

Ethnicity and Nationalism in Anthropology: Past, Present, and Future Perspectives

Interview with Prof. Thomas Hylland Eriksen (University of Oslo)

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Tomas Hylland Eriksen is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo and former President of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA). He is the author of numerous classics of anthropology including “Small Places, Large Issues” (5th ed. 2023), “Ethnicity and Nationalism” (3rd ed. 2010), “A History of Anthropology” (2nd ed. 2010), and “What is Anthropology?” (2nd ed. 2017), which have become standard references in anthropology, transcending linguistic and cultural boundaries.

His publications on topics such as identity politics, creolisation, and the changing world and global change include: *Overheating; An Anthropology of Accelerated Change* (2016), *Boomtown: Runaway Globalisation on the Queensland Coast* (2018), and the co-edited *Identities Destabilised* (2016) and *Knowledge and Power in an Overheated World* (2017, both with Elisabeth Schober). He has been honored with multiple awards for his efforts in popularizing science. In 2017, he was awarded the University of Oslo Research Prize, and in 2022, he received the Vega Medal. He is an honorary doctor of the Charles University in Prague.

There's no doubt that the study of ethnicities and nationalisms has been a fundamental pillar of social anthropology for a long time. However, in the last, let's say, ten years, the research on ethnicities and nationalisms seems to have somewhat taken a back seat. Does that mean they have nothing more to offer to contemporary science?

There are people who measure the occurrence of particular, specialized words in the academic literature, which is normally a useful exercise. Regarding ethnicity, and its kindred terms ethnic identity and ethnic group, there is no doubt that it reached a peak in the last decades of the twentieth century. By now, ethnicity does come across as less urgent and much less glamorous in anthropological research. But many of the same perspectives and tools are now used to study Islamophobia as well as Jihadism, ‘nativism’ and other forms of contemporary identity politics. At the same time, we must keep in mind that changes in academic fashions do not necessarily reflect facts on the ground, and ethnic processes are no less important now than a few decades ago although they have, in many cases, changed in character and appearance. At the same time, the toolbox has usefully been expanded, but we will return to that later.

Anthropological research on ethnicity got a powerful shot in both arms in the sixties and seventies. First, new theoretical approaches enabled us to see ethnic difference as relational and dynamic rather than stable and based on observable cultural



differences. Second, ethnic revitalisation in many parts of the world, from Kenya to Mexico, indicated that Weber and other classic sociologists were wrong: Ethnic organisation and identity did not go away because of modernisation and urbanisation, but were intensified instead. So, these insights led to a very vibrant and creative research field which somehow fizzled out, or was transformed, around the turn of the millennium.

Returning to your question, let me start by stating that narrowly speaking, ethnic identity can be located at a scale between kinship and race. It is to do with origins, usually biological descent. Ethnic processes usually concern competition for scarce resources, and if successful, an ethnic identity can provide you with something useful as well as something meaningful. Nobody is going to tell me that these processes have suddenly disappeared and become irrelevant to people. Doing research on anything from people's immediate life-worlds to political power struggles at the national level requires something akin to the concept of ethnicity in the 2020s, just as in the 1970s.

The easy answer would just refer to academic fads — new, fashionable approaches have displaced the older concerns, which frequently happens in academia. But the issue runs deeper. Many of the phenomena we used to study simply as ethnic relations now need to be investigated with a more fine-grained conceptual apparatus, from intersectionality to superdiversity. To some of our colleagues, there is also a lingering connotation of race in the very term ethnicity, which many find uncomfortable. But look, if our interlocutors believe that culture is to some extent transmitted through DNA, it is our duty to report on their world.

Finally, the very air that we breathe has become more individualistic in the last few decades. The advent of neoliberalism in the 1980s and the fall of state socialism a few years later have emphasised identity as something to be chosen rather than something given through birth and upbringing. Ethnicity refers to relationships between groups, not individuals, and it may therefore, at the level of ideology and representations, fit badly with the prevailing worldview, certainly among academics, but also among quite a few of our interlocutors.

What are some specific topics or situations that are currently under examination in the field of ethnicity and nationalism, which might have been previously overlooked or inadequately explored?

I would like to mention two current topics which build on, but also depart from, previous research in the field. First, the concept of superdiversity, which was coined by Steven Vertovec around 2006, expands and opens the field in really very productive ways. The argument is basically that in contemporary complex societies, people belong to many different groups or categories. A Berliner with a Turkish name and even a Turkish mother tongue may be a climate activist, a lawyer, a greengrocer, or an Islamic preacher. His or her Turkishness may not be at the forefront. Vertovec also points out that migrants in a large city such as London have arrived under different circumstances, and with different kinds of social and cultural capital, even if they come from the same place and have the same background. So, the mere fact of having an ethnic identity says very little here about people's ways of identifying. But we can return to this issue later, there is a lot more to say about it.



The other field where there is much dynamism is creolisation, and you might say that it is coming from a place which is related to superdiversity. Since the standard view of ethnicity takes the ethnic boundary for granted, the sheer messiness of social life, and cultural flows, creates a map-territory problem: In societies where mixing, both socially and culturally, is widespread, boundaries are unclear. Creole societies — some would restrict the category to post-slavery societies, typically in the Caribbean; I am inclined to include other, comparable settings — do not build their identity on origins or shared bloodlines, but on place, shared practices and let's say a shared outlook. Difference is not seen as a threat, but as something normal. In a sense, a creole identity is a non-ethnic identity; I have published a bit about this myself, showing that in Mauritius, the Creole group are qualitatively different from the others. They have no rule of endogamy and an eclectic, frequently very creative approach to change and impulses from outside. Briefly, there is no obsession with purity and boundaries. Moreover, thousands of Mauritians who statistically belong to an ethnic group such as Tamils or (North Indian) Hindus regard themselves as Creoles.

Of course, these two perspectives do not tell the whole story, whether about the societies in question or about changes in ethnic identity. In many parts of the world, ethnic boundaries are being patrolled and protected, and there has been a very visible re-ethnification of identities in lots of societies. However, there is a dynamism, an analytically exciting if sometimes politically frightening friction between the strengthening of ethnic identities and their dissolution. We can observe versions of this friction in many societies, and it is important to emphasise, not least for us who study ethnic relations, that there are non-ethnic ways in which to organise lives, societies and group identities.

To you, the relationship between the Czech and Slovak identities is an obvious place to start. Over here where I live, people from Sweden are not perceived as Norwegian even if they have lived here for years, nor are they seen as foreigners. In a word, the very concept of the boundary needs critical attention.

How do you perceive the increasing individualistic nature of society and the notion that identities are often viewed as choices rather than products of one's origin and upbringing? How might these changes potentially influence the exploration of ethnicity?

Great question, thanks! As early as in the 1980s, the sociologist and anthropologist Peter Worsley argued that life did not take place in a self-service cafeteria where you filled your plate with whatever you fancied. There was, in his view, something imperative about your group identity, not something you chose. We should not forget that this is the situation for a great number of people in the contemporary world as well, notwithstanding the drive to neoliberalism which insists that freedom is identical with individual choice. You cannot choose not to be this, that or the other, but you may be able to wriggle out of the straitjacket — or web of security if you prefer — that dictates how you should behave in order to be a good Basque or Aymara or Vietnamese. Perhaps you prefer just to be a computer engineer, or an anthropologist, and these options are more numerous now than they used to be.

This development — I hesitate to use the word shift — makes it necessary to study identity processes with a stronger magnifying glass than a generation or two ago.



These days, we are having heated controversies around the category of gender, not least in the USA; curiously, race is not discussed along different lines even if it is obvious that lots of African-Americans and Native Americans are ‘non-binary’ when it comes to that kind of classification. Why this difference between race and gender? Ethnographic methods can produce fresh insights into these dynamics by exploring life-worlds in depth instead of using superficial survey methods. But again, let us not neglect the friction and sometimes entrenched conflict between the deconstruction of boundaries and their reconstruction. This relationship is constitutive of many political controversies. One interesting research project, by the way — which I cannot remember having seen realized — would consist in looking at people who have changed their outlook and group identity radically; say, cosmopolitan liberals who become right-wing ethnonationalists or vice versa. Those people are in the happy situation of being able to choose, but at a cost, and why?

You mentioned that ethnic processes retain their significance despite shifts in how they are perceived. According to your perspective, what implications could the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine have on future studies of ethnicity, particularly in its manifestation within political and power dynamics?

Well, as a matter of fact, ethnic identities do vary quite strongly in significance depending on context and circumstances. They may be activated just a few times a year, typically on festive occasions, if the ethnic boundaries carry little social capital and makes little difference in everyday life. Being a Norwegian-American in Minnesota means being a White non-immigrant — most Norwegian migrants arrived there in the 19th century — and in everyday affairs, they are perceived, and see themselves, just as ordinary Americans. They do have their festivals and rituals though; some food traditions are preserved, as is the Lutheran religion. But there is no prohibition, formal or informal, on intermarriage.

Being a Black Minnesotan is different since racial boundaries are being activated across a broad range of situations, and an informal politics of exclusion reminds African-Americans every day of their identity as non-White. And as you suggest, dramatic events such as the Russian attack on Ukraine can lead to an intensification of ethnic identity. Boundaries between Russians and Ukrainians have often been fuzzy, and it is well known that many who identify as Ukrainians were primary Russian-speakers and had family members on both sides of the frequently invisible boundary. In the current situation, Ukrainian identity becomes more visible and a vehicle for military mobilisation.

We may think of many examples of a similar kind. As a general principle, one might say that the intensity of a group identity depends on the external pressure exerted on it. This simple formula explains why small groups tend to have a stronger group identity than the larger ones, since they are confronted with their particularity more often. If you take an American city with 90% Whites and 10% Blacks, the Blacks are ‘black’ far more often than a White is ‘white’, since they meet Whites far more often than Whites meet Blacks. Moreover, the formula may also help to explain why certain group identities become more powerful than others. If we imagine a society which is genuinely colour-blind — visible difference has no social significance — but

where gays and lesbians are stigmatised, the gay or lesbian identity becomes an important part of the life-world of those sexual minorities.

To turn to the final part of your question, the identity work especially in Ukraine after February 2022 shows the power of ethnic identity, since it can be mobilised at several interrelated scalar levels. This cannot be taken for granted. In the political anthropology of stateless societies, kinship and/or place are the main foci of political loyalty. An ethnic group, which in this case is associated with a nation-state, can become an imagined community in Benedict Anderson's sense; as a member of the group, you pledge loyalty to people you will never meet. And when they rule the state, you get a powerful cocktail of political power, family life and existential security in one package. The main alternative — the territorial state — seems to be less capable of mobilising strong emotions, probably because it is detached from kinship. When the dust has settled, hopefully soon, research on boundaries and mixing in Ukraine can provide new insights of theoretical significance. For one shortcoming of much — I would say most — research on ethnicity since the late 1960s is the tacit assumption that boundaries are stable although objects, ideas and even people may flow across them. This perspective does not do justice to people with acknowledged mixed origins, of whom there are millions of course. Before the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, lots of people had one Serbian and one Croatian parent. A good friend of mine, who grew up in Belgrade, had a Serbian mother and a Macedonian father. Before the breakup of the federation, this was never an issue, but from one day to the next, it virtually became a matter of life and death which group he identified with. He solved the problem by moving overseas to pursue studies and returned to Belgrade more than a decade after the end of the hostilities.

Let's approach this from a different angle. Researchers engaged in the study of ethnicity know you as an author of the ethnicity concept, both in the analytical realm of research and in relation to informants. So, in this context, are we to understand ethnicity as both a conceptual tool of research and as an object of research?

One could say that it is an empirical phenomenon since it can be observed 'out there', but like with other comparative concepts in anthropology, the use of a common name for otherwise very diverse phenomena indicates that it is a conceptual tool as well. Since the self-other distinction is universal, and often based on notions of kinship and what we would call cultural differences, ethnic phenomena lend themselves easily to comparison. Ethnic dynamics enable us to discover not only similarities and differences between self-defined groups, but the study of ethnicity can also help with fundamental questions in social theory and communication studies, to mention just a couple of horizons. Limiting yourself to your ethnographic or empirical data may be necessary at a certain stage in your intellectual development, but sooner or later, it is paramount to ask questions concerning the wider significance of that ethnography.

Following on from this, I wonder if ethnicity stands as a universal concept independent from its connection to ethnographic data. Can we currently be thinking ethnicity without tying it to culture?

It might be possible to think of ethnicity as a purely analytic device abstracted from concrete social relationships, but another concept would then have served the pur-





pose better, for the sake of avoiding misunderstandings. But if we agree that ethnicity has something to do with relationship, difference, social integration, and communication, it can be taken in many directions. So, in my very first book about the topic, *Communicating Cultural Difference and Identity* from 1988, the epigraphs to the book were meant to suggest that the study of ethnic dynamics can be used to address fundamental aspects of the human condition. If you allow me, I'll just read them out quickly.

This is Nietzsche.

Habit of seeing opposites. — The general imprecise way of observing sees everywhere in nature opposites (as, e.g., 'warm and cold') where there are, not opposites, but differences in degree. This bad habit has led us into wanting to comprehend and analyse the inner world, too, the spiritual-moral world, in terms of such opposites. An unspeakable amount of painfulness, arrogance, harshness, estrangement, frigidity has entered into human feelings because we think we see opposites instead of transitions.

And this is Gregory Bateson.

It takes at least two somethings to create a difference. (...) There is a profound and unanswerable question about the nature of those 'at least two' things that between them generate a difference which becomes information by making a difference. Clearly each alone is — for the mind and perception — a non- entity, a non-being. Not different from being, and not different from non-being. An unknowable, a *Ding an sich*, a sound from one hand clapping.

So this issue does not merely concern, say, Creoles and Hindus. It concerns the definition of the word 'we', the workings of the human mind and how knowledge about anything at all, really, enters the world. So research and theorisation of ethnicity forms part and parcel of a much broader search for understanding and explanation. As to culture ... actually yes, we do not need a concept of culture to study ethnicity. Quite often, as others have shown, competing ethnic groups do not consider each other culturally different in significant ways; they compete for the same scarce resources and have nothing 'against' each other beyond that. Cultural stereotypes usually strengthen the competitive spirit, but they may not be necessary. Having said this, it has to be conceded that it is clearly the case, empirically, that notions of what scholars often refer to as cultural differences usually form part of the boundary work.

As if there were not enough inconsistencies, scholars often use the term "ethnic identity". Is there a semantic difference between the terms "ethnicity" and "ethnic identity"?

It is a useful distinction. Ethnicity could, and in my view should, be reserved for the relationship, while ethnic identity refers to the personal and collective belonging attached to being in a group which promises to offer anchoring, existential security and meaning in life. During our conversation, I tend to use terms such as 'ethnic dynamics' or 'ethnic relationship' in order to avoid this misunderstanding.

Could you reveal to us what was the key fieldwork, moment, or discovery during your research that further solidified your interest in ethnicity? Was the already mentioned research in Mauritius a pivotal moment?

I think the answer is yes. My initial plan was to do an ethnography of the Creoles, people of African and Malagasy — and mixed — origins, but early on I realised that in order to understand Mauritian society, ethnicity was inescapable since it seemed to be on people's minds, or even in their unconscious mind, much of the time as a descriptive and explanatory factor. Mauritians do not say 'ethnicity' but have other terms which mean roughly the same thing. I had good teachers in Oslo and would like to mention one in particular. Harald Eidheim, whose main research was on Sami-Norwegian relationships in the far north, taught us the semiotics of ethnicity. He showed how the exchange of signs, and their interpretation was crucial for the production of meaning inside the group and in the social construction of particular realities, for example. He brought in theorists like Goffman, Bateson and the philosopher Pierce to enable us to raise basic theoretical questions departing from some very tangible and locally grounded empirical material. So before coming to Mauritius back in 1986, I was aware that it could be used as a tool, or perhaps better a lens, through which to view a whole range of social and cultural phenomena. When we study human diversity, a lot of the work goes into making distinctions between similarity and difference, and believe me, Mauritius has its share of both!

Could you recommend books on the topic of ethnicity and nationalism that you consider important and that a good cultural anthropologist should not overlook?

Most of these books have a regional focus, and I think many anthropologists are wary, often with good reason, of universal comparative concepts of this kind. After all, as alluded to just now, since the beginning of systematic anthropological thought and research in the 19th century, our trade has consisted in the study of human diversity rather than whatever it might be that people have in common. The best books, I suppose, would be those that use their regional and local focus to raise questions of a more general nature, enabling comparison and adding fruitfully to the growing library of anthropological knowledge. I hesitate to mention titles out there since there are so many excellent books ... but a longlist would certainly include Carlos Londoño Sulkin's *People at the Center*, which problematises concepts of boundaries, shared culture and notions of origin in challenging ways. I also think people should read the late Marcus Banks's *Ethnicity: Anthropological Constructions*, which has theoretical ambitions and offer a good overview of the field. Günther Schlee's *How Enemies are Made* does not only attempt to explain ethnic conflict, but also tries to show how they can be solved. As a counterweight to the emphasis on ethnic boundaries and origins, I recommend Jacqueline Knörr's *Creole Identity in Postcolonial Indonesia*, dealing with a motley crew of people who seemingly have little in common except for the fact that they have little in common with anyone else either. Finally, some of the classics still have something to teach us, from J. Clyde Mitchell's *The Kalela Dance* and his colleague A. L. Epstein's *Ethos and Identity* to Fredrik Barth's edited *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Regarding nationalism, since you ask, there are also a small handful of classic books that defined the field in the early 1980s — Gellner's *Nations and*





Nationalism, Anderson's Imagined Communities and Hobsbawm's Nations and Nationalism since the 1780s. Some later books that take these insights a step or two further are Rogers Brubaker's *Ethnicity Without Groups*, which also takes on nationalism, and Andreas Wimmer's *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict*. Nira Yuval-Davis's work on gender and collective identity is also important and totally neglected by the classic authors, who were white, male and European, like myself. Nira's *Gender and Nation* is a good place to start.

I could easily have mentioned twenty more. What is important to people who start out on this subject, is to get exposed to and familiar with several perspectives and empirical settings, from the benign and low-key to violent conflict; from the relatively homogeneous nation-state to the wildly diverse one, and so on and so forth.

Your works on ethnicity and nationalism have become a phenomenon in cultural anthropology. Recently, you have been focusing more on the topic of climate change and the negative aspects of modernity. Can readers expect another book on ethnicity in the future?

Honestly, I do not think so, not with 'ethnic' in the title. But as I hope to have conveyed during this conversation, an interest in ethnic relations can on a good day be seen as a sapling that eventually grows into a tree. If what we study in ethnicity studies is relationship, difference, social integration, meaning, conflict and communication, ethnic studies can — and should — be seen as an instantiation of something more comprehensive, offering as they do a few pieces to the great jigsaw of knowledge. In my own case, I sincerely believe that there has been a continuity from ethnicity and nationalism via globalisation and migration studies to 'overheating', accelerated change, which has been the focus of much of my work in the last decade or so. The way I see it, I have just expanded the scope empirically, while keeping some of the theoretical ideas warm, as well as some of the empirical fields. In my 2016 book *Overheating*, I include several of the same theoretical references as in *Communicating Cultural Difference and Identity* from 1988. One can only hope that the explanation is not that I have been unable to move on ...

Thank you for the interview, and I wish you a lot of inspiration in your future work!