

ANTH 300–History of Anthropological Theory

Notes on Fredrik Barth

II. explicate quotes

- A. “[It]t is clear that boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them” (9-10).
- B. “[E]thnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built” (10).
- C. “It is important to recognize that although ethnic categories take cultural differences into account, we can assume no simple one-to-one relationship between ethnic units and cultural similarities and differences. The features tht are taken into account are not the sum of ‘objective’ differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant . . . some scultural features are used by the actors as signals and emblems of differences, others are ignored, and in some relationships radical differences are played down and denied” (14).
- D. “The critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses” (15).
- E. “The important thing to recognize is that a drastic reduction of cultural differences between ethnic groups does not correlate in any simple way with a reduction in the organizational relevance of ethnic identities, or a breakdown in boundary-maintaining processes” (33).

III. Controversies: defining some important terms

- 1) **primordial**: Is ethnicity a fundamental, primordial aspect of human existence and self-consciousness, essentially unchanging and unchangeable in the demands it makes upon individuals and the bonds it creates between the individual and the group?

→ “blood and mud”

instrumental: is ethnicity defined situationally, strategically or tactically manipulable, and capable of change at both the individual and collective levels?

- 2) **subjectivist**: ethnicity is defined as categorical ascriptions undertaken by the agents themselves
→ Self-ascription implies self-consciousness in a wider social arena. It also imples agency.

objectivist: ethnic distinctions, ethnic organisatin or even ethnic stratification may exist without the acquiescence or even the awareness of the agents themselves

IV. Read excerpts from Perry and Jenkins

V. Review general characteristics of Ethnicity

agency

interaction, non-isolation of groups

ascriptions and self-ascriptions

focus on boundary over culture (substance or content)

stress on production and reproduction as a continual process

linked to politics, economics: instrumental and goal-oriented, materialist, individualist

VI. Compare with other theorists:

Wolf: interconnection, but Wolf does not stress continuing differences; Barth offers a more nuanced analysis of the boundary (think of Wolf's billiard balls—what would Barth have to say about this?)

Scheper-Hughes: urban

Ortner: agency, ongoing reproduction

Geertz: NOT like him! Does not care about unique cultural traits in and of themselves