålund 1987). Different studies indicate that this subordination has continued into the second generation (Ålund 1997). The children of labour immigrants suffer higher levels of unemployment overall than their Swedish contemporaries (Leiniö 1994).

Polarization and division appear to have increased in the 1990s. The percentage of immigrants with jobs has fallen drastically during this decade. Similar changes have taken place in relative income levels. Unemployment increased during this period, moreover. It is higher among 'immigrant' youth than among 'Swedish' youth, and it is substantially higher among the children of refugee immigrants than among the children of labour immigrants. There is reason to view the tendencies on the Swedish labour market with alarm.

In Sweden, as in Canada and the United States, a 'structural' rather than 'cultural' pluralism has developed (Porter 1968, Gordon 1970, Ålund 1985). While the former stands for actual inequality in the vertically ordered 'ethnic mosaic' (cf. Porter 1968), the latter seems in reality to have acquired a largely formal meaning. Immigrants are understood to be arranged in static and specifically ethnocultural categories, and differences and social failings tend to be explained in a manner stressing cultural factors.

The social dimension of ethnicity – its relation to class and status divisions and to social segmentation and hierarchy – is obscured in cultural differences (Ålund 1994, 1995). In the multitude of 'cultural' differences and clashes, culture is transformed into a stereotypical smoke-screen behind which social distinctions, inequality and segregation prevail. This cultural reductionism also helps to conceal underlying strains in the social construction of ethnicity and to reinforce a hierarchical status system. A complex and dynamic perspective on ethnicity, therefore, is unavoidable and relevant if we are to render visible the often fundamental social conflicts associated with the cultural and the ethnic. All too often – in both social-scientific and popular discourse – the social dimension has been overshadowed by culturalizing stereotypes.

Beyond cultural essentialism

The pathbreaking showdown with cultural determinism and the primordialist view of ethnicity as something original and fundamental was published in an anthology in 1969. The editor was Fredrik Barth; the title was *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Culture Difference*. The authors established that ethnicity is expressive of social rather

than cultural processes, and that it can be understood – as indicated in the subtitle – as the social organization of groups on the basis of cultural differences.

What is culture in such a perspective? Culture is a work of human creation, Barth writes (1989: 123), and it is rooted as effectively in social concordance (as expressed in such collective representations as language, symbols, rituals, institutions, etc.) as in material causes. The social and the cultural are variable and intertwined; culture cannot therefore be interpreted as a uniform and final product of settled symbols and meanings (Barth 1989: 122). Various experiences related to social positioning – in terms of gender, class, age, etc. – are mediated through cultural representations. These lie at the bottom of variations in the way ethnic identity is formed among individual members of 'ethnic groups'. Ethnicity is thus a dynamic phenomenon, interwoven with class, gender and race (see also Ålund and Schierup 1991, Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983, 1992, Hall 1992). Neither culture nor ethnicity can thus be defined as clearly delimited and internally uniform categories derived from an original source (cf. Barth 1989, 1994). The cultural constructions of reality spring rather from various sources and are spread through many routes.

When culture is considered immutable, a fixed essence, i.e. reduced to a core of statically defined elements, this has consequences for a discursive construction of 'immigrants' (Ålund 1988, 1995). The cultural boundaries formulated thereby – which are often based on an ethnocentric contrasting of traditional and modern – facilitate social stratification and the categorizing and ordering of people along ethnic lines.

Ethnicity as a transcultural phenomenon

With the passage of time, the research on ethnicity has gone through changes – from static to dynamic – and the complex relation of culture to ethnicity has come into focus. The concept of 'boundaries' particularly, and its relation to different sorts of identity, has been analysed and debated. Culture and ethnicity have come to be seen as related to each other and to other social categories like gender, class and identity.

Recent international feminist research in particular has shown the complex interplay between sexism, racism and ethnicity. Through a far-reaching critique of reductionism (e.g. biological determinism and cultural essentialism), scholars in this area have called into question the conception of identities as homogeneous. The interrelation between different forms of oppression – racism, sexism, class oppression – can

thus be disclosed (cf. Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983, 1992). The social construction of ethnicity is observed and related to global processes, cultural hierarchies, discrimination, and political and civic exclusion.

In the wake of the increasing interest in globalization processes – and associated world-spanning mass migration and transnational networks – such concepts as that of diaspora have highlighted new spatial and cultural frameworks for the emergence of identities, cultures and ethnicities (Robertson and Lechner 1985, Hannerz 1989, Clifford 1994, Cohen 1987, 1995). The attention of researchers has shifted towards multiethnic urban contexts. Political marginalization and discrimination against immigrants and ethnic minorities has led to new forms of ethnic mobilization and the politicization of social movements (Rex 1973, Castles and Miller 1993, Rex and Drury 1994).

But it is the British academic tradition of 'cultural studies' especially – the most prominent representative of which is Stuart Hall – that has contributed to the development of a new approach, in which culture, identity, ethnicity and race are viewed as interrelated in a complex fashion. Parallels have been drawn between ethnicity and race, and the social construction of ethnicity (like race) has come into focus. Ethnicity, Hall writes (1992/1994: 255), is 'constantly crossed and recrossed' with other social categories like race, class and gender. The concept of identity is defined as 'fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions' (Hall and du Gay 1996: 4). In contrast to an essentialist understanding – 'this concept of identity does not signal that stable core of self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change' (ibid.: 3) – identity is here understood as variable, 'strategic and positional' (ibid.).

This argument calls attention to the social character of the contemporary 'cultural' battles and the need to acknowledge that the social struggle is carried on through the cultural. The context of cultural dynamics and identity formation is social experience. This focuses on both the processes of identification and the formation of culture as an ongoing process. All so-called autochthon cultures are socially constructed and 'hybrid'. It might be that the notion of hybridity is not the best concerning what it aims to describe. The meaning of the concept of hybridity, as put forward by Homi K. Bhabha (e.g. 1994, 1996), is that essentialistic understandings of culture should be seen as the result of social battles (which in contemporary European societies have become ethnicized and culturalized) rather than their cause.

Bhabha (1994, 1996) stresses the significance of 'cultural hybridization', and points out that 'hybrids . . . are pregnant with potential for new world views, with new "internal forms" for perceiving the world in words'

(Bhabha 1996: 58).¹ Hybrid identities involve the negotiation of a discursive doubleness, 'by which I do not mean [that] duality or binarism engenders a new speech act' (ibid.). The new 'voice' expresses the formation of strategic solidarities, and the concept of hybridity describes 'the construction of cultural authority within conditions of political antagonism or inequity'. The strategies of hybrids 'deploy the partial culture from which they emerge to construct visions of community, and versions of historical memory, that give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy, the outside of the inside: the part in the whole' (ibid.). These ethnicities and identities, which are still rendered invisible and thus 'erased' (Hall and du Gay 1996), must be recognized.

Understood in this way, cultures and cultural identities developed in multiethnic and multicultural contexts are new both in relation to the worlds of emigration as well as continuously in change. There are no distinct 'authentic' sources from which the 'hybrid' is composed. Both 'cultural baggage', contemporary 'hybrids' and 'fundamentalists' are manifestations of cultural crossings, cultural formation and change, which are related to social processes. This kind of anti-essentialist critique of the research on culture and identity led to a change of focus from identity to identification – conditions and visions shared by different individuals and groups – and to the manner in which identification forms the basis for new ethnicities, new solidarities and alliances (ibid., Gilroy 1987, 1993, Hall 1987, 1992).

Ethnicity, culture and social exclusion

In a European context, a critical and politically radical current of research on ethnic youth and culture arose in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s (see e.g. Hall and Jefferson 1975, Willis 1977, Hebdige 1984). Widely noted studies of youth culture related culture to class and generational conflicts, to unemployment, to social fragmentation, to crises of identity, and to the expansion of market society. In the search for new forms of community new cultural styles are developed that serve as an anchor inwardly and a cultural marker outwardly (see further in Ålund 1991, 1993, 1994, 1997). Paul Gilroy (1987), among others, has conducted research on the dynamic character of new cultural expressions. Gilroy has called attention to the appearance of composite social communities cutting across ethnic boundaries and articulated through new boundary-crossing cultural systems of meaning. The latter function as collective

¹ Bhabha (1996: 58), with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin.

self-confirmations on the basis of which alternative and authentic appearances on the public scene take place (*ibid.*). Transcultural fusion – into a so-called syncretic culture – acquires importance for both identity and community. It is closely connected to new social movements, for example, antiracist movements. For Gilroy, the syncretic forms of culture symbolize mutuality in a common struggle to reconstitute a collective historical presence beyond the divisive, fragmented forms of existence in the diaspora (*ibid.*).

In ethnically complex (but also politically charged) environments in the suburbs or inner cities of international metropolises, culture has acquired a new resonance and meaning (Schierup 1993). Expansive artistic developments among the young find avant-garde expression in text, tone and image, often with political content focused on antiracism and putting forward demands for equality and belonging.

The reaction that has ensued demonstrates, in all its variations, a view of society's failings which is marked by a thoroughgoing realism, based on the experience of a hardening social climate from the early 1970s on. Young people continue to become aware, in a rising degree and in increasing numbers, that they are daily denied their right to equality with 'natives'. Yet their answer to these social failings is marked by a search for dialogue throughout. It is perhaps precisely because of this that their ethnicity – which is created here and now in the mixed soil of cultural differences and social closeness – is expressive of a dialogue in progress. Their answer to not belonging to 'our' nation is to build new connections, relations and affiliations. The commonly shared experience of internal exile creates the conditions for social recognition. This in turn generates cultural closeness, as well as stimulating mutual borrowing, the exchange of social memories, and the common creation of cultural symbols that unify people and prepare the way for the crossing of cultural boundaries.

A space is hereby opened for another meaning of ethnicity than that associated with 'purity', 'origins' and, in extreme cases, 'ethnic cleansing'. The 'new ethnicities' (Hall 1992/1994) are frequently composite and transcultural. In ethnically complex environments – as in the suburbs of the large cities in Sweden and the rest of Europe – 'boundaries' are crossed while cultural mixtures and cross-fertilizations find expression in personal and collective identity work, in language, in music, and so forth. The common experience of exclusion contributes to a social recognition. This in turn generates closeness and stimulates mutual borrowing, the exchange of stored experiences and pictures of the world, and the common creation of cross-boundary cultural symbols.

This means, taken together, that, in the era of 'the global traffic in culture' (Hannerz 1989: 206), cultures can no longer be reduced to distinct, separate or homogeneous units delimited by nations, regions or

local communities. In this perspective we cannot study people and cultures today through a magnifying glass – as if they were a fossilized ‘ethnographic present’ – without making the prism of contemporary cultural complexity visible (Hannerz 1989: 205). Nor, on the other hand, can we understand the dynamic of culture or ethnicity without relating it to the fragmenting, marginalizing and separating forces of social inequality.

We must pay due regard to the fact that the ethnic identities and affiliations created within the framework of the variable richness of multicultural society are in no way ‘pure’, original or connected with a fixed past; rather, they relate to the dilemmas and conflicts of the present. The emergence of ‘new ethnicities’ is thus the fruit of cultural diffusion and social exclusion.

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