



Ethnicity

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Ethnicity is a concept that marks social belonging as much as it does difference, and that lies at the heart of political debates as well as debates across academic disciplines today. Rooted in the ancient Greek ethnos, the term is popularly understood as 'people' or 'nation'. It entered public discourse in the US and Europe as early as the 1940s, but only gained significant traction by the 1960s. Emerging as an important frame for anthropological research during the same time period, ethnicity was initially seen as a terminological shift away from loaded, biologically-based concepts such as 'tribe' and 'race'. This made it a potentially more accurate and productive lens through which to understand sociocultural diversity. Yet 'ethnicity' also retained associations with primordial forms of group identification, therefore gaining a prominent place within exclusivist nationalist discourses as well as mobilisations of multiculturalism around the world.

This entry shows how understandings of ethnicity have changed over time, and that both structural and affective features continue to define what ethnicity may be in any given context. It highlights the ways in which groups use and embody their ethnicity as a category of their identity, and that ethnicity overlaps with related understandings of identity such as 'Indigeneity', 'nationality', and 'tribe'. Recent scholarship has criticised associations between being 'ethnic' and being a 'minority' to explore the political consequences of ethnic labels, which can serve as tools of both social change and discrimination. The anthropological study of ethnicity shows that ethnic labels are constructed, used, and understood differently by communities, political actors (both state and non-state), and scholars. It also shows that shifting claims over ethnic categories connect to broader debates surrounding authenticity, recognition, and social belonging. Lastly, this entry illustrates that anthropological scholarship has evolved alongside such political claims, and needs to account for their dynamic and often paradoxical outcomes.

Introduction

Ethnicity is one domain of identity: an affective and structural [production](#) of social belonging. The concept of ethnicity has two closely related primary meanings. The first is often used at the subjective, individual level to define identity: 'my ethnicity is ...' This usage denotes the inherent connection between the individual and a larger group based upon a mutual recognition of shared origins and descent, as well as shared cultural practices and political projects of community building. In this sense, ethnicity is often understood as a contemporary successor of the [colonial](#) term '[tribe](#)', as it refers to ostensibly singular collectivities produced through shared beliefs and practices. The second meaning is an analytical one which defines ethnicity as a social and political structure, a relational system produced through interaction *between* groups within local, national, transnational, or other overarching frameworks for identification. In this sense, ethnicity departs from '[tribe](#)' by situating groups in relation to each other. Both meanings of ethnicity refer to the production of identity as a mutually entangled process of meaning-making, which fuses individual and collective elements of belonging.

Ethnicity can be both a tool of social transformation and a weapon of discrimination, depending upon context. Anthropologists have long criticised interpretations of the term that take group characteristics as inherent and objectively real (often referred to as 'primordialist' or 'essentialist'). Based on empirical studies of group formation, anthropologists instead foreground ethnicity's constructed nature. Nonetheless, ethnicity has remained a perhaps ever more meaningful category for political representation and practice in the public domain, particularly for marginalised communities around the world. It therefore also remains a key area of study across the social sciences, despite well-known academic critiques. A schematic periodisation of anthropological practice over time reveals how the discipline has shifted from attempting to empirically describe discrete ethnicities (1940s-1960s), to exploring the boundaries between them (1960s-1980s), to deconstructing the concept of ethnicity itself (1990s-2000s), to examining the pragmatic and affective work it does in the real world of politics and cultural practice (2010s-onwards).

This entry begins with a selective chronological overview of the [historical](#) usage of the term within [ethnography](#) and theory, to demonstrate how the concept has often been linked to marginalised populations in the context of modern nation-state development. It then segues to a regionally focused exploration of how ethnicity has been wielded differently in various global contexts, as a catalyst of social, political, and economic change. Bridging historical context, key theoretical shifts, and ethnographic studies, this entry draws connections between 'ethnicity' and terms such as 'tribe', '[race](#)', 'Indigeneity', 'multiculturalism', and 'nationalism'. It thereby considers how ethnicity as a conceptual, affective, and political category manifests regionally with distinct connections to other elements of social and political identities.

Lineages of thought

Etymologically, the term 'ethnicity' is rooted in the ancient Greek *ethnos*, which implied a collective of humans and is most often understood as 'people' or 'nation'. Early interpretations in the social sciences often begin with Max Weber's *Economy and Society*, published in 1922. Weber acknowledges that ethnicity acts as a facilitator of group formation in political terms that crystallises around a shared acceptance of common descent. Yet Weber does not emphasise the multivocal and dynamic nature of ethnic identity formation. Later interpretations of Weber's analysis stress that ethnic membership is not some form of passive collectiveness but is rather constructed actively through political action (Jenkins 2008).

Weber further posits that '[race](#)' works in a similar way to ethnicity in that both members and nonmembers of 'ethnic' or 'racial' groups must recognise their shared distinctiveness and align with others who share a perceptible common trait or phenotype. It is apparent here that the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' are historically intertwined, and 'are not precise analytical concepts; they are vague vernacular terms whose meaning varies considerably over place and time' (Weber [1922] 1978 as quoted in Brubaker 2009, 27). In the original German, Weber used the term 'ethnic group' (*ethnische Gruppen*), and although the term

'ethnicity' appears in English translations, he does not appear to use the German word *Ethnizität* in the original.

Perhaps the earliest English use of 'ethnicity' as an abstract noun is in Lloyd Warner and Paul Lunt's 1941 study of Yankee City in the United States, *The social life of a modern community*. Stating that, 'In this volume a great emphasis is placed on descent as a criterion of ethnicity' (Warner and Lunt 1941, 237), these authors use the term in the group-specific sense to set immigrant groups such as 'Irish' and 'Italian' apart from 'natives' of the New England city. A slightly earlier use of 'ethnic group' appears in Julian Huxley and A.C. Haddon's 1935 *We Europeans: A survey of 'racial' problems*. These authors critique the mistranslation of Herodotus' *ethnos* as 'race' in English, and explain that in their analysis, 'the word *race* will be deliberately avoided, and the term (*ethnic*) *group* or *people* employed for all general purposes' (Huxley and Haddon 1935, 108). These early references demonstrate that the term gained traction in both American and British scholarship around the same time, when embedded assumptions of [colonial](#) anthropology began to give way to greater introspection about systems of classification often taken for granted at home. Such introspection came with a recognition of the need for new terminologies that could decouple discussions of human difference and social inequality from the Darwinian hierarchies embedded in biologically-based understandings of 'race'.

In another North American context, anthropologist Franz Boas critiqued the concept of 'race' by debunking anthropometry, that is, the measurement of people's bodies as an indicator for socio-cultural similarity and difference. While he did not explicitly offer 'ethnicity' as an alternative, subsequent commentators have linked his public arguments against essentialist visions of race and their resulting eugenicist policies with this concept (Hyatt 1990, Williams 1996). Recently, Boas' engagement with Indigenous communities of the Northwest Coast has been reinterpreted by Indigenous scholars as work that at once 'produced significant, albeit gradual, transformations of racial ideology, but ... also perpetuated aspects of colonial modernity' (Blackhawk and Wilner 2018, xvi). At Boas' time, native North American communities were not identified as 'ethnic' in the same way as the immigrant groups of which Warner and Lunt wrote; it would only be later that 'ethnicity' would come to be understood as the overarching relational system for organising difference between groups within the unit of the nation-state. Even so, many contemporary theorists argue that, 'Indigeneity is distinct from ethnicity, defined by unique representational needs that stem from Indigenous peoples' relation to the colonial nation-state project' (Williams and Schertzer 2019, 679). From this brief review, we can understand ethnicity as an inherently relational concept, which remains co-defined by adjacent concepts including [tribe](#), race, and Indigeneity.

Particularly in the years following the Cold War, as notions of 'race' had come under heavy [scientific](#) and political criticism, ethnicity proliferated as an alternative concept useful to projects of development and social change. For example, it lent itself to proprietary claims by governing bodies over culture, territory, and political recognition (Warren and Kleisath 2019). However, it was not until the 1960s that ethnicity

really came into widespread use within and outside the academy, beginning in the United States. As Eric Wolf (1994) notes, the use of ethnicity in American anthropology was part of a larger disciplinary shift from 'race' to 'culture' to 'ethnicity' that was reflective of world politics and public opinion at a time when the post-World War II process of decolonisation and creation of 'democratic' institutions were vying to solve the problems of the 'underdeveloped areas' of the world (Escobar 1995). At the same time, the rise of ethnicity paralleled the Civil Rights movement within the US itself, which brought into focus the social injustices linked to racial difference at home. Ethnicity was propelled into the limelight as a possible means of recognising difference in a positive sense, without thereby reifying it as an essential trait of certain groups. New disciplinary spaces such as Cultural Studies and Ethnic Studies emerged in tandem with these social movements in both the UK and the US, creating possibilities to reclaim ethnicity as a positive source of belonging and self-understanding (see, for instance, Hall [1988] 2021).

By the 1990s, these celebratory views of ethnicity as a marker of diversity and inclusion gave way to critiques from Marxist and post-structural thinkers, who highlighted its constructed nature and associations with exclusivist political movements (Banks 1996). The vast array of scholarly literature on this topic is by no means obsolete, and its significance in and beyond the academy lives on, as new waves of scholarship identify ethnicity as a critical contemporary vector in political projects, as well as projects of commodification, and affective self-production (Meiu et al. 2020).

Ethnic as 'other'

Anthropology's nineteenth century ties to imperialism meant that its knowledge about human difference was in large part conceived of as a tool of British and other [colonial](#) administration (see Asad 1973). Towards such ends, through projects of enumeration like the census (Cohn 1987), ethnicity was typically associated with discrete, singular, and essentialised categories of social identity that were perceived as biologically determined. In other words, people were understood to have essential, inborn, embodied characteristics that marked them as a member of one group or another. Early scholars in the field such as Lewis Henry Morgan, Herbert Spencer, and Edward B. Tylor were writing at a time when Darwin's theories of evolution laid much of the groundwork for social inquiry. Their 'social evolutionism' divided people into groups and placed them along hierarchies of evolutionary progress. Foundational work among anthropologists of this time period heralded the disciplinary trend of studying seemingly less advanced 'others', and it is from this notion of essential difference between the researcher and subject that the designation of ethnic identities became misleadingly associated with 'minority' or 'marginalised' groups. 'Ethnic minorities' are thus often those distinct from, and therefore available to, the anthropologist as subjects of study or the administrator as a representative of [bureaucratic](#) universalism.

Referring to a population as 'ethnic' still connotes a sense of marked minoritisation in relational difference to whatever the unmarked dominant community is in a given nation-state context, such as 'whiteness' in

the United States (Jackson and Thomas 2009), or 'Han-ness' in China (Mullaney et al. 2012). Yet the anthropological trend of studying ethnic 'others' has significantly diminished over the past decades, as much anthropological research has turned to focus on dominant institutional and political networks, often 'at home' (Ho 2009; Nader 2011). This disciplinary shift has made studies of particular ethnic groups fall out of favour to a significant extent. Paradoxically, as the rise of identity politics around the world paved the way for a disruptive politics that frames dominant groups as 'others' (Adhikari & Gellner 2016; Kaufmann 2004), anthropologists have often sought to disassociate themselves from such movements (Eriksen 1993). Recognising the often highly politicised material consequences of ethnic claims for representation may disrupt dominant scholarly and political discourses that frame ethnicity as an ephemeral, entirely discursive construct. Importantly, identity-based arguments can emerge from both left and right ideological positions. For instance, they define both the Black Lives Matter, and the 'Make America Great Again' movements in the US. The power of ethnicity as a category of both self-consciousness and political mobilisation may therefore be equally important for dominant and minority groups (Taylor 1994; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Shneiderman 2020). Such a perspective moves away from demonising 'ethnicity' as a necessarily negative political force, and instead seeks to understand its actual operations across fields of power.

Ethnicity as a relational field

As early as 1940, E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1940) had proposed the concepts of fission and fusion to describe the ongoing processes of separation and integration between sub-groups amongst the Nuer of Sudan. These ideas were part of a broader school of thought known as 'structural-functionalism', which interpreted the structures of social life as determined by their functional contributions to community livelihood and subsistence capacities. Despite its many shortcomings, such thinking productively identified that patterns of group identification were inherently dynamic. It helped recognise that individuals' clan membership might differ from one week to the next and that it was not essentially implanted in their bodies in any fixed manner.

Building upon such work, anthropologist Edmund Leach (1964) further identified ethnicity as a fluid vector of power across multiple social domains when he studied socio-cultural group formation and group variance over time. Perhaps the first to define ethnicity as a process rather than a structure, Leach observed the constant state of flux in ethnic belonging between the Kachin and Shan groups of northeast Burma which he had studied in the 1950s and 60s. Individuals and sub-groups would regularly shift their membership between these two seemingly separate categories as external political and environmental disruptions intersected with internal structures of association.

It was the influential work of Fredrik Barth, particularly the introduction to the edited volume *Ethnic groups and boundaries* (1969), which popularised the notion that ethnicity must be understood as a system

of relationships between groups, through a focus on the ever-shifting boundaries between them. Until this time, scholars still largely attributed specific ethnic characteristics as essential to non-Western populations, conceptualising ethnic groups as singular, bounded units. Barth critiqued this vision of a 'world of separate peoples' operating in 'relative isolation' (Barth 1969, 11), setting off a new wave of ethnic studies that diverged from evolutionary and structural-functional understandings of social groups as complete and internally consistent. Barth instead sought to frame ethnicity as a dynamic and processual set of *relations* between groups, urging scholars to think about how groups established boundaries between themselves and their neighbours, rather than on the shared 'cultural stuff' found within those ever fluid boundaries.

Following Barth's now seminal essay, scholars have since critiqued even Barth's approach for being too rigid, arguing that his use of the term 'boundary' invokes too much of a sense of exclusive group reification (see Cohen 1978). Yet Barth's work continues to be one of the most cited in anthropological studies of ethnicity today. Most importantly, it signaled a momentous shift in the way anthropologists understood social organisation, moving towards a model of cyclical change where ethnic boundaries are constantly produced through real time encounters between individuals in practice (see also Vincent 1974; Bentley 1983). This type of fluidity is again present in the work of Abner Cohen (1974) who broke new ground by situating analyses of ethnicity comparatively across the US, Britain, Israel, and several African contexts, offering a pitched counterpoint to the received understanding that anthropologists could only study such phenomena amidst 'others' in faraway locations. Cohen, like Barth, moved away from the notion of ethnicity as an essential characteristic, focusing instead on practice in real time to postulate that an ethnic group is 'a collectivity of people who share some patterns of normative behavior' (Cohen 1974, ix), and he emphasised the power of politics and economic resource competition as drivers of social relationships.

Cohen's work and other Marxian analyses of ethnicity have been critiqued for overemphasising resource competition and failing to adequately account for culture. Arguably, they do not sufficiently 'consider the processes, formal and informal, that link the distribution of tasks in this system to embodiments and patterns of cultural enactment' (Williams 1989, 409). The reference to 'cultural embodiment'—in other words, the notion that cultural differences shape behaviour at the individual level of the body in a material, physical sense—stands out. It marks the important point of tension between earlier modes of studying ethnicity that tended to view ethnic differences as essential and isomorphic with *race* and territory, to more contemporary debates in the field that take seriously the socio-political processes that produce both self-selected and externally asserted ethnic labels. In making these arguments, Williams also establishes the need to analyse ethnicity across the multiple registers on which it plays out simultaneously: scholarly, political, and lay (1989).

Deconstructing ethnicity: against groupist ontologies

At the end of the twentieth century, anthropologists and other social scientists began reconsidering the uncritical use of culture as a concept. Often associated with the seminal book *Writing culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), these critiques drew upon the work of poststructuralist, [postcolonialist](#), and deconstructionist thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, and Edward Said to criticise the knowledge claims of anthropologists in general, and their understanding of 'culture' in particular. They argued that many social groups deemed to exist in the sense of fixed or 'reified' categories were actually in flux, and far less clear cut than previously assumed. Ethnicity concomitantly began to be viewed as an outmoded reference to a 'groupist social ontology' (Brubaker 2009) grounded in the primary inclination to think of the social world with reference to people's unchanging substances (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 228). People's identity and culture was beginning to be understood as much more fluid than previously models allowed for.

For example, Arjun Guneratne describes how members of the Tharu community in Nepal created reified, or objectified versions of their own elders' rituals to transform culture into performance, creating, 'a tale that Tharus tell themselves about themselves' (Guneratne 1998, 760). Along these lines, a wave of [ethnographies](#) sought to deconstruct the ethnic claims of their subjects (see for instance Fisher 2001; Guneratne 2002). Thereby, they contributed to the parallel rapprochement between [history](#) and anthropology, which focused on the all-too-frequent 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). This is the notion that cultural symbols and practices that are held to be 'traditional' and therefore in need of preservation are often relatively new inventions that serve a contemporary sociopolitical purpose. This was the case in many nationalist performance traditions such as those mobilised by the Nazis to authorise the idea of a historically continuous Aryan [race](#), for example. Paradoxically, as the use of the term 'ethnicity' was beginning to lose its relevance inside the academy due to the systematic critical deconstruction of its symbolic repertoires, its importance for communities began to grow (Banks 1996).

Ethnicity thus came to be seen as a profoundly political concept mobilised within the identity-based politics of difference in various national contexts where state-imposed regimes of recognition required marginalised communities to mark themselves as distinctive (Appadurai 1981; Povinelli 2002; Middleton 2015). This idea lends itself to broader debates over recognition and representation within nation-states and the processes of competition for what Jonathan Friedman (1992) refers to as 'identity space'. In other words, the increasing hegemony of nation-states and nationalism—understood as both inherently limited and sovereign (Anderson 1991)—means that cultural difference becomes a valuable commodity that can be used to make all kinds of claims upon perceptibly scarce state resources (Appadurai 1981; Todd 2011; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). As the very principal of nationalism 'holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent' (Gellner 1983, 1), the moment an individual, community, or nation is perceived as threatened, boundaries of identity become increasingly important in [resisting](#) the pressure exerted on them (Eriksen 1993). Several scholarly works pertaining to nationalism and ethno-nationalist conflict

explore the fundamental element of recognition as a reaction to external pressure or threats. Ethnic recognition is thus political, as much as it is about belonging at an emotional and psychological level (Appadurai 1998; Eriksen 1993; Gellner et al. 1997; Horowitz 1985).

Beyond theoretical debates in the academy, conflicts around the world in the second half of the twentieth century drew increased attention to violence perpetuated in the name of ethnic, racial, or national difference (Malkki 1995). This politicisation of ethnicity marked a transition from 'the politics of the nation-state to the politics of ethnic pluralism' (Tambiah 1996, 8), whereby socially constructed ideas of group belonging lend themselves to constructing exclusionary regimes on the basis of a shared identity. Such dynamics have unfolded in both [democratic](#) and communist state contexts, with political mobilisation on the basis of ethnicity being linked in complex ways to Marxist and Maoist projects of class-based mobilisation (see for example Ismail and Shah 2015, Shneiderman 2020).

Ethnicity as affective politics

The beginning of the twenty-first century marked yet another significant shift in anthropological engagements with ethnicity. By then it had become generally accepted that ethnic identities were constructed through [historical](#), political, and social processes, and were not concretely real in any essential sense. 'Constructivism had gained the upper hand over essentialism' (Wimmer 2013, 2), so to speak. However, attempts to address the social and political processes that maintain divisions of the social world in ethnic, racial, or national terms opened a dialogue around the 'fluid' nature of ethnicity (Fisher 2001; Jenkins 2002). They highlighted the need to question why and how ideologies of ethnic identification work in the real world *despite* our critical recognition of their constructed nature. Anthropologists realised that when debates over ethnicity intersect with racial and national identities they can be a significant locus for the exercise of power and authority in spite of being constructed. Even if ethnicity is not natural or essential, it can be owned and used as an economic resource against and within [neoliberal](#) market forces (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), and it can serve as a locus of power and [resistance](#) towards dominant social structures (Scott 1985; 2009).

The knowledge that ethnicity is constructed thus does not lessen its social power, nor does it lessen its intimate, emotional, and affective importance in people's daily lives. Recent scholarship has sought to demonstrate the ways in which ethnicity may thus be simultaneously instrumentalised for external recognition *and* 'affectively real' (Shneiderman 2015), as both a mode of politics and a mode of consciousness. Refocusing debates 'on the objectification of identity as a fundamental human process that persists through ritual action regardless of the contingencies of state formation or economic paradigm' (Shneiderman 2015, 285), such scholarship seeks to bridge the bifurcated debates between politics and meaning by suggesting that ethnicity can be both at the same time (Meiu et al. 2020).

One such example comes from an [ethnography](#) of the Thangmi community who live across the borders of Nepal and India (Shneiderman 2015). It shows how Thangmi enact certain cultural practices, such as wedding [dances](#), in different registers for different purposes. When dancing at an actual wedding in their home villages, Thangmi may be producing the content of their ethnic identity for themselves through a shared set of practices that are mutually agreed upon as particularly Thangmi by all actors involved. The act of dancing in this way is part of the process of constructing their ethnicity in an affective sense, in the group-internal context of a wedding at someone's [home](#).

At the same time, those dancers, and other members of the community, may also perform stylised versions of the same dances on stage in a theatre for the express consumption of state officials with the power to recognise the community within state paradigms for ethnic categorisation. Here they are producing Thangmi ethnicity in the political sense, in the group-external context of a theatrical performance organised by state actors. While the latter is certainly constructed, in the sense that it is staged in a very intentional manner to meet certain political requirements, both versions of the dance are real and relevant to those who enact them. Both contribute to the overall ability of the Thangmi community to maintain their traditional knowledge of such cultural forms, which in turn constitute the content of their ethnic identity. The point here is that the political mobilisation of such cultural knowledge does not eclipse or erase its continued existence in community-internal forms. The constructed nature of ethnic identity can thus co-exist with its affectively real power for those who embody it (for further details, see Shneiderman 2015, Chapter 2).

The geopolitics of ethnicity

While we have discussed that ethnicity may shift over time, we now turn our attention to understanding its variation across space by considering regional literatures that bring nuance and texture to the aforementioned general narrative of debates over ethnicity. Grounded in what Richard Fardon (1990) refers to as 'regional ethnographic traditions', theories of ethnicity have come to intersect with global and local politics in myriad ways. In calling attention to the disparities between essentialising theories of ethnic difference and [ethnographic](#) studies of particular communities (Abu-Lughod 1991), some of the fundamental understandings of ethnicity are complicated by the incommensurability of partial and shifting claims to recognition in various parts of the world.

As scholars whose own research has been grounded in South Asia, we find recent ethnic debates in Nepal and India a good crucible for exploring some of these broader themes. Since the 1990 advent of [democracy](#) in Nepal, long-standing internal tensions between historically marginalised ethnic groups and state forces began to be vocally expressed through a range of ethnic and political mobilisations. These were both a product and driver of the tensions between Hindu nationalist ideologies and the diverse groups of people the state of Nepal has come to govern (see Pfaff-Czarnecka et al. 1997; Onta 2006; Hangen 2010). Identity

politics thus became the centerpiece of national debates through successive waves of civil conflict (1996-2006) and post-conflict state restructuring (2006-2015), as minority groups struggled to attain recognition and rights within the 2015 constitution and subsequent 2017 administrative restructuring. Beginning with the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities Act (NFDIN) in 2002, Nepal passed a series of policy reforms aimed at addressing the limited visibility of *adivasi janajati*, or 'Indigenous Nationalities' (approximately 60 are currently recognised). These policies have become closely linked to conversations around [human rights](#), social inclusion, and development (Shneiderman 2013).

Nepal remains only one of two Asian countries to have ratified ILO Convention 169 on the rights of Indigenous peoples (the other is the Philippines). By contrast, while India has maintained constitutional provisions for the 'upliftment' of groups designated as Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes (ST/SC) since the 1950s, it has not recognised Indigeneity as a legal category. This has led to a different politics of ethnicity than that described in Nepal—despite the two countries' shared borders, and linguistic and religious heritages. In India, 'tribalness' has become the category of aspiration to secure a better future (Kapila 2008; Moodie 2015; Middleton 2015; Phillimore 2014; Shah 2010). Using terms such as 'backwards' and 'highly marginalised', the politics of difference in various parts of South Asia can be seen as echoing early anthropological models of ethnic and racial inferiority.

However, the current politics in both countries provide a counter-narrative to the assertion that ethnicity is something that only minoritised groups have. Instead, as Krishna Adhikari and David Gellner (2016) put it, there is a backlash from dominant communities who seek to label themselves as 'other' in response to the growing visibility of erstwhile ethnicised minorities, such as *adivasi janajati* in Nepal and [Muslims](#) in India. In both Nepal and India, once-marginal ethnic labels have become targets of aspiration, as communities vie for entitlements and territorial sovereignty. Showcasing their distinctiveness as tribal, ethnic, Indigenous, and religious groups, ethnicised categories become prized targets of recognition.

The rise of cultural rights activism and increasing struggle for 'identity space' among marginal groups has given way to a growing emphasis on [neoliberal](#) multiculturalism worldwide. In its simplest form, neoliberal multiculturalism enmeshes pro-market reforms with policies for cultural rights granted to disadvantaged groups. In [Latin America](#), this regime has gained traction in the name of cultural protectionism and human rights discourse in favour of ethnic minorities. Yet contrary to these alleged goals, it can lead to contradictory and oppressive outcomes, as pro-market reforms are often detrimental to the lives of various ethnic and Indigenous groups. Charles Hale (2005) asserts that

the great efficacy of neoliberal multiculturalism resides in powerful actors' ability to restructure the arena of political contention, driving a wedge between cultural rights and the assertion of the control over resources necessary for those rights to be realized (13).

Hale's argument is echoed in Shaylih Muehlmann's description of experiences in northwest Mexico at the

end of the Colorado River, where US dam projects and the more recent creation of a protected 'biosphere reserve' by the Mexican federal government have denied local Cucapá Indigenous communities the right to fish, creating what a lawyer referred to as 'cultural genocide' on its own people (Muehlmann 2009). This conflict between the Cucapá and the state is mired in debates over Indigenous rights, cultural and ethnic difference, and state-regulated discourses of multiculturalism. Rather than allow ethnic groups to control the Colorado Delta, the state has instead used ethnic difference to deny the Cucapá access to their ancestral fishing ground (Muehlmann 2009, 469). Instrumentalising ethnic difference under the guises of global discourses such as multiculturalism and environmental [sustainability](#), the Mexican state has used the politics of ethnicity not to aid the Cucapás, as multicultural policies often insinuate, but to fuel their continued marginalisation. In other instances, claims to Indigenous status have been undermined when communities lose control over the ways they are represented to larger publics (Conklin and Graham 1995; Heatherington 2010; Tsing 2005), or communities may choose to reject legitimate claims to Indigenous status altogether (Li 2000).

Although neoliberal multiculturalism is not unique to Mexico, or Latin America for that matter, the case of the Cucapá shows how in the neoliberal era the intersections between Indigeneity, environmentalism, and state projects become contested sites of 'authenticity' (Handler 1986). From an anthropological perspective, 'authenticity' is a cultural construct linked with terms like 'untouched' or 'traditional' that is underpinned by the assumption that cultures are discrete, bounded units that do not change (Handler 1986). The use of 'authenticity' as a legitimising framework for evaluating traditions, ethnicity, and cultural heritage persists today. It comes to light particularly through cultural performances for public and political purposes (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Conklin 1997), as well as through private ceremonies and rituals (Shneiderman 2015). As a result, the concepts of performance and performativity emerge as important ways to understand how particular groups are 'driven by their specific desires for recognition, self-determination, and cultural sovereignty' (Graham and Penny 2014). As described above in the Thangmi example, performance as a tool to legitimise ethnic claims has emerged both as a powerful means of asserting and expressing difference, and as a way for contemporary governments and international bodies to capitalise on these designations.

This is the case not only in explicitly neoliberal state contexts, but even in an erstwhile communist state such as China, where ethnic classification has been constitutive of national identity since the foundation of the People's Republic. The Ethnic Classification Project of the 1950s sought to structure the 'number, names and composition of China's officially recognized ethnonational groups' (Mullaney 2010) as part of the Communist Party's campaign to achieve ethnonational equality. Later in the 1980s and 1990s, during China's [postsocialist](#) reforms, the linguistic and cultural traditions of minority communities came to be appropriated by the state as desirable representations of 'traditional culture' (Schein 2000, 24). 'The figure of the minority, usually feminine, came to be included in what was considered to constitute the

authentically Chinese' (Schein 2000, 24). Today, minority communities continue to renegotiate their place within China's ethnonationalist politics and assert their own cultural identity through performances including [tourism](#) events, village rituals, or even scholarly and journalistic encounters (Chio 2014; Jinba 2013). It is in this way that concepts like 'ethnicity', 'minority', and 'authenticity' are interlinking components of ethnonationalist agendas, as well as contested sites of cultural [production](#) and representation.

Across the Global North and the Global South, anthropologists have explored similar themes related to the 'articulation' of Indigeneity and ethnic identity (Hall 1990; Li 2000), multiculturalism (Turner 1993), and the complex relationships between 'Indigeneity' and 'autochthony' (McGovern 2012; Pelican 2009). These and other related terms continue to be used by various state and nonstate actors as both platforms for social justice, and to continue the marginalisation of minority communities. Ethnicity can cut both ways.

Conclusion

Whether self-designated or externally imposed, ethnic classifications are regionally and historically diverse, and the entanglement of ethnicity with related terms such as '[race](#)', 'Indigeneity', 'minority', 'nationalism', and '[tribe](#)' have persisted since its inception within anthropological and popular discourse. A common thread is the association between ethnicity and marginalised groups. Although in some cases this power imbalance has been overturned to render minority groups visible in the global arena of cultural rights, analytical approaches to the study of ethnicity are not exempt from [colonial](#) legacies and the politics of exclusion. As Brackette Williams (1989) succinctly states,

ethnicity labels the politics of cultural struggle in the nexus of territorial and cultural nationalism... as a label it may sound better than tribe, race, or barbarian, but with respect to political consequences, it still identifies those who are at the borders of the empire (439).

Finally, to assume that ethnicity as an analytical category and structure of belonging will run its course would be to ignore the realities faced by communities around the world. People will likely continue to find it useful, as they navigate [neoliberal](#) policies to secure access to resources in the face of rapidly [changing climate](#) conditions, make claims to territory within newly invigorated Indigenous rights frameworks, or attempt to escape the ethnic label altogether. To address ethnicity, and do justice to the highly politicised nature of this term, scholarship must carefully consider [histories](#) of marginalisation and social inequality without imprisoning groups in an idealised image of their own past in the process (Li 2000). Ethnicity may carry numerous intimate and affective meanings for one person whilst being of no value to another, and it is through a careful consideration of the politics at stake that future anthropological scholarship can disrupt grand theories of ethnicity to reveal its multivocality and contextual specificity. In this third decade of the twenty-first century, as we see newly invigorated global protests against systemic [racism](#) collide with

unequal vulnerabilities to the global [pandemic](#) and the juggernaut of climate change, it seems ever more important to apply a social justice lens as we reconsider the relationships between ethnicity and its others. Whether in lay, scholarly, and political registers, and whether within or beyond the framework of the nation-state, ethnicity will likely occupy us for years to come.

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