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Thornton, Robert

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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

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by: Robert Thornton

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Ethnicity and the Geometry of Power
One moment in the imagination of the polity[1]

Robert Thornton
Department of Anthropology
University of the Witwatersrand

Abstract

Ethnicity, for those who subscribe to the concept, is understood to be one 'part' of a polity that contains, at least, other 'ethnicities' and probably many other kinds of groupings and 'parts'. This paper argues that in order to understand ethnicity, we must seek to understand why it is that people believe that 'society' is composed of 'parts' and to understand how those parts are visualized and 'imagined'. [To say that they are imagined does not means that they are thought of as merely 'imaginary', but rather that they depend on images and beliefs] In short, it is argued that 'ethnicities' are conceptualised quite literally as maps, puzzles, blocks or masses, as groups or sets, as levels or power 'bases'. Ethnicity can be also understood, at a higher level of generalization as one moment, or part, of a complex visualization of other sorts of social power such as 'state', 'family' 'economic', spiritual/ancestral', 'witchcraft/sorcery' and so on. Ethnicity, seen in this way then, appears not as some special 'social formation', but rather as a special case of the visualization (or objectification, reification) and metaphorization of social relations. It is these visualizations that make political rhetoric and recruitment possible. They are objectified in 'ethnic' dress, dance, the built environment, bodily dispositions, ritual forms, and other cultural displays Ethnicity, then, is an aesthetic phenomenon, and must be understood at least partly in these terms. This approach permits us to reason about why special kinds of social power are associated with certain 'ethnicities' and thus to understand the cultural basis for an imagined, socially transmitted and sanctioned geometry of social power.

As I sat down to write this paper, a young woman came into my office with an invitation to a "Macedonian cultural evening", sponsored by the Greek Embassy, and billing Macedonia as "the Bridgehead of Hellenism. My immediate reaction was to ask the girl if she was a Macedonian. "No," she replied, "I'm just Greek, . . . well, actually Cretan. I'm helping to distribute the invitations." I accepted my invitation, and thought, "my god, not another ethnicity!!" The brief interchange had raised a number of interesting points. A 'Macedonian' ethnicity had been distinguished from a "just Greek" identity. Depending on how, when and who construed this statement, "just Greek . . ." and ". . .well actually Cretan" might signify national, ethnic, sub-national, supra-ethnic or even historical identities. The Macedonian "identity" was further linked to a concrete image of a "bridgehead" and an abstract image--that is, and imagination--of Hellenism.

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[1] A version of this paper was originally presented to the Conference on "Ethnicity, Society and Conflict in Natal," organised by the University of Natal Project on Contemporary Political Conflict in Natal, at University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg on 14 September, 1992.

What had happened in these few words? Identities had been claimed, a polity had been identified and partitioned into at least Macedonian and Cretan parts, with the possibility of a "just Greek" residuum. I would also take both the concreteness of the 'bridgehead' metaphor and the abstractness of Hellenism to be significant. A tradition had been named ('Hellenism), an emblem selected ('bridgehead'). In order to display these cultural claims, I had been invited to celebrate at a party. Is this ethnicity? Or is it just fun?

1. Ethnicity as the construction of social 'parts'.

Ethnicity, at the simplest 'folk' level, is the recognition of social and cultural differences in others, and the adoption of an identity by one's self. For 'ordinary people', outside of the discourses of social science, *ethnic* difference is usually held to be something *other than* racial or class (economic) difference. It is also held to be a sort of sub-difference within the nation, and people generally believe that national difference and national loyalties normally transcend--and, morally speaking, ought to transcend-- ethnic differences. Ethnicity, then, for most people is *not* racial, may often subsume class difference, and is subsumed in turn by national difference. Among social scientists, however, ethnicity is frequently said to 'cross-cut' these other kinds of differences. Received wisdom asserts that ethnicity is 'caused' by power differences, or by other more 'fundamental' differences such as race or class. For example a social scientist who is committed to a "class analysis" will see ethnicity as the *consequence* of class differences. The phenomenon itself is demoted to the status of sub-identities within a class, or is considered to be subsumed by a "larger", often global (or 'world-system') pattern of interactions that is ultimately caused by 'economy', 'material' or 'class'. By the same token, a social scientist who is committed to an analysis conceived in terms of racial difference--such as the sociologist Hendrik Verwoerd, or the anthropologist Eiselen, the major architects Apartheid --will see ethnicity as a second-order commitment to local differences that are subsumed by the racial order or things, or that are caused by 'race'. The racial order, in their case was, in turn, believed to be subsumed and guaranteed by a God-given religious order, or a natural biological order, and perhaps by both. While the one privileges a metaphysics of the material, the other privileges a metaphysics of physical difference. Both rely on images of a 'more fundamental order' which is held to determine ethnicity. Ethnicity is a consequence of something else. I have only given two examples of this, one 'materialist', the other 'racist'. Both views have qualified as valid 'social science' for some and at different periods of time. Some still believe them to be valid.

It is not my initial aim, however, to dispute the validity of these particular forms of the causal account of ethnicity. I merely wish to point to the metaphysical underpinnings[2] of these 'social science' accounts and add that these views are rather far from what 'ordinary people' know or feel to be the case.

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[2] I ask the reader to bear in mind that some metaphysics may indeed be more real or more useful than others--but that is irrelevant here.

It is by now obvious that it is difficult to convince 'ordinary people' that ethnicity is anything other than what they know and believe it to be. Many instances from the history of the twentieth century show this clearly. The Apartheid State in South Africa, the Soviet Union with its tightly controlled empire, and numerous capitalist democracies have used sophisticated techniques of persuasion ranging from near-total control of the public media to direct and violent coercion either to persuade people that their ethnic identities were not real or that they were other than they thought them to be. For the most part, these exceptionally well-documented attempts to persuade people that their ethnic identities were not genuine or were not somehow fundamental to their well-being, identity and livelihood have failed. What has failed, specifically, is the social scientist's conceptions of what ethnicity meant and what it might mean in the future. It has failed, I think, because social science in all its many varieties, and in all its attempts to support either a political Right or a political Left, has not sought to understand the larger framework of social parts and social powers in which ethnicity plays a part. Attempts to try to portray ethnicity as 'just class in another form', or simply a reflex of race, or as something other than what it is will continue to fail. In fact, we may not be able to say what it is at all, any more than we can say definitively what is race or what is class. We can examine its consequences, however, and we can seek to deconstruct the idea of ethnicity itself. In doing this, we must seek to go beyond the attempts to explain ethnicity as 'really' something else, and to eschew the attractive belief that it is not really there.

I want to try to say something, then, about what 'ordinary' people might believe about ethnicity. Beyond that, I hope to say something about an alternative approach to understanding the nature of ethnicity. This is a purely conceptual analysis, a first attempt, and not an empirical analysis of what real people say. It is, moreover, an attempt by a social scientist who is committed to ideas that history is not predictable; that real social processes are necessarily more complex than simple social theories can entirely comprehend; and that people imagine their worlds, construct the terms under which they live in those worlds and yet continue to believe that those worlds are uniquely real; and that life is lived by means of, and in terms of systems of values, symbols and signifiers. I believe that a thorough-going conceptual analysis is necessary before new data can be collected that will do more than simply confirm old beliefs.

What ordinary people seem to believe about ethnicity, then, is that it is an inevitable part of the polities in which they live. It appears too, that ethnicity has some sense of concreteness for most people; that is, it is a kind of social part[3] that endures and has a unique character. The concreteness of ethnicity, the special and compelling reality that many people seem to feel is not exclusive of other kinds of identity. It has presence, a sense of *sui generis* substance. It is is inclusive on most grounds--that is, most other forms of identity or difference are allowed within the category of ethnic

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[3] I am using the somewhat peculiar locution 'social part', or 'part' of a polity in order not to prejudice the terms of my argument. 'Part' seems to be the most neutral word in this context. I have discussed the idea of 'social parts' in Thornton 1992, as has Strathern (1992) and others in Kuper 1992.

identity--and is exclusive principally of other 'ethnicities'--that is it excludes identities that are formulated on the same grounds.

For the most part, however, ethnicity in the theories of the social scientists is 'invention', 'inauthentic', a 'construction', merely imagined. For ordinary people, these words entirely miss the presence and substance that ethnicity seems to have to them. To seek to deny it, or to seek to say that it is merely other, mere difference, simply created, or whatever--that is to try to deny the very grounds on which it is given its value in social action is to miss the boat as badly as Marx did with respect to religion. We can not expect to understand the phenomenon while looking everywhere but at it.

1. Ethnicity as construction: a deconstruction

We now accept, most of us 'social scientists', that ethnicity is a 'construction'. While this clears up the matter of thinking that ethnicity is somehow 'primordial', or (socio-) biological and not the result of historical processes and of culture, it still leaves us the problem of what exactly we might mean by 'constructed'. If we are not clear about what we mean by 'ethnicity,' then to assert that ethnicity is constructed only exacerbates the problem.

In order to advance the understanding of ethnicity we must 'deconstruct' the category itself since it is considered to be a 'construction'. I am going to try to sketch some ideas about how a 'deconstruction' of the notion of ethnicity might begin. 'Deconstruction', however, raises the fear of post-modernism in many minds today, and the sort of analysis that it implies is not widely understood, nor accepted. Something of a digression is necessary:--

'Deconstruction' first of all is derived from the field of literary criticism. It is a critical method that is perhaps most appropriately applied to actual texts of the literary variety, but the extension of the method to a broader field of cultural criticism is already well underway. The genie can not be stuffed back into the lit-crit bottle. There is, of course, nothing simple about the concept of deconstruction, but simply put, it is the attempt to grasp the nature of construction and to state with some precision the metaphors and metonyms that make thought possible. This exercise is essentially a philosophical one, since it assumes that there is nothing that humans think, and nothing that they do that is not symbolically 'constructed'. The approach takes seriously Nietzsche's dictum that all knowledge, all belief, all meaning is nothing other than an infinite "chain of signifiers" and metaphors that signify each other and endlessly mark differences and equalities, but never successfully nor fully *refer* to any world that can be said to be *outside* of the world of the signifier. This is sometimes called the 'prison house of language'. Deconstruction is frequently taken to entail a commitment to the idea that there is 'nothing outside the text', that is, that all discourse is fully conditioned by the existence of other different and previous discourses from which no subsequent discourse ever escapes. The common locution that something is "always already" there--that is, that it is neither possible nor useful to believe that some condition, category, possibility or limit is not already and always conditioning the content of whatever is the subject or topic of analysis--signifies that there is no 'origin' of a discursive practice before which some particular condition does not apply, or that there is no 'point' outside of the textual tradition from which some exterior judgment

can be made. (It is locutions like this one, and sentences like the previous one, that give deconstruction and post-modernism a bad name.) In other words, if we accept this view of the nature of cultural products (and, by extension, of the nature of all things and notions which are 'constructed') then there is no *exterior position* from which to judge any action, any event, any statement or pretense as morally good, empirically valid, or transcendentally true.[4] Deconstruction then, as a critical method, accepts this stance with regard to judgment (judgments of moral goodness, aesthetic beauty, propositional truth-value, empirical or referential validity, transcendent or ultimate truth, and so on) and attempts to show how and with what assumptions the *claims* to truth, beauty, validity, goodness, etc. are made, and on what grounds these claims are accepted by a reader, an observer, or a consumer.

As long as we are dealing with literary texts--that is with fictions-- this stance is probably justified since the readers of literary fictions already assume a skeptical stance with respect to factuality. The literary fiction is not merely 'constructed', but is constructed in the expectation that certain special standards of judgment will be applied (or suspended) for the sake of the pleasures that reading fiction gives us. If the 'constructed-ness' of ethnicity were taken to be of this sort, the project would seem ludicrous. Since some writers sometimes take ethnicity to be a construction of this sort, as John Comaroff appears to do in "Of Totemism and Ethnicity" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992), it is worth while to point out that such writers are confused. Deconstruction of this variety is inappropriate to the project of a more broadly conceived cultural criticism.

Deconstruction of categories like ethnicity seem constantly to be in danger of destroying the very data they must stand on. Real people commit real resources, including their own bodies and those of their kin, to the 'fictions' of ethnicity. In applying these techniques to cultural categories, then, it is not possible to maintain the same assumptions as those on which the practice of a purely literary deconstruction is practiced. To do so makes the project of post-modernism and deconstruction seem absurd to those of our practical-minded and feet-on-the-ground colleagues. The mistake arises because 'ordinary people', those who believe they belong to ethnic groups, do not agree before hand to the suspension of judgment in the construction of social and cultural forms in which they participate. People do not--emphatically do not--agree before hand, implicitly or explicitly that 'ethnicity', 'nation', kinship, community of faith, and other similar 'constructions' are to be taken as 'imaginary'. They do not accept that moral judgment will be suspended while they are acting 'ethnically', or expressing a national patriotism, or behaving 'like a man ', or acting 'like a lady'. These are positions and construction that are taken *seriously*. To take something seriously, however, is a stance that requires commitment of resources, intellect and belief. The seriousness of ethnicity and its like is a sort of generically different order of belief than the 'imaginary' of literary fiction. The important point is that both those things that people take seriously--that is those things to which they willing to fully commit themselves, their intellect and their resources--may be as fully

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[4] The elaboration of this position is properly the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, although many conemporary scholars falsely attribute the idea to either Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault, who borrowed the idea from Nietzsche (mostly without attribution).

constructed as those things which they take to be 'imaginary'. The imaginary of fiction is constituted by those imagined worlds or entities to which we commit only our sense of belief and appreciation of possibility, but not out intellect, our bodies or our resources. Ethnicity is a fiction, but it is a *serious fiction* and therefore real.

If we can make this distinction, then it is possible to apply the concept of deconstruction to those fictions that we take seriously, that is, we can take apart and review the fundamental categories and commitments that underpin the serious constructs within which lives are really led. It is important to make this distinction since a methodological deconstructionism does not imply a moral vacuum nor political paralysis.[5] It does require, however, a willingness to re-imagine a field of intellectual inquiry with which we social scientists mostly think we are already quite familiar: the field of power, power relations, and ethnicity.

It is commonplace in today's discussions of sociology to assert that ethnicity, nationalisms, tribalisms, and other kinds of sectional loyalties and identities are 'constructions'. This assertion means a number of things to a number of different people, but what is common is that these ideas are not 'natural', that they are built up through an historical process, and that they are part of political systems in which they function as emblems of identity and as banners under which membership to these social categories is recruited. Implicit in this now-widespread conception of the constructedness of these categories, is the possibility that they can be either reconstructed in different ways, and that they can be destroyed, if necessary, through appropriate means. Although the theoretical vocabulary of 'construction' and ' imagination' is relatively recent, the project of reconstruction or destruction of ethnicities or nationalities has been a central part of the many projects of social engineering that have characterized much of the last half of the nineteenth century and most of this century. Indeed, it is probably the practices of the modern socialist, national socialist and other authoritarian and centralist states that has given weight and urgency to the notions of 'imagination' and 'constructedness' of these categories. Projects of national cleansing, ethnocide, genocide, national socialisms (of the Apartheid or the NAZI varieties), have aimed either to create or to destroy various versions of ethnicity or nationalisms by means of persuasion (propaganda, control of the new and popular media), bureaucratic manipulation (passes, visas and passports, residential registration, etc.), forms of economic pressure (special taxation, fines, restrictions on access to capital, money land or other resources), and in the most extreme cases torture, rape, terrorism, and genocide.

Ethnicity, as such, is not the problem

It is for these reasons that ethnicity is now at issue. But it seems to me that ethnicity *per se* is not the problem. We might say, as a first approximation that it is the *effect* of ethnicity as social instrument that is the problem. But what do we

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[5] Of course, for Nietzsche, it did: it certainly implied a political paralysis, but whether his real psychological and physical paralysis was the result of his 'mind' or merely a disease of his brain, must remain an open question.

achieve by speaking as if 'ethnicity' is the cause of other social events or structures, or that it is itself caused by other different events and structures? The problem, in other words, is not so much ethnicity itself as the notions of cause and effect that are implicit in the social science versions of causal accounts. Unfortunately, the social science causal account shares a great deal with the many different programs of ethnic 'cleansing', racial 'hygiene' and social engineering that have taken us so close to the precipice of annihilation so often in our era.

The notion that 'ethnicity' is the causal result of colonial 'impact' or capitalist 'penetration' are only conventionally causal. Cause, in the strict sense, could be taken only to describe the relation of physical masses and forces and the observable events that are immediately consequential (that is have a strict sequential relation in time and space) on other events. The notion of cause in the social sciences is already a metaphor. The sense of these statements--colonial impact, capitalist penetration--depends crucially on the image of two masses or entities that are capable (in our imaginations) of impact or penetration. Of course, in reality, there are no such 'masses' that are capable of physical relations of this kind, and thus there can be no real causal account that relies on the metaphors of cause and substance that 'impact' and 'penetration' (or any other metaphors of force, striking, or entry) imply. What we are trying to convey in these metaphors, I think, is better described as relations of social power.

In their application to Africa, the metaphorical figures of masses, impacts and penetrations that we have referred to, rely for their rhetorical force on the idea that African societies were i) static wholes that could be metaphorised with the image of the 'mass'; and ii) were unable to 'invent' ethnicity for themselves. The notion that African societies were static wholes has been quite comprehensively demolished within the discipline of Anthropology, but is still held to be a valid proposition--or tenet of belief-- for many contemporary sociologists and historians. The second implied notion, that African societies were only on the receiving end of the causal arrow of world history, is scarcely acknowledged yet in any discipline, but I think that many people already realize the implication of such a position and are uncomfortable with it. The problem with these metaphors, is that they are incapable of allowing us to conceptualise the individual event within the 'mass', or the complexity of processes that do not all have any causal links between them. In other words, the global sociologies based on Marxism and structuralism do not permit us to understand the human scale on which events proceed. They do not allow us to perceive the differences of scale between the kinds of social parts that have come into interaction with one another. Finally, they do not permit us to understand, or to talk usefully about, the sorts of causes that are relevant to social events. The only causal account that is relevant, I believe, is an account of what we call 'power'. Power (the word itself) is already only an umbrella term under which many forms of social interaction are summed up and labeled. To understand it, a thoroughgoing critical understanding of what the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern has called 'the Western Metaphysic' is essential.[6] In

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[6] Note Derrida's claim that "The history of metaphysics, like the hisotry of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix . . . is the determination of being as presence in all the senses of this word. It would be possible to show that all the names relatd to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always deignated the costant of a presence--*eidos, archè, telos,*

undertaking such a project, however, precious concepts such as "society" (in the Durkheimian sense), and "politics" (in the Weberian sense) must be jettisoned in favour of careful examination of the nature of power in all social relations, of concepts of the person, of gender, of violence and so on.

Our problem, then, becomes one of deconstruction of metaphors. We are still left with the metaphors of the 'common man' who uses these to talk about and to understand his common predicament. But some of the outmoded metaphors of the social sciences can now be discarded, especially those that we believed, until now, permitted us to stand outside this common predicament and look at it 'from a distance'. We may be able to gain some distance, but that does not absolve us from examining our metaphors and the constructions of causality that we impose on the social world which we attempt to understand.

Ethnicity is not just 'The State'

It is certainly clear that ethnicity is closely associated with what we variously call the nation, the state, and the 'nation state' or occasionally, the country. The state, in simplest definitional terms is the governmental apparatus of a country, or alternatively of a 'nation'. We might add to this the symbolic manifestation of government and countries such as capital cities, national shrines and secular religion, including monuments, anthems, state symbols, formulaic rhetorics at occasions of State, quasi-prayers, and so on. For the most part, social science deals with 'the state'. This misses the point for the 'ordinary person', though it might prove something about habits of discourse. The idea of 'The state' is fossilized today in the tough ancient amber of theory. Ethnicities live in countries and often ignore the state; they transcend it in trans-national cultural movements, and

The notion of the 'country', however, is less theorised though much more widely used by the 'ordinary person'. The country may be the territorial extent of power exercised by the government, although today there are many parts of the world that would qualify as 'countries' even though they lack any, or any single 'state'. The 'country' is the content of an imagined border--imagined through the medium of the map or of the image of a 'country-side', and ethnicities are parts of these kinds of wholes.

The notion of the State, however, has remained fundamentally unchanged since the foundation of the Roman Republic and the codification of its laws under the Emperors. This was the first watershed, since the Romans were perhaps the first to speak of *ethnes* in roughly the same way we use it today. They meant the non-Roman peoples who had gradually become incorporated into the Empire. The Greeks before them had also used the term, and contrasted it to the *demos,* those people of non-Greek origin

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energeia, ousia (essence,, existence, substance, and subject) *aletheia*, transcendentality, , or conscience, God, man and so forth." (***Writing and Difference***; quote in Spivak, Translator's Preface to ***Of Grammatology***, p. xxi.)

who lived outside of the Ancient polities of the Greek city states. This model was re-discovered, and re-invented during the Enlightenment, and then applied rather uncritically to the social theory during the nineteenth century by people like Henry Maine, Karl Marx, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Herbert Spencer, among many others. Thus it is that the theory that ethnicity is only definable in terms of the state, and in opposition to it, has had a long history. In as much as the theory of the state is the same since Roman times (Maine, Morgan and Marx, in fact, added little to it) our theories of ethnicity remain largely constrained by the particular imagination implicit in the Roman Tables of the Law. It is incumbent upon us to at least re-examine some aspects of this in order to understand the relations that might really exist between the European State (which is really the Roman notion of sovereignty over territory) and the pre-European forms of polity that existed in Africa and which still show some continuities into the present.

The first social interactions between Africans and Europeans in Africa almost always resulted in attempts by Africans to incorporate what they understood to be new sources of power, new sources of goods, and new sources of value into their own relatively smaller scale polities. There was first of all a difference in scale between the two polities that were represented by Africans and Europeans, but of equal importance was the differences in the kind of value each sought to maximize. The African societies sought to maximize social values of prestige, personal authority, charisma, and varieties of power that were incorporated in the individual body. These were held to originate somewhere or somewhen else, in other 'sources' of power. Example of these sources of power were ancestors, herbs, named spiritual entities of various sorts, and each others bodies. They sought to incorporate the European versions of these powers, as they saw then, into their own polities and in terms of their own histories and historical imaginations. For the Africans in these earliest encounters--but also continuing through the entire history of what is now a complex of internal relationships--values either circulated within restricted domains of exchange, or they served as metaphors for each other. Thus, while personal essences or hereditary powers ordinarily circulated within restricted channels of kinship, they could also be metaphorically extended in witchcraft and sorcery practices. On the other hand, for the Europeans , value was imagined to inhere in goods. The kinds of value that could be signified and carried by goods, moreover, was strictly distinguished from the kinds of values that could be signified by persons, and that could be carried by persons. Examples of the first kind of value were things, things of all kinds, but especially things that did not change (gold and ivory) or that could sustain physical loads (iron, tin, copper, wood, leather) or that could be used to assemble other things (gums and fibres). Examples of the second kind of value were 'souls' and spirits, but also the human physical capacities to make goods, and sexual capacities to reproduce (make people). Europeans sought labour 'power', the capacities to reproduce by means of muscular energy and intellectual conceptualization the goods of culture. What labour makes is the things that can carry other kinds of cultural values . Thus, the interaction that we characterize as colonial impact or capitalist penetration was instead a disjuncture of the scale of polities and of the nature of the values that people sought to maximize through their activities within them.

Thus, African societies sought first to incorporate value as they saw it. Only when they were on the verge of being overwhelmed by the polities into which they had

recently come into contact did they seek to identify and to defend their boundaries. These defenses were often mounted too late to be effective. This was partly due to the limits on the size of the African polities themselves. The common African political features of low-level and small-scale democracy among men, where value inheres mainly in animals (especially) cattle and a few restricted mediums of exchange (but no money), and the kinship metaphors of political identity dictated, in effect, that African polities remained small with no (or very few) independently active individuals and very few large states capable of military action. In the early instances, these small scale polities competed among themselves to capture to incorporate what they saw as external sources of goods and power that they did not themselves produce. So long as these inputs were small--as during the slave trade and the early mercantile trade by Portuguese, Dutch Arab and Indians-- these polities were not overwhelmed, but rather maintained tenuous balances of power. Eventually, they were overwhelmed and re-emerged as 'countries'. After de-colonization, the apparatus of 'European' (i.e. Roman-like) states continued or were set up. Today, in much of Africa there is little left of this peculiar social form. Countries and ethnicities, however, remain

By drawing this distinction in such broad terms, we are able to begin to set up a categorical distinction between polities that seek to incorporate power from outside of their boundaries and those that seek to exert their power beyond their boundaries. Classically, it was African societies that sought to incorporate powers into the structures of polity that already existed, while it was Europe that sought to extend (often to the most absurd degree possible) their own internal structures of authority and organization in order to control what was beyond their boundaries. These opposite strategies, founded on quite different concepts of boundary, difference, value and cause, are responsible in large part for what we call ethnicity in Africa today. I think that an understanding of these phenomena in their own terms will take us much farther along the road to understanding that the nineteenth century Industrial Age metaphors of impact (or the crypto-sexual metaphor of penetration), or the borrowed theory of the "state" (well polished though it may be).

First of all, an incorporative strategy implies an outlook of a 'zero sum game' in which the gains of one player are the loses of the other 'player'. To transcend the image is very difficult indeed. One way is to seek an external guarantor that will attempt to make up the difference between what one side gains and what the other side loses. This strategy often works when there is enough surplus in the system such as the New Deal of FDR, or when there is some other source of external value such as the European's own successful redistribution (among themselves) of the accumulated gold of the Incas or and Aztecs in the fifteenth century. While such redistributions serve to jolt a limited political entity out of its previous state of economic solipsism, jealousy and resentment, it cannot be sustained. The other alternative is for some larger alternative vision of the limits of the polity to emerge. Such a transformation of the imagination occurred when Europeans gradually created the global economy of the empires and colonies. As Europeans gradually exhausted what could be simply plundered, and sought instead not just to capture the products of external economies but to control them indirectly, they had to transform their imagination of the nature of the world itself. This resulted in the transformation of the rapaciousness of Columbus or Van Riebeeck into the sophisticated systems of control that now reside in the District of Columbia and in Pretoria! These imaginations of global economies are the

conditions for escape[7] from the image of the limited good to the image of unlimited goods.

The recognition of ethnic parts depends on the visualizable image of a polity

In effect, the 'imagination' of ethnicity can be taken to be a 'serious fiction' in the form of an image of the polity that is divided into parts. It is essential to take the idea of *image* quite seriously--that is, to recognize that the sense of reality and presence that ethnicity has is founded on the concreteness that a visualizable picture or 'political map' of the polity gives. Under this view, the physical emblems of the 'ethnic group', the badges of its identity (such as monuments, clothes, anthems, or 'ways of life'[8] are not merely symbols that *refer* to some *other* reality--imagined, primordial, constructed, economic, material, or whatever--but are rather part and parcel of the presence and feeling of substance that ethnicity has for its members. The symbols of ethnic identity are not 'totems', and they are not names; they do not refer to other meanings, nor do they serve as labels for things or concepts or sets which are selected by other means.

Instead, they 'stand for themselves', non-referentially as parts of what being ethnic is. If they do not 'refer'--that is if the emblems of ethnicity do not act as 'words' in a 'language ' of identity in the conventional linguistic or semiotic or symbolic sense, then we may not speak of them as symbols *of* identity. The emblems of ethnic identity do not name or refer to the 'group' anymore than the Mona Lisa's smile 'refers to 'or 'labels' her face. It is simply part of the picture.

There is an immediate corollary of this: ethnicity is essentially an aesthetic phenomenon, and is perceived and evaluated aesthetically by those who profess any ethnic identity.

This view of ethnicity as a fundamentally aesthetic phenomenon helps us to account for its troublesome ahistorical character. Participants in ethnic identities do not typically understand themselves to have acquired that identity, nor do they understand the identity as just a 'phase' or 'stage' of growth, historical change, or development. This is what makes the study of ethnicity so mightily resistant to the conventional semiotic and functional analyses we have so far brought to bear on it. While intellectuals have struggled to give complex historical accounts of the origin of ethnicity, the 'common man', the believer, the person who explains his behaviour and that of others in terms of ethnicity, is resolutely ahistorical: the identities have 'always' been as they are, and will remain so. This view is maintained despite much evidence to the contrary in many cases. Any account which claims that the subjects are simply misinformed about the matters of their own belief, of course, simply negates the empirical facts of belief, or seeks to privilege some alternate account. Either way, the belief itself is not taken into account. Ethnic identities are held to be timeless by most

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[7] The notion of 'conditions of escape' from certain forms of economy is Ernest Gellner's (1988).

[8] Including all aspects of what Bourdieu has called the *'habitus'*.

of those who profess or declare such identities. Ethnicity is categorical for them, and not something that they perceive themselves as having grown into--like manhood, or professionalism--or having acquired through a process--like wealth, motherhood, and wisdom. The very categorical feel of a person's declarations of an ethnic identity marks it, empirically, as a fundamentally *aesthetic* response.

The second characteristic of ethnicity that marks it as an aesthetic phenomenon, rather than an historical, political or economic one, is its situational character. Ethnic identities are 'declared' only under certain circumstances. When they are declared, the aesthetic display is crucially important: ethnic costume, special modes and registers of speech, music and art festivals, ethnic dance, and, in South Africa at least, 'cultural weapons'(although the ritual display of uniforms, insignia, fancy hats and dance-like bodily dispositions of any, even the most powerful military, all qualify as cultural weapons as well). All of these performances mark ethnicity, but they are also aesthetic expressions and are evaluated as more or less 'pure' forms of art, music, dance, or physical display.

What do I mean, then, by this use of the term 'aesthetic'? First, an aesthetic is a judgment based on some standard of beauty, truth, goodness, 'The Good', or some other system of transcendent value and static truth. The aesthetic judgment is a judgment of the state of being of an object, not its state of becoming. As such it is immune to judgments of practical reason, that is, judgments of efficiency, means-to-ends rationality, usefulness, economy or science. An aesthetic judgment is a judgment based on transcendent categories that are held to be timeless, or at least beyond time. The aesthetic is not evaluated according to criteria in which time would be relevant. The aesthetic object is not good because it is efficient or quick, but because it is good. Secondly, the aesthetic judgment assesses the object as a whole. The good is good because it is whole, complete, entire. The broken, the injured, the partitioned object, the partial, and the incomplete are not 'good ' or beautiful because they are not whole. An unfinished painting is not a masterpiece. The novel that leaves characters and motives 'hanging', unfulfilled, without closure, is not satisfying. Health is good because it is conceived holistically as the proper state of wholeness of the body. The stranger within the gates is dangerous not because he poses an economic or political threat but because he offends the image of wholeness that wall and gates are meant--and usually do produce. All of these sorts of judgments are 'aesthetic.'

Ethnic identity, then, precisely because it is felt to be timeless and consists of a categorical judgment, can be said to be an aesthetic identity. Ethnicity is held to be a solidary part of a larger polity, and therefore a whole unto itself while also being part of another whole (this is possible under conditions of aesthetic judgment, although it is *logically* impossible). The assessment of ethnicity, and the claim to ethnic identity, then, is an aesthetic judgment. Ethnicity is one kind of 'part' in a visualised polity that consists of other 'parts' and powers. If it is true that a polity exists (at least partly) as an imagination of holism, then we can sum up by saying: ethnicity is an aesthetic holism without the State.

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