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The study of ethnicity and nationalism needs better categories

Clearing up the confusions that result from blurring
analytic and lay concepts

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Synopsis: It has been difficult to make progress in the study of ethnicity and nationalism because of the multiple confusions of analytic and lay terms, and the sheer lack of terminological discipline (often even within the same article). This makes a conceptual cleaning-up unavoidable, and it is especially salutary to attempt it now that economists are becoming interested in the effects of identity on behavior, so that they may begin with the best conceptual tools possible. My approach to these questions has been informed by anthropological and evolutionary-psychological questions. I will focus primarily on the terms ‘ethnic group’, ‘nation’, and ‘nationalism’, and I will make the following points: 1) so-called ‘ethnic groups’ are collections of people with a common cultural identity, plus an ideology of membership by descent and normative endogamy; 2) the ‘group’ in ‘ethnic group’ is a misleading misnomer—these are not ‘groups’ but *categories*, so I propose to call them ‘ethnies’; 3) ‘nationalism’ mostly refers to the recent ideology that ethnies—cultural communities with a self-conscious ideology of self-sufficient reproduction—be made politically sovereign; 4) it is terribly confusing to use ‘nationalism’ also to stand for ‘loyalty to a multi-ethnic state’ because this is the exact opposite, so let’s not; 5) a ‘nation’ truly exists only in a politician’s imagination, so analysts should not pretend that establishing whether something ‘really’ is or isn’t ‘a nation’ matters; 6) a big analytic cost is paid every time an ‘ethnie’ is called a ‘nation’ because this mobilizes the intuition that nationalism is indispensable to ethnic organization (not true), which thereby confuses the very historical process—namely, the recent historical emergence of nationalism—that must be explained; 7) another large analytical cost is paid when scholars pretend that ethnicity is a form of kinship—it is not.

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Scholars often seem to want to get the definitional issues out of the way as quickly as possible so they can get down to the business of *thinking*. Alas... Thinking theoretically requires concepts, and unless one chooses them carefully the time subsequently spent theorizing is wasted. One should therefore give definitional issues the time and attention they deserve. I shall begin with a brief reflection on what it means to make a scientific definition, and why the special epistemological structure of social science makes this process such a minefield. Having thus identified the dangers, I will do my best to avoid them in my own set of proposed definitions concerning ethnicity and nationalism.

What is—ideally—a scientific definition?

In a technical jargon, the *extension* of a category is the full list of ‘objects’ which the category label may denote. For example, the extension of ELEPHANT will list all individual elephants now alive in Africa, all those now alive in India, those in zoos and circuses elsewhere, plus all individual elephants that ever lived. We will have to add every new elephant that is born to keep the list current.

Extensions are bothersome; it is often much easier to specify the conditions which, if satisfied, place an ‘object’ inside a category. This is the category’s *intension* (with an ‘s’), or—less fancifully—its *definition*. But extensions are hardly useless. By partially listing the extension of a word we may ponder what these ‘objects’ have in common, and also what candidate objects not denoted by the word are missing, abstracting in this manner the conditions for category membership. The first such attempt

produces a ‘working definition’ whose adequacy we proceed to test. Doing this by listing the word’s full extension may be impossible, so one looks for contrast categories, and also special cases that might be ‘exceptions that prove the rule’. Aptly named ‘borderline cases’ thus show us where the semantic boundary is.

Because science seeks to understand nature, it must avoid arbitrary definitions, producing instead categories of phenomena that group the ‘stuff’ of the universe according to its main causal forces (what philosophers call ‘cutting nature at the joints’). New definitions which do not improve our language in this manner may be adopted without loss by diviners, priests, politicians, and ordinary laypeople—but not by scientists.

Particle physicists are fortunate in that, when they need to create a technical term, they can choose a word in common use (e.g. ‘spin’) and give it an entirely novel definition without raising special problems. Why? Because the phenomena they study are never encountered by ordinary people. By sharp contrast, social scientists examine phenomena in which the layperson *swims*, and the layman’s terms actually function for the social scientist as a first hypothesis. It is in this partial overlap between a layperson’s intuitions and the real structure of the universe that the greatest semantic dangers lurk for the social scientist.

For example, say that Tim, a social scientist, has delimited domain X (a set of describable phenomena) as being causally unified, and produces a hypothesis to explain X. Imagine also that domain X includes *some but not all* of the phenomena that C (some common term) refers to. Tim is now tempted to do the following: lop the meaning of C here, and also there, and—presto!— $C = X$. Amazingly, this is considered good form: Tim

has produced a *technical* (re)definition of C, a word everybody knows (e.g. ‘war’, ‘prestige’, ‘aggression’, ‘friendship’—whatever), so that, *when he talks*, it stands exactly for X (the smaller subdomain that he actually has a hypothesis for).

But Tim’s technical redefinition cannot win, as it will be presented only at the beginning of his argument, and his readers will be exposed to it only while reading Tim. Everywhere else in these people’s lives, the common meaning of the term imposes itself. The result? Tim’s readers end up thinking that he explained this: ‘C, as commonly defined’. But this failure of Tim’s definition will paradoxically seed his cultural success, because people are interested in C—all of it—so if they think that Tim explained it this will bring him great prestige. The greatest difficulty here is that this all happens in the most innocent way, so that Tim himself easily ends up convinced and also enormously satisfied that he explained C.¹

From such processes result vexations that are unique to social science. As different scholars try to explain different phenomena (X, Y, Z, ...) variously intersecting with C, each re-sculpts the common term so that his/her idea can be presented as a hypothesis *for C*. The desired intellectual process—fencing over argument quality—is impossible when accosted by a stampede of technical meanings all attached to the same familiar spelling, and so we end up with a different process: a marketing contest over definitions. It is all enough to make one seek refuge, but this can only be found in the abused word’s *common meaning*, which again increases the difficulties one has using the various technical definitions—even one’s own. The remarkable long term result is to make it difficult even for those who authored a theory to keep it straight.

Although one finds such problems all over social science, they are perhaps especially acute where the study of political phenomena are concerned, and especially so in the study of ethnicity and nationalism. As a result, some of our best thinkers explicitly opt to use terms without clearly specifying their boundaries: ‘...much ink continues to be spilled in an effort to define race, ethnicity, and nationalism and to specify analytical distinctions between them. [The domain] does not parse into three clearly bounded subdomains...’ (Brubaker et. al. 2002)

But the subdomains themselves do not need to be clearly bounded for clearly bounded *definitions* to be useful. Spilling a little extra ink is worth it. If the analytical boundaries delimit the main causal processes, such that borderline cases are obviously caught between them, then the definitions help us *see* the causal processes at work. And that’s their job. Empirical data may show that a definition does not properly cut nature at the joints, of course, and one may end up, after doing some work, with different definitions than those one started with—such is the nature of science: data can make us change our minds. But the investigation itself cannot begin without much confusion unless one puts forth *some* definitions as clearly as possible.

If a technical definition will abuse a familiar word, then it is best to coin a neologism. In social science analytic definitions should be attached to common words only when the definition respects the familiar word’s common usage while also cutting nature at an important joint. When possible, this is the happiest state of affairs, because it makes it easiest to think and make theory. But this also means that, already, the definitional exercise must be theory, for one has to demonstrate the joint that is properly cut when producing the definition.

What is an ethnies?

It does not matter to me what truck-drivers or lawyers etc. usually mean by ‘ethnic group’. I once conducted a relatively informal study of laypeople’s use of the term ‘ethnic group’ and found that most Europeans and many Americans treated the term as synonymous with ‘immigrant minority’—but this is not how most scholars of ethnicity use the term, and it is these latter that constitute the speech community of interest here.

As I have argued before (Gil-White 1999), for the most part it seems that scholars of ethnicity all ‘know an ethnies when they see one’ (‘ethnies’ here substitutes for ‘ethnic group’—it is one of my proposed terminological reforms, and I justify it further below).² Thus, if we were to write down a separate list giving the extension of ‘ethnies’ for every scholar of ethnicity, we would find that the lists would match almost exactly, giving us ‘Germans’, ‘Mongols’, ‘Anatolian Turks’, ‘Ibos’, and ‘Basques’, but never ‘Muslims’, ‘Catholics’, ‘the Rotary Club’, ‘bakers’, ‘architects’, ‘Americans’, or ‘the Communist Party’. Similarly, asked to give the extension of ‘ethnic conflict’ the lists would include ‘the civil war in Yugoslavia’, ‘Kurds versus Turks’, ‘Sinhals versus Tamils’, and ‘Arabs versus Jews’, but none would include ‘a thermonuclear exchange between the US and Russia’, ‘the Gulf War’, ‘the wars of Reformation’, ‘a marital spat’, or ‘the rivalry between the Democratic and Republican parties’. A happy beginning: matching extensions among scholars reveal an agreed upon set of referents that, grouped as a phenomenon, are felt to require a scientific explanation.³

For those who seek to answer scientific questions the next step is to take this agreed-upon extension and try to see what such ‘ethnies’ have in common, in order to

produce an *intension*. This gives us an explicit, analytic statement of what ethnies are and what makes them different from other human categories, and with this valuable reflection in hand the serious business of explaining the emergence and stability of ethnies, the conditions under which they are politically mobilized, the reasons why they might elicit dramatic loyalty, etc., etc., can begin. *Having an intension in hand gives us an analytic specification of a phenomenon and, therefore, something to explain.*

The partial extensions listed above will easily help us produce an intension:

1. *An ideology of membership by descent.* One can convert to Catholicism, pay dues and become a member of a club, go to school and earn a professional degree, or sign up as a member of a political organization. But ordinary people do not believe that one can do such things to become a Turk or a Tamil. In ethnies, membership is restricted by a descent criterion. I am not saying that there really *is* an ethnic ‘essence’ that gets transmitted biologically—the point is that people *believe* there is, and this belief has consequences for the claims of identity that people can and cannot make in practice.
2. *The perception of a unique and homogenous culture (typically, associated with a particular territory).* Catholics around the world have very different cultures, the members of a political party are typically not *required* to be of one culture, members of any culture can go to school and earn a professional degree, and clubs obviously don’t *have* to restrict membership by cultural background—and many don’t. However, to be a member of an ethnie automatically implies that a particular culture corresponds to you (whether or

not you have mastered this culture is immaterial—this culture is considered to be your birthright). This culture is believed by members to be unique to the ethnies and distinct from others (whether or not such claims have justice is immaterial, what matters is that members *see* it this way).⁴

3. *Category-based normative endogamy*. This says that marriage across the ethnic line will be perceived by members as immoral or unnatural, or both (i.e. it is not merely a preference; it is normative). This particular feature does not clearly distinguish ethnies from religions, but it sets them apart from professions, clubs, political parties, and a host of other human categories.

All three together (not any one of them in isolation) define an ethnies. When at least one of these is absent, or is seriously weakened, we have something other than an ethnies, or else something that is *not the best example* of an ethnies—a borderline case. A prototypical ethnies, therefore, is *a collection of people who, at a minimum, represent themselves as a self-sufficiently and vertically reproducing historical unit implying cultural peoplehood*.⁵

Notice, then, that a collection of human beings is an ethnies whenever the members themselves *believe* certain things.⁶ If my definition is acceptable, then what we have to explain is a certain kind of identity—a psychological phenomenon. The first question in the investigation of the ethnic phenomenon, then, is this: What accounts for the fact that people believe such things about themselves? But I shall defer that question, which is an evolutionary psychological one, and concentrate on the problem of analytical description, which occupies this essay.

Producing a definition as I do above is always a necessary first step. What is usually neglected is any effort to *force* the reader to accept a definition, and this is what I attempt below. My strategy is one of making contrasts between ethnies and other social categories that can now be clearly distinguished thanks precisely to my definition.

My theory-based justification for this contrast method is the following:

- 1) information about the social world of a human is processed by the brain, and brains are designed by natural selection;
- 2) natural selection takes advantage of recurrent informational patterns;
- 3) therefore, so long as we agree that human social life is dizzyingly complex, it is more than plausible that the information requiring adaptive processing is:
 - a. not of the same content in every type of social category, and
 - b. not distributed the same way in every type of social category;
- 4) and from this it follows that the human brain may have been designed by natural selection to deploy different kinds of information processing mechanisms—with consequences for behavior—with respect to different types of social categories.

It is hard to imagine a truly ‘social’ science that does not care deeply about investigating such questions. Therefore, an excellent way of justifying my definitions to social scientists is by demonstrating how they divide the universe into analytical social categories separated according to clear differences of content, where these differences plausibly have adaptive implications.

Ethnies are not clans

An anthropology glossary specifies: ‘Clan: a unilineal descent group usually comprising more than ten generations consisting of members who claim a common ancestry even though they cannot trace step-by-step their exact connection to a common ancestor.’⁷

A ‘descent group’ is a social category where one is a member by virtue of the fact that one or both parents are members. The term ‘unilineal’ means that there will be a rule specifying that clan membership is handed down *either* through the father’s line, *or* the mother’s line, but each society will make a firm choice for one or the other. It has to be this way because clan members typically marry outside of the clan—and in many societies they are required to (clan exogamy)—so a rule is needed to disambiguate the clan status of the children. And so we encounter the first difference between clans and ethnies, because in the latter it is the opposite—normative *endogamy*—that tends to be enforced.

Clan members ‘claim common ancestry’, and so do coethnics. However, notice that the above definition says that, in clans, members ‘claim common ancestry even though they cannot trace step-by-step their exact connection to a common ancestor’. The words ‘even though’ are telling: they suggest that clan members consider themselves members of the same family because they think that establishing common genealogy is in principle possible and relevant, if difficult. And clans are also a kind of family in the sense that the kinship bonds are typically there also to provide a social glue for practical corporate existence.

This observation brings us to another difference between ethnies and clans. If my clan folk are ‘members of my family’, those in another clan will be conceptualized as ‘not members of my family’. But members of another ethnie are thought of as *a different people* rather than ‘not members of my family’. Thus, shared *categorical* descent—what happens in ethnies—is not the same as shared genealogical descent—i.e. ‘being a member of the same family’—in ordinary human intuitions. It is true, however, that scholars of ethnicity often confuse the two precisely because they are not ordinary human beings and are actively looking for common threads to gain a theoretical purchase, so they end up talking about ethnies as if they were kinship groups. But they are not. I shall return to this.

Clan members also do not think of themselves as the primary locus of cultural difference—that distinction belongs to the *ethnie*, which will encompass a number of clans whenever there is clan organization still present.

Let us now consider a borderline case. What to do with a (perhaps large) clan that has developed a *rule of* (not merely a preference for) endogamy? *We wait*. For the moment it is an anomalous clan, but a process of ethnogenesis may be under way. Clan endogamy will weaken relationships with other clans in the same ethnie, and will thereby promote the development of cultural differences as the flow of human material that would carry cultural innovations from one clan to another becomes restricted. As cultural differences develop, the endogamous clan is likely to develop a new charter myth that gives it a true ethnic identity distinct from that of other clans in the ethnie it was once a part of. When this happens, we will call it ‘an ethnie’.

If consideration of an anomalous borderline case motivates a causal hypothesis for a particular form of ethnogenesis, the definition proves its use.

Ethnies are not religions

The English category RELIGION includes a staggering variety of multifarious ‘things’, from animism (which practitioners appear to perceive as part of their theory of nature, rather than a separate domain), to something like Islam. I focus here on ‘confessional religions’, such as Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, or Catholicism, which present a useful contrast with ethnies.

As in ethnies, endogamy within the religious boundary is the norm, and coreligionists will perforce share some cultural traits. However, this is not felt to be the major locus of cultural difference. Think for example of the cultural differences between all sorts of Muslims, and which divide them into different descent-based categories. Even restricting ourselves to, say, the traditionally Hanafi Muslims of Central Asia, we still find a variety of ethnic identities (Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kirghiz, Turkmen, etc.). Moreover—and most importantly—membership in a religion can be obtained by means other than descent. The exception is when religion is the sole province of a particular ethnies (see below), but this special case proves the rule, because what makes joining by conversion difficult in these cases is precisely that the religion is the ethnically particular cultural content, and in ethnies membership is a matter of descent.

Again, let’s consider a borderline case. What do we do with a religion that, in addition to a rule of endogamy with coreligionists, develops a rule of membership by

descent? *We begin to call it an ethnîe*, especially if the practice of the religion becomes the locus of distinctive culture which members consider their birthright. Horowitz's analysis (1975, pp. 113-14) of the Sikh case makes clear how their development of a descent criterion practically forces the intuition that we are now dealing with an ethnîe. This is also the case of the Jews.

Now, of course, Jews are considered controversial as an ethnîe by some scholars precisely because—despite religion being the locus of Jewish ethnic particularity—conversion to Judaism (in antiquity, and again in modern times) *is*, in fact, possible. But what does this teach us? Notice: if you say that Jews are not a good example of an ethnîe because one can gain membership by means *other* than descent, then you are using my definition of 'ethnîe'.

Scholars who, on the contrary, argue that Jews *are* genuinely an ethnîe must be using the same definition, because what *they* point out is that the child of a Jewish mother is considered Jewish even if agnostic or atheist. Here are two examples of this general view. '[Jews are] a group into which a person is born and of which the person remains a part regardless of what he or she does' (Liebman 1990, p. 17); 'Being a Jew is an immutable biological and social fact, ascribed at birth like sex and eye color. It may or may not include belief in the Jewish religion, but being a Jewish atheist is not considered a contradiction in terms' (Markowitz 1988, pp. 81-83).

Suppose that an Irishman converts to Judaism. Is he a 'Jew'? Or is he 'an Irishman who converted to Judaism'? Jews and Gentiles alike will probably prefer the second answer. But for those who insist this person is a real Jew, there is a second question: if our protagonist should, after some time, become an atheist, would he still be a

Jew? No. Yet even for an atheist with a Jewish mother, Judaism will be his or her cultural birthright. Consider the following examples: ‘...we know from experience that when asked, “what is your religion?” even non-religious and antireligious Jews answer ‘Jewish’ (Chervyakov *et al.* 1997); ‘the common fate [of Jews] is defined ultimately by connection to a single religion, to which everyone is still attached by birth and tradition, if not by action and belief’ (Glazer & Moynihan 1963, pp. 140-142); ‘A survey of 2,155 British Jews concluded that ‘levels of ritual observance are far more closely related to ethnic identity than to strength of belief. For most Jews. . .religious observance is a means of identifying with the Jewish community rather than an expression of religious faith’ (cited in Chervyakov *et. al.* 1997, p. 303).

The Jewish religion functions as the locus of ethnic identity for those descended from Jews whether or not Judaism’s claims are believed—even when its traditions are not followed. Since this is what prompts many scholars to distinguish Jewish ethnicity from the actual practice of Judaism, explicitly or implicitly they must be using the definition of ‘ethnie’ that I am explicitly defending here.

Once again we see the dramatic utility of considering borderline cases closely. The terms of the debate over whether Jews should or should not be considered an ‘ethnie’ bring into relief what the conditions for being an ethnie are held to be.

Ethnies are not tribes

There is a long history of using the term ‘tribe’ with ambiguity. Smith (1986, p. 21) points out that Herodotus sometimes meant by this political subdivisions of an ethnie, and

other times he meant a people, nation, or race. But, like us, the ancient Greeks used the term ‘ethnos’ more for groups marked by distinctive cultures, larger than kinship groups, and ‘tribe’ or ‘genos’ for kinship/political units, so it is reasonable to insist on sociopolitical organization as the main connotation of ‘tribe’ (though sub-Saharan African scholars might object).⁸

To test your own intuitions, ask yourself which phrase makes more English sense ‘He was the tribal chief’, or ‘He was the ethnic chief’? If the latter strikes you as a rather strange phrase, that is because ‘chief’ is a political status and sociopolitical organization is not the main or first connotation of ethnicity. The contrast remains if we choose to use a political status not closely identified with ‘tribe’: ‘He was the tribal president’ vs. ‘He was the ethnicity’s president’. I thus concentrate on the main—and most useful—meaning of ‘tribe’ and ignore entirely the quasi-mystical debate that anthropologists have had over what the word ‘really’ means, which debate treats the word as a real object with discoverable intrinsic properties, rather than a practical category whose meaning derives from its use (i.e. its *extension*).

A tribe is a sociopolitical unit below state and chiefdom organization, whose component units (e.g. clans) are loosely rather than tightly controlled, and which do not introduce new bureaucratic structures (tribes tend to rely on pre-existing kinship institutions to do political work). The dominance of the tribal chief is usually a function of the relative military strength of the particular unit from which he emerges and the prestige he acquires with other units that relatively freely attach to his. Of course, members of a tribe are usually coethnics because tribes are typically smaller than ethnies,

but tribes can in fact be multi-ethnic (e.g. Barth 1956, 1963). Moreover, for an ethnies the first connotation is cultural, not sociopolitical.

The crucial distinction is this: political units do not quintessentially require membership by descent. Naturally, in the case of an ethnies small enough to organize itself entirely under one chief, the tribe is coextensive with the ethnies, and for any such collection of people the terms may be used interchangeably with no cost. But this is a special case.

Ethnies are not races

This distinction is tricky, so I will make it explicit with care, borrowing from an earlier paper of mine (Gil-White 2001).

‘Race’ in the technical sense. To the biologist ‘race’ = *subspecies*, identified by an (often) morphological (but always) genetic discontinuity between two populations in the same species. The lay categories of race that humans variously think they see in their own species do not meet the criteria either for a morphological or for a genetic discontinuity. There are no human races in the technical, biological sense (see Cavalli-Sforza et. al. 1994, Barbujani et al. 1997, Brown & Armelagos 2001, Boyd & Silk 2003, pp. 456-464).⁹

The lay category of ‘race’. This is a category of people made by privileging certain features of appearance—people whose bodies ‘look’ a certain way. But it is not just that. Membership in such categories is held to be explanatory or predictive of other things. This is why ‘brunettes’ are not a ‘race’—there isn’t much in the way of content or

expectations, implicitly or explicitly, associated with a member of the category.¹⁰ The people who use such categories of ‘race’ appear also to think they are looking at biologically meaningful groupings. That is, laypeople appear to consider the appearance-based categories they call ‘races’ to be ‘natural’, even if the intuition does not carry all of the sophistication of the technical understanding of ‘subspecies’ as described above. Hirschfeld’s (1996) investigations indeed suggest that, starting at a young age, people effortlessly recruit certain intuitions to give what they imagine are sharp phenotypic contrasts an essentialized and naturalized representation.

‘Ethnicity’ in the technical sense. This is the definition I have already defended above: *an ‘ethnie’ is a collection of people who, at a minimum, represent themselves as a self-sufficiently and vertically reproducing historical unit implying cultural peoplehood.*

The lay category of ‘ethnicity’. Since, as noted above, analysts recognize an ‘ethnie’ (or ‘ethnic group’) when they find a set of laypeople who organize themselves around an ‘ethnic identity’, there is not here, as in race, the possibility of a sharp distinction between the analytic and lay understandings of ethnicity. But at least one can say that the cultural distinctiveness, the purity of vertical reproduction, and the historical depth of the groups may be greatly exaggerated or entirely reified by native participants, and the analyst has no need to go along with such exaggerations and/or reifications. It is also likely that laypeople tend to reify their ethnic categories as natural, biological cuts of humanity endowed with transmittable ‘essences’—that is, they thoroughly racialize them (Gil-White 2001a, 2001b, 2002). But the analyst shouldn’t go along with that either.

The borderline case to consider here is when members of an ethnie abandon normative endogamy, as this will challenge the ideological claim of self-sufficient

reproduction. What to do? It depends but, again, *we must wait*. In situations of considerable ethnic intermarriage, one typically sees robust rules of unilineal ethnic ascription, so that a child of a mixed marriage will still have, and unequivocally, no more than one ethnicity (that of the father in a patrilineal system, and of the mother in a matrilineal system). This prevents even considerable ethnic exogamy from diluting the separate identities (Nave 2000). Absent a unilineal rule of ethnic ascription, however, rampant intermarriage may lead to the dissolution of the ethnies. For example, some worry this is happening to American Jews despite the (admittedly weakened) rule of matrilineal descent (Dershowitz 1997, Abrams 1997). It is also possible for such processes to merge two intermarrying ethnies into a new ethnicity. Several ethnies in fact have origin charter myths speaking of the merging of two separate peoples (for example, for the Romanians it is the fusion between the ancient Dacians and Romans; Connor 1994[1991], p. 216). But this is *ex post facto* rather than a conscious and causal motivator of the merging process (i.e. the recognition or reification of a blending origin *follows* the historical moment of actual or putative blending).

What's in a definition?

Testing a definition in this way increases our confidence in it, or else causes us to discard it, and either way the exercise was useful. Moreover, it helps discipline and clarify our thoughts not only about the concept itself, but about contrast concepts, which in turn can contribute all sorts of insights about things that may require explanation. The tests of my definition could, of course, be continued *ad infinitum* (e.g. ethnies are not castes because

the latter *must* be hierarchically organized, etc.). Any reader not satisfied that my definition of ‘ethnie’ passes the test should discard it, but this is the arena and method in which such decisions should be made.

However—and this is crucial—if my definition of ‘ethnie’ is judged to pass, then some things cannot be done. For example, the claim by a scholar that ‘the Fs’, whom he insists are an ‘ethnie’, admit members by means *other* than descent, and the use of this claim to then argue that descent-based membership is not a defining feature of ethnicity, is an absurdity. Finding an example of something that *isn’t* an ethnie—e.g. ‘the Fs’—naturally cannot affect the meaning of the word ‘ethnie’. What one *could* do is say that the Fs, thought by some to be an ethnie (if this was the case), are not really such, or at the very least not a very good example of one, making the case, precisely, by pointing out that Fs don’t believe descent is necessary for being F (this would be the case, for example, of the social category Vezo, in western Madagascar, studied by Rita Astuti, 1995). This sort of exercise is useful and contributes to terminological precision, which is indispensable to any scientific endeavor. Sadly, however, much of the debate in ethnic studies has been of the form where the scholar insists that a particular collectivity is ‘ethnic’—even though it isn’t—just so that a theoretical point about ‘ethnicity’—a favorite topic of scholarly activity these days—can be made with this maneuver.

For instance, Horowitz (1999, p. 348) asks, ‘If ethnic behavior is primordial [i.e. based on descent]...why is even the definition of group boundaries so sensitive to shifting contexts?’ The same paper offers some examples of what he considers to be ‘shifts’ in the ‘definition of [ethnic] group boundaries’ (p.360): ‘Changes in ethnic group boundaries respond strongly to the political environment, particularly the territorial

frame, in which groups find themselves... In many cases, new identities at high levels of generality—such as North and South, Christian and Muslim, Malay and non-Malay—were embraced, even though the component groups did not abandon lower-level identities for all purposes. . . The category of ‘northerner’, or at least northern Muslim, came to have great resonance in Nigeria, but southerners remained divided into Ibo, Yoruba, and others. . .’

Notice that what is offered each time as an example of *ethnic boundary change* is repeatedly not that at all. In one case we see the political mobilization of a regional identity (North vs. South); in another the same happens with a religious identity (Christian vs. Muslim); finally, we hear about the political mobilization of an intersection between the two (northern Muslim). Where is the evidence that ethnic boundaries easily change? Only by calling regional and religious identities *ethnic*, and by writing as if the move to make them politically relevant is a *boundary change*, can the examples be made to fit the argument that ‘the definition of [ethnic] group boundaries [is] so sensitive to shifting contexts’. And even the development of a Malay vs. non-Malay contrast was not a lightning quick redefinition of ethnic boundaries, but a gradual move to make a *superordinate* identity—also based on culture and descent, and not exactly *new*—the most politically relevant boundary (Shamsul 2001).

Horowitz is one of the sharpest students of nationalist politics. That his language should be in need of so much repair illustrates the breadth and tenacity of the problem, for Horowitz in fact explicitly accepts my definition of ethnic (as shown below).

How common are the intuitions behind my definition?

Given that I have considerably belabored my definition of ethnic, one not familiar with the literatures bearing on ethnicity might think that explicit statements at least approximating mine are difficult to find. But they are quite common. Here is a sampling: ‘We shall call ‘ethnic groups’ those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent—because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and emigration—and in such a way that this belief is important for the continuation of nonkinship communal relationships. . . regardless of whether an objective blood relationship exists or not (Weber 1968, p. 389); ‘The term ethnic group is generally understood in the anthropological literature (cf. e.g. Narroll 1964) to designate a population which (a) is largely biologically self-perpetuating [note that biological self-perpetuation implies both endogamy and descent-based membership—FGW]; (b) shares fundamental cultural values...; (c) has a membership which identifies itself. . .’ (Barth 1969); ‘An ethnic group is a self-perceived inclusion of those who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by others with whom they are in contact. Such traditions typically include ‘folk’ *religious beliefs* and *practices*, *language*, and *common ancestry* or place of origin... which includes some concept of an unbroken biological-genetic generational continuity... *Endogamy* is usual...’ (De Vos 1995); ‘. . . should members subjectively assume the existence of such ‘mythical’ [primordial] bases, the salient condition of ethnicity is met’ (Patterson 1975); ‘The term *bangsa* in Malay is the equivalent to our ‘ethnicity’. It conveys the double ideas of people sharing both a common origin and a common culture. Etymologically it is derived from the Sanskrit

vamsa, 'line of descent'. Emically, it has a primordial quality, for it implies that the cultural traits are inalienably and inextricably associated with a particular people, that is, carried by a community whose ultimate unity derives from a single origin. (. . .) While the concept of bangsa...has overtones of shared culture, this is secondary... to the solidarity acquired through common descent or origin...' (Nagata 1981, pp. 98-99); '. . . [ethnic groups] are social phenomena which call upon primordial sentiments and bonds based upon common ancestry' (Bonacich 1980); '. . . ethnically . . . human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories, and cultures, having an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity' (Smith 1986, p. 32); 'The reference to origin is . . . the primary source of ethnicity which makes a *socio-cultural* boundary into an *ethnic* boundary. . . . ethnic identity can best be defined as a feeling of belonging and continuity-in-being (staying the same person(s) through time) resulting from an act of self-ascription, and/or ascription by others, to a group of people who claim both common ancestry and a common cultural tradition' (Roosens 1994, pp. 83-84, original emphases); 'In many parts of the world. . . new ethnic identities and groups are being created which claim. . . primordial status' (Eller & Coughlan 1993); 'The only reference point for identifying an ethnic role is a belief in common descent as a basis for group identification that is acknowledged by members of other groups' (Banton (1994); 'Ethnic groups, whatever their composition, purport to be founded on descent... Endogamy gives concreteness to conceptions of ethnic affinity and makes the group a descent affiliation.' (Horowitz 1999, pp. 355-356).

Definitions recognizing that ethnicity involves cultural identity tied to an ideology of self-sufficient reproduction are terribly common, so why am I making such a fuss? For

one, because, as we've seen in the case of Horowitz, much analysis proceeds by completely disregarding what is explicitly recognized when producing definitions of ethnicity. For another, because despite this proliferation of definitions with intuitions approximately similar to my own, there is a rather shockingly hoary debate—shocking at least from the perspective of an innocent soul not familiar with the relevant literatures—one side of which spills an enormous amount of ink 'explaining' that ethnies are supposedly not really descent groups. Even more shocking is the fact that many of the definitions quoted above are by people broadly identified with such arguments—namely, those of Patterson, Bonacich, Eller & Coughlan, and Banton (and Barth 1969 is considered one of the foundations for this camp).

More shocking still is the fact that all of this insistent intellectual activity occurs in the absence of an intellectual antagonist. The 'explanation' that ethnies are supposedly not really descent groups is little more than the constant repetition of the rather obvious truth that no ethnie is pure or eternal, and that even the most ancient ones can be shown to be admixtures. At one time this was a useful point, but the scholars now proffering this 'explanation' (who variously go by the names of 'constructivists', 'instrumentalists', 'circumstantialists', and 'situationalists') act as if anybody in recent memory had argued otherwise, and they label their supposed opponents 'primordialists', 'essentialists', or 'perennialists'—all terms of abuse. As Brubaker points out (1996, p. 15, fn.4), the argument that the myths of common origin entertained by particular ethnies should be taken seriously as literal, historical truth is in fact all but impossible to find.¹¹ The alleged 'primordialist/essentialist' scholars, as represented by their self-declared opponents, do not really exist.¹²

That is, they do not exist among scholars of ethnicity, but they certainly do exist among ordinary laypeople (see Gil-White 1999, 2001a, and 2002 for fastidious demonstrations of this). ‘Constructivists’ spend so much time redundantly telling each other that ethnies are not, in fact, really primordial and eternal, but *constructed*—by which they mean that ethnies are not, in fact, really primordial and eternal!—that they have forgotten to pay attention to ordinary ethnic actors, who in fact do believe that descent is crucial to membership in their ethnies, and often also believe the myths of ancestral purity. *And it is with these—honestly-held—beliefs that ethnies (as opposed to religions, political parties, clubs, professions, etc.) are ‘constructed’.*

Walker Connor expressed a very similar criticism when he said: ‘With but very few exceptions, authorities have shied away from describing the nation as a kinship group and have usually explicitly denied that the notion of shared blood is a factor. Such denials are supported by data illustrating that most groups claiming nationhood do in fact incorporate several genetic strains. But...such approach ignores the wisdom of the old saw that when analyzing sociopolitical situations what ultimately matters is not *what is* but *what people believe is*. And a subconscious belief in the group’s separate origin and evolution is an important ingredient of national psychology. . .’ (Connor 1994[1978], p. 93); or, ‘...it is not *what is*, but *what people believe is* that has behavioral consequences. A nation is a group of people characterized by a myth of common descent. Moreover, regardless of its roots, a nation must remain an essentially endogamous group in order to maintain its myth’ (Connor 1994[1987], p. 75).

I will argue below against Connor’s practice of referring to ethnies as ‘nations’—even when discussing nationalism—and also against the suggestion that an ethnies is a

‘kinship group’. But disregarding for the moment these differences, notice how the quotations make clear that those who take the descent criterion seriously tend to say exactly what they mean: it is *the members of an ethnîe* who consider descent and endogamy crucial for identity, and who have charter myths of pure and common origin: ‘...what ultimately matters is not *what is* but *what people believe is*’.

‘Nation’ is a politician’s category—let’s avoid it

A ‘nation’ is not a thing in the world but in the political imagination: it is excellent, full of poetic virtues, deserving, legitimate, and—of course!—it ought to ‘determine itself’. Ever since the French *Declaration of the rights of man and citizen* we all supposedly ‘know’ that ‘the source of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation; no group, no individual may exercise authority not emanating expressly therefrom’. In this ideological framework any group or individual in power is tempted to address the state polity as ‘the nation’, which rather than a matter-of-fact description is an assertion of state/regime legitimacy. Even politicians in the United States, an immigrant country, will boast about the ‘American nation’—not because this nation obviously exists, but because it must be invoked, given that the politician’s audience believes all legitimacy to reside in something called ‘the nation’.

But precisely because ‘nation’ is a reified category of political *practice*, scientists use it as an analytical category at their peril (cf. Brubaker 1996, ch.1). And yet they have plunged. Despite its strong connotation of ‘ethnicity’, many scholars take their cue from politicians and refer to state polities as ‘nations’ even when these polities are composed

of several distinct ethnies. The same scholars are then naturally tempted to equate ‘nationalism’ with ‘loyalty to the state’. If one meaning had merely been substituted for another, of course, there would *be* no confusion, but the offending usages are in fact simultaneous with the potently lingering connotation of ‘nation’ as ‘ethnicity’ rather than ‘state’. When strong intuitive connotations conflict with explicit scholarly use it is harder to think straight and the result is bad theory. To avoid this, Walker Connor coined the term ‘ethnonationalism’ in an explicit attempt to restore the ethnic connotation to analytical primacy (Connor 1994, p. xi), but few have heeded his call.

Since everybody agrees that ‘nationalism’ is a quite modern ideological and political phenomenon, ‘nation’ carries with it another strong connotation: *politics*. The phenomenon of ethnicity is ancient (even if many specific ethnies are recent), but *nationalism*—the belief that ethnies should be unified and politically sovereign—is modern, first gaining prominence among European intellectuals only a few hundred years ago, and becoming a global mass phenomenon only since the mid-twentieth century. Political activity throughout most of history has centered around sub-ethnic boundaries (clans, tribes, some chiefdoms) or supra-ethnic ones (other chiefdoms, empires). Thus, the historical transition in which ethnies became the locus of political activity is lost to the analytical gaze if one makes no distinction between ‘ethnie’ and ‘nation’ (Gil-White & Richerson 2002).

It is true that the *etymology* of ‘nation’ is ancient, coming from the Latin ‘nationem’ which meant something mostly synonymous with ‘ethnie’ as defended here. But etymology is an exercise in history, not semantics. The *current* meaning of ‘nation’ is

strongly political and not merely cultural, and is informed by recent European history rather than ancient Roman usage. Thus, I offer the following distinctions:

Ethnie: a collection of people who, at a minimum, *represent themselves* as a self-sufficiently and vertically reproducing historical unit implying cultural peoplehood.

Nationalist: Person who believes his *ethnie* should be a unified and politically sovereign unit (*not* someone who is ‘loyal to the *ethnie*’; I’ll come back to this).

I define ‘nationalist’ but not ‘nation’ precisely because ‘nation’ is a politician’s category, and I will therefore not use it.

Now, I recognize that some scholars distinguish two types of ‘nationalism’. One supposedly ‘has its origin in the French Revolution [and] is based on the secular and rationalistic traditions of the Age of Enlightenment’, believing in ‘a social contract, expressing the will of the citizenry...A person can feel that he or she belongs to a specific nation and can affiliate by desire and choice...’ Then there is an idea from ‘the period of revolt against rationalism in the Romantic era’, of ‘an organic notion of society deriving from blood ties and common ethnic origin, culture, and history’ (Shapira 1992, p. 6). I ignore the first because I hardly see it; even in allegedly quintessential examples of it the romance of ethnicity creeps in considerably.¹³ But those who think it exists should nevertheless label it with a different word: voluntary association is the opposite of membership by descent, rationalism is the opposite of romanticism. Nothing but confusion can result—and has—from labeling diametric opposites with the same word, for the common term suggests unity of causal structure, and nothing could be further from the truth.

In what follows I will address other terminological confusions that can be resolved by using my two definitions above.

A correction to Walker Connor's use of 'nation' and 'ethnie'

One can have an ethnic identity without feeling any need to make the identity political, and for most of recorded history, for most people, such has been the case. Forgetting this, many scholars of ethnicity write as if there were something coercively *natural* about wanting the ethnic boundary to be a political one, but the idea that ethnies *ought to be* politically sovereign is terribly recent. If we blur ethnicity and nationalism into each other, the historical forces that brought about the latter, and which today inhibit or promote its spread, cannot be understood.

I pick Walker Connor as an example of the terminological issues that must be resolved for three reasons: 1) this political scientist has been admirably and explicitly concerned with terminological clarity and discipline over the years, making his vocabulary a considerable improvement over how others write and speak; and 2) he has been influential. Thus, by improving how Walker Connor speaks, I am proposing reforms to the very best we currently have.

Here is an example of what I consider evidence of remaining problems in Connor's dialect: his definition of a 'potential nation': '...a group of people who appear to have all of the necessary prerequisites for nationhood, but who have not as yet developed a consciousness of their sameness and commonality, nor a conviction that their

destinies are interwound. They are usually referred to by anthropologists as 'ethnolinguistic groups' (Connor 1994[1978], p. 114, fn.14).

Members of Connor's 'potential nation' must have *neither* 'a consciousness of their sameness and commonality' *nor* the 'conviction that their destinies are interwound'. It will all happen at once, and so the social category that precedes a nation (i.e. a potential one) has neither a cultural identity nor a political (nationalist) project—this is what Connor calls an 'ethnolinguistic group'. This means either that nationalists create ethnies in the course of pushing their political project, or else that ethnies are automatically political.

Such confusions occur at various levels of clarity among political scientists precisely because they are mostly interested in politics, and therefore in ethnies whose members—or some of them—are politically mobilized. This disciplinary focus produces the illusion that ethnicity is naturally nationalistic, or else that ethnies are literally born as part of a political process. But one hardly needs to speak this way in order to make Connor's main point, which is that ethnicity is the locus of political activity for nationalists.

Although Connor invokes the authority of anthropologists for his definition of 'ethnolinguistic group', what anthropologists refer to with that word is usually a largish category often comprising *several* distinct ethnies usually assumed to be the product of fission from a self-identifying, single, ancestral ethnic category (e.g. the Bantu, the Turkic, etc.). It is true that ethnolinguistic groups typically have either no common identity (or only a very weak one), and also usually lack a political project to match. It is also true that sometimes ethnolinguistic groups develop nationalist movements at that

level of contrast. For example, in the Republic of Mongolia, the ethnic identities Khalkha, Torguud, Uryankhai, Buryat, etc. have become less important than the common identity ‘Mongol’ around which the state is organized, even though these various ethnies used to speak different, often mutually unintelligible, dialects within the Mongolian linguistic family (some members of these groups still do). However, nationalist movements more often emerge out of *ethnies* rather than ethnolinguistic groups, and we have to keep the distinction up front because ethnies are different.

If Connor will invoke the authority of anthropologists, then it matters that in the definition of ‘ethnie’ put forward by anthropologists politics is entirely absent, and cultural identity is paramount: ‘The term ethnic group is generally understood in the anthropological literature (cf. e.g. Narroll 1964) to designate a population which (a) is largely biologically self-perpetuating; (b) shares fundamental cultural values...; (c) has a membership which identifies itself. . .’ (Barth 1969).

Connor also says that *before* nationalism, people’s ‘sense of fundamental identity is still restricted to the locale, extended family, clan, or tribe’. Apparently, for Connor people can have *either* a village, clan, or tribe identity, *or else* an ethnic (i.e. cultural) identity, becoming ‘a nation’ only if the former identities are given up for the latter. But wouldn’t this require that identities be mutually exclusive—unstackable hats that cannot be worn simultaneously? What lies behind Connor’s intuition is probably that, in nationalism, ethnicity displaces whatever identity previously occupied the privileged spot *as the most legitimate locus for political activity*. But one can have a political identity at the village level and a merely cultural one at the ethnic level—every identity is not political. As shown above, anthropologists use ‘ethnie’ (or ‘ethnic group’) to denote those

who—without necessarily having a political project to match—believe themselves to be culturally unique by descent.

Ever since Barth (1969, see also 1994), whose definition I quoted, there has been a strong consensus among anthropologists—resting on a firm empirical foundation—that one cannot find the boundaries of ethnies by parsing random trait lists of objective cultural material. There is simply no way to predict which aspects of culture will anchor the identity by being important to the members, nor even whether they will turn out to have, in fact, anything distinctive (they typically will, and therefore ethnic identity is tied to cultural awareness, but on occasion the claim of cultural uniqueness strikes the anthropologist as a mere allegation by members; e.g. Moerman 1968). Anthropologists thus maintain that if people do not believe certain things about their culture and descent, then there *is* no ethnie, and moreover that these beliefs are quite sufficient to recognize a population as ethnic.

Connor's isolation from these terminological distinctions leads to his infelicitous word choices, which in turn cause him to misread Max Weber. He quotes the following passage from the German sociologist (Connor 1994[1978], p. 102): '...The Poles of Upper Silesia, until recently, had hardly any feeling of solidarity with the 'Polish nation'. They felt themselves to be a separate ethnic group in the face of the Germans, but for the rest they were Prussian subjects and nothing else' (Weber 1968, p. 923). Notice that Weber is making *the exact same distinction* between cultural identity and political mobilization that I am defending here, but Connor reads this passage very differently, saying: 'Weber is here clearly speaking of prenational peoples or, what we termed earlier, potential nations...peoples not yet cognizant of belonging to a larger ethnic element'.

Is Weber ‘clearly’ saying that in Upper Silesia Poles were ‘not yet cognizant of belonging to a larger ethnic element’? On the contrary. Weber says that ‘The Poles of Upper Silesia...felt themselves to be a separate ethnic group in the face of the Germans’. What these Poles lacked was any interest in the ‘Polish Nation’, which term refers not to an object *in* the world but to a political project—a *desideratum*—to create a sovereign political unit comprising all those who consider themselves ethnically Polish. In Upper Silesia, explains Weber, those who knew themselves to be Poles had yet to reach the ‘conclusion’ that this presented any contradiction with their political status as Prussian subjects. To read Weber the way Connor does one must hold fast to the conviction that the nationalist project is necessary for ethnic identity, and one must ignore Weber’s own definition of ‘ethnie’ which, like mine, ties cultural identity to descent and makes no reference to politics (see above).

That my own definitions are more closely tied with common usage and ordinary intuitions is evidenced in the fact that Connor—apparently without taking notice—often implicitly abandons his own and adopts mine. For example, always in the same 1978 essay, Connor writes the following: ‘Bismarck’s famous exhortation to the German people, over the heads of their particular political leaders, to “think with your blood” was a similar attempt to activate a mass psychological vibration predicated upon an intuitive sense of consanguinity. An unstated presumption of a Chinese (or German) nation is that there existed in some hazy, pre-recorded era a Chinese (or German) Adam and Eve, and that the couple’s progeny has evolved in essentially unadulterated form down to the present. It was recognition of this dimension of the nation that caused numerous writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to employ *race* as a synonym for *nation*,

references to a German race or to the English race being quite common' (Connor 1994[1978], pp. 93-94).

Notice what is conceded in this example (which Connor likes so much he has reused it (1994[1993], p. 198). Bismarck was trying to inject the political idea into the minds of Germans, but he was *not* trying to inject the idea that they were Germans, and Germans by *blood*. All of that he took for granted. Bismarck's appeal was merely the exhortation to Germans that, *because* they were Germans by blood, they should be together in a single political unit. This is the new idea.

And yet Connor cannot abandon his terms. He tells us that the 'mass psychological vibration' which Bismarck was trying to activate was '...predicated upon...An unstated presumption of a...German nation'. In other words, there were nations before nationalism? I would argue rather that what Connor calls the supposed 'presumption of a... German nation' was neither unstated nor of a German nation. Rather, what was previously there, before German nationalism appeared, was the publicly recognized identity of the Germans as an *ethnie*, membership in which was (and is) indeed 'predicated upon an intuitive sense of consanguinity'—that is, common blood, meaning that one is a German who is descended from another German.

These corrections to Connor make his coinage 'ethnonationalism' more, not less apt. In the first place because it steers our thoughts away from the confusing usages in the literature where nationalism is equated with 'loyalty to the state', and this was Connor's main reason for coining it. In the second place, because it reminds us what the historical innovation of nationalism consists of: the attempt to convince members of an *ethnie* that they should constitute themselves as a unified and sovereign political unit.

Don't define 'the nation'

In all this, I have resisted defining 'the nation', but Connor (1994[1967], p. 4) is not so shy. His own question, 'What constitutes a nation?', is answered: 'In the final analysis, the coincidence of the customary tangible attributes of nationality, such as common language or religion, is not determinative. The prime requisite is subjective and consists of the self-identification of people with a group—its past, its present, and, what is most important, its destiny'.

I would rewrite the above as follows: 'The coincidence of the customary tangible attributes of *ethnicity*, such as common language or religion, is not determinative. The prime requisite—for *ethnicity*—is subjective and consists of the self-identification of people as a meaningful cultural category, with a past and a present (see my above definition of 'ethnie'). But this in turn is not determinative of nationalism. Only when a member of such an ethnic category develops a concern for that ethnie's *future*—specifically, its political 'destiny'—do we have a *nationalist*'.

Again, I define 'nationalism' and 'nationalist' but not 'nation' because an analyst should not presume that the object of a political project exists (Brubaker 1996, ch.1). The nationalist's cry 'we are a nation' is not an act of description but a demand that his ethnie become (or remain) unified and politically sovereign. A scientist who asks if the X's are a 'nation' and answers 'yes' is not asserting the existence of an 'object' but rather *endorsing a political project* (because 'nations' are supposedly lofty, deserving, legitimate...). The same occurs when scientists refer to the X ethnie as the X *nation*, or

when they try to answer when exactly a collectivity becomes a ‘nation’ (as Walker Connor does; 1994[1991], pp. 211-226). Consider, if certain members of the ethnics disagree with the goals of the nationalists, are they members of ‘the nation’? If we cannot give an unambiguous answer to this question (and I would argue that we cannot), then we cannot identify ‘the nation’. Therefore, the scientifically useless talk of ‘nations’ is best left to the politicians, as Brubaker (1996, p. 16) correctly argues.

Don’t deny ethnicity its obvious reality

However, I think Brubaker (2002), who adds the point—correctly—that ‘races’ are also figments, then overextends himself when he adds the argument that ethnics are just as fictional: ‘Racial idioms...and racialized ways of seeing, thinking, talking, and framing claims are real and consequential...But the reality of race...does not depend on the existence of ‘races’. Similarly, the reality of ethnicity and nationhood—and the overriding power of ethnic and national identifications in some settings—does not depend on the existence of ethnic groups or nations as substantial groups or entities.’

The idea that what ordinary people call ‘races’ parse humanity into ‘subspecies’ (what ‘race’ means in the biological literature) is a fiction unsupported by the genetic evidence (see Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1994, Barbujani et al. 1997, Brown & Armelagos 2001, Boyd & Silk 2003, pp. 456-464). This fiction informs every racial categorization at some level, because the categories are incorrectly assumed by ordinary people to correspond to ‘natural’ boundaries. This point is often repeated; what is usually forgotten is that, although the *folk belief* in human races rightly holds great interest for scholars, the

‘races’ themselves do not capture anything interesting to social science: inside each so-called ‘race’ is a staggering variety of cultures, so general statements about any such supposed ‘race’—whether or not they allege biological causation—are meaningless.¹⁴

Ethnicity is different. Ever since Barth (1969) there has been general agreement that the phenomenon which the term labels is a form of *identity*, and one that is importantly linked to perceived discontinuities in the distribution of normative culture, which in turn are—not inevitably, but nonetheless typically—based on *real* cultural discontinuities. How these discontinuities will occur, and how many there will be, is unpredictable, but that hardly means that ethnies usually have no material substance (cf. Barth 1994).

Since, as De Vos (1995, p. 16) points out, Barth taught us that ‘[ethnic] boundaries are basically psychological in nature...’, it follows that if we can find collections of people who give themselves labels with beliefs attached concerning their cultural distinctiveness, imagined as a product of descent, then ethnies indeed exist. By contrast, race is a biologist’s term, so the biologist does not need members of a race to be self-aware *as members* for a race to exist. The corollary is that neither does the belief of many humans that they are members of a race conjure that race into existence. Similarly, ‘nation’ is a politician’s term, and the nationalist politician by necessity must claim the existence of the ‘nation’ even before any of his coethnics are kindled by his prophetic assertions. Why? Because it is the so-called nations that are supposedly deserving of sovereign political status. What this shows is that neither the biologist’s ‘race’ nor the politician’s ‘nation’ require the psychological phenomenon of ‘identity’ as a prior.

Ethnies are of a different order of reality than races and nations because, in their case, psychological identity is not only necessary but sufficient for their existence.

A final disagreement with Brubaker is that, though he correctly discards ‘nation’ as a reified category of political practice unfit for the analyst, he nevertheless wants a new word: ‘nationness’ (1996, pp. 16-22). But ‘ness’ and ‘ity’ terminations, as in ‘dogness’ or ‘humanity’, imply a *quality* intrinsic to an *entire category*, not to particular individuals (the species of dogs in the first example, and humans in the second). Nationness is the quality of being a nation (it *will* be read that way). So by postulating nationness (or nationhood) one again reifies ‘nation’ as truly existing, where Brubaker wanted precisely the opposite. It is enough, for the analyst, to define *nationalists* as those who wish to make the ethnies unified and politically sovereign. Social science must therefore explain the emergence and proliferation of nationalists, the strength of their passion, and their grassroots support in a time and place. And nothing more.

Why ‘ethnie’ and not ‘ethnic group’?

I believe the term ‘ethnic group’—despite being perfectly widespread—should be abandoned wholesale; Anthony Smith’s (1986) term ‘ethnie’ is much preferable.

The intuitions and connotations of the word ‘group’ are well-reflected in the emergence of ‘small-group research’ in psychology (see Homans 1968, p. 259), which began by investigating psychological phenomena within small, task-oriented, face-to-face groups in the context of the lab. Members of such groups reach common decisions by

consensus, quickly establish a hierarchical pecking order, develop solidarity when given a common task, etc.—all sorts of interesting things.

Notice how clear, at one point, was the distinction between a ‘group’ and a ‘category’: ‘...the intuitive notion that a group is an entity that consists of interacting people who are aware of being psychologically bound together in terms of mutually linked interests. A group is thus to be distinguished from [a] . . . category . . . which consists of people who are classified together because of some common characteristic’ (Deutsch 1968, p. 265).

Thus, the problem with the term ‘group’ is the following. On the one hand, its main implicit connotations are still those of ‘an entity...of interacting people who are aware of being psychologically bound together in terms of mutually linked interests’ because ‘group’ is a common word that we continue to use with its common meaning. But on the other hand, the term is now applied to all sorts of human *categories* that are *not* groups in the least—for example, so-called ‘ethnic groups’.

In pointing to its origin in psychology I hardly mean to say that ‘group’ is a good psychological term which other disciplines have misapplied. Even in psychology the extension of ‘group’ now deplorably includes a staggering diversity of things (e.g., minimal groups, face-to-face groups, ethnies, political parties, etc.) that our cognition cuts into several different joints and which should be properly distinguished by the scientist. But because the term is unfortunately used as a gloss for them all, scientists (including psychologists) are distracted from the proper piecemeal examination of each, and seduced instead into thinking that these disparate phenomena all belong in the same

scientific category—‘group’—which will therefore be supposedly amenable to a single theoretical approach.

To give just one dramatic example, psychologists commonly talk about ‘minimal groups’, which are formed (for example) by assigning individuals at random to their respective categories in the laboratory. Such individuals are made aware of the random assignment and, moreover, never meet a single member of their own category or the opposite one. Individuals so divided into these wholly abstract categories, it turns out, will slightly favor anonymous members of their own category when asked to allocate essentially meaningless rewards, but this effect is tiny and *very* fragile (see Tajfel 1970 for the original experiments, Diehl 1990 for a review, and Mummendey 1992 and Hartstone & Augoustinos 1995 for demonstrations of the fragility of the purported effect). The effect has been called the ‘in-group favoritism bias’.

Notice now the power of words. Because these abstract categories are called ‘groups’, though they aren’t, and because the effect found is called the ‘in-group favoritism bias’, many scholars have been tempted to use this result to ‘explain’, say, conflict between collections of humans that are *also* called ‘groups’, such as ‘ethnic groups’ (e.g., Tajfel & Turner 1979, Hartstone & Augoustinos 1995)—*which are not groups either*.

One is forced to wonder whether such theories would have been attempted at all if the effect had been called ‘the fragile bias to favor anonymous co-members of lab-based, exotic, and thoroughly abstract categories with an insignificantly disproportionate share of a meaningless reward’. My guess is no. Things are very different (1) if we label such abstract categories ‘groups’; (2) if we call the practically uninterpretable result ‘in-group

favoritism'; and (3) if we label meaningful categories in the world—such as ethnies—'groups' even though they are also *not* groups. Now we are ready for an awesome tangle.

Even a political scientist who has made a career of cleaning up terminological confusions, such as Walker Connor, has been no exception to these seductions. He says, '...in his book, *Ethnic groups in conflict*, Donald Horowitz indicates one avenue of possibly fruitful research, suggesting how several studies borrowed from experimental psychology (and dealing with both individual and group behavior) may lead to a better understanding of ethnonationalism' (Connor 1987). But the studies which Horowitz (1985) refers to are none other than these 'minimal group' experiments.

Could the theory which emerged from this experimental literature call itself 'Social Identity Theory' if the word 'group' had not been employed? Not likely. After all, no *social* identity whatever is created in such experiments! A later reform dropped the word 'social' and also SIT's argument that self-esteem had anything to do with the effect (because no evidence was found for that), renaming itself 'Self-Categorization Theory' (Turner *et al.* 1987), but by then the damage had been done. This latter theory, like the former, believes that psychologically there is something *general* to all categories of person and therefore that effects obtained with 'minimal group' categories are useful for understanding, say, ethnies. But asking oneself the question 'when did I last hear about an architect-vs.-baker riot?' shows that conflict between certain kinds of social categories will develop more easily than between others.

Horowitz (1999, p. 347) correctly observes that '...there are bite-sized pieces into which ethnic conflict can be sliced. There is no a priori reason to swallow it whole'. An identical argument applies to person categories: there is no a priori reason to assume that

a single cognitive mechanism handles them all. This is laid bare by the fact that the ‘minimal group’ results appear not to generalize in the least. I recently modified the ‘Ultimatum Game’ used in experimental economics so that anonymous members of opposite ethnies in a naturalistic setting would play each other, and also with anonymous coethnics. The UG setup introduces meaningful rewards and a structure where allocators must pay for their behavioral choices; the ethnicity manipulation makes the categories involved meaningful rather than ‘minimal’. All three of these changes increase the ecological validity of any ‘ingroup bias’ that might be found. What I turned up, however, was something that SIT and SCT would interpret as an ‘*outgroup* favoritism bias’ (Gil-White 2004a, 2004b). Another set of economic experiments with ethnic categories also failed to find an ‘ingroup bias’ (Fershtman & Gneezy 2001). This meshes well with experiments showing that adding meaningful rewards to the ‘minimal group’ setup will make the effect disappear (Mummendey 1992), but not with the presuppositions of SIT and SCT that the results generalize to other category contrasts and that the effect will be larger with more meaningful categories. The entire interpretation of the so-called ‘ingroup favoritism bias’ is put into question by such results. If it is a real effect, it indeed appears to be tiny, exotic, lab-based, and easily overwhelmed in the real world. In other words, it may explain nothing of interest to social science—least of all ethnic conflict.

The term ‘group’ is more or less adequate for a village, a clan, or a tribe (also: a team, a family, or a parish). But ethnies themselves are usually vast by comparison with the scope of informal political organization, social control, reputation network, etc., which typically extends only so far as the local residential community. And before nationalism—which is terribly recent—members of an ethnie did not think of themselves

as sharing mutually linked interests with other members *by virtue of being coethnics*.

Analysts often forget this when they project their interest in recent ethnonationalism into the past, as if ethnies historically had been the locus of political activity (they get a lot of ‘help’ from the confusion between the terms ‘ethnie’ and ‘tribe’, for the latter *were*, certainly, important loci of political activity). An ethnie is therefore not quintessentially ‘an entity that consists of interacting people who are aware of being psychologically bound together in terms of mutually linked interests’. An ethnie is quintessentially a category, not a group (cf. Brubaker 2002).

There is no question, however, that the project of the nationalist is to turn the ethnie into a unified political unit. A nationalist will certainly *entify* the ethnie (pretend it is a unified whole) in his rhetoric, *claiming* that members of an ethnie share a common destiny and mutually linked interests. The term ‘ethnic group’ forces an exercise in metonymy where the nationalists—who are loud and salient and *do* organize in political parties (which *are* groups)—stand for the entire ethnie despite the common fact of internal resistance to them within the ethnie. If the solidarity of ethnies were so natural and inevitable, political conflict *within* ethnies would hardly be the staple of history, nor would nationalists in modern times have to work so hard (why did Bismarck have to explain the supposed political importance of blood ties to his German audiences?). It is noteworthy that, despite their overt claims of ethnic brotherhood and mutually linked interests, a rather striking number of nationalists direct significant violence against ‘their own’ coethnics—because they don’t cooperate with the nationalist vision—rather than concentrating exclusively on supposed ‘enemies’. For this reason, ‘nationalist’ must not be equated with ‘person loyal to the ethnie’.¹⁵

Yes, nationalists *will* represent the ethnies as a ‘group’, but those of us who study such things should hardly be taking our marching orders from political manifestos (cf. Brubaker 2002). Evidence that the best political scientists do this, however, is not hard to find: ‘...the power of ethnic affiliations stubbornly presses in on us and demands explanation ...[in terms of]... the need of individuals to belong to groups. Individuals require the cooperation that groups provide’ (Horowitz 1999, p. 353). Only by calling an ethnies a ‘group’ can one speak of ethnies as one of the quintessentially *cooperating* social entities that people by nature long to join. In fact, people typically do not cooperate as members of ethnies but as members of villages, clans, tribes, etc. Only in the context of ethnopolitical conflict (which, again, is a recent phenomenon) do we see coethnics cooperating at the level of the ethnies. Even here, however, it is arguable that scholars are so seduced by the vision of ‘groups’ in conflict that they privilege an entified view of ethnopolitical processes over a complex reality in which ethnonationalists often inflict more violence on their own coethnics due to fragmented social processes in which large numbers of coethnics are opposed to the nationalists (sometimes a majority).

A final cost of the term ‘ethnic group’ is that it tempts those who approach the study of ethnicity from the economic perspective to choose the wrong payoff matrix. For example, Fearon & Laitin (1996) say that the boundaries of the ‘ethnic group’ need to be *policed* by ethnic entrepreneurs. But this confuses the ethnic boundary with an ethnopolitical process. The cooperation of members in the context of, say, an ethnic secession struggle will require some policing, but ethnic boundaries themselves are easily kept in place by a myriad self-interested decisions as people prefer to marry and interact with coethnics whose behavioral standards are like their own (Barth 1994, Schwartz

1995, Gil-White 1999, 2001a, 2005, Nave 2000, McElreath et. al. 2002). For example, as regards economic behavior, Landa (1981) has shown that Chinese merchants, under conditions of contract uncertainty, prefer to trade with kinsmen and co-ethnics who share the same code of ethics, resulting in the formation of ethnic trade networks which function as an alternative to contract law in economizing on contract enforcement costs (see also Yarbrough & Yarbrough 1999). Fearon & Laitin are mixing up two different things: the maintenance of the ‘boundaries of the ethnies’, on the one hand, with the maintenance of ‘ethnic cooperation for a nationalist project’, on the other. As I observed once before (Gil-White 2001a, p. 550) this is the confusion of a prisoner’s dilemma payoff matrix with incentives to cheaters (ethnic ‘cooperation’, which *does* need policing) with a payoff matrix that has costs to mismatched standards of behavior and signaling (ethnic ‘coordination’, which does *not* require policing). The only reason this confusion occurs is that we say ‘ethnic group’, which forces the entifying intuition that ethnies behave *qua* ethnies (i.e. as cooperating wholes), a misleading notion that is rampant in political science.

Don’t confuse ethnicity with kinship

Walker Connor repeatedly characterizes the descent-criterion for membership in an ethnies as giving coethnics a bond of ‘kinship’. For example: ‘...authorities have shied away from describing the nation as a kinship group and have usually explicitly denied that the notion of shared blood is a factor’ (Connor 1994[1978], p. 93); ‘Recognizing the sense of common kinship that permeates the ethnonational bond clears a number of

hurdles. First, it qualitatively distinguishes national consciousness from nonkinship identities (such as those based on religion or class) with which it has too often been grouped. Secondly, an intuitive sense of kindredness or extended family would explain why nations are endowed with a very special psychological dimension—an emotional dimension—not enjoyed by essentially functional or juridical groupings, such as socioeconomic classes or states’ (Connor 1994[1987], pp. 74-75).

The intuition is that, as Horowitz (1999, p. 356) puts it, the family is ‘the fount of descent affiliations’ and therefore ethnicity, which is a descent affiliation, should be seen as a form of kinship. The argument is increasingly common, and Pierre van den Berghe (1987) made a serious attempt to turn the intuition into a comprehensive theory of ethnicity.

One can sometimes detect in the attempt to treat ethnies as families a desire to bring an evolutionary perspective to the study of ethnicity. This is certainly the case for van den Berghe, who has attempted to extend kin-selection theory to address this problem. However, evolutionary theory is much larger than a narrow kin-selection approach, which has little to recommend it when the social categories in question are composed of large numbers of genetic strangers (Gil-White & Richerson 2002). In fact, co-ethnics are also *social* strangers (most members of most ethnies never meet each other). The increasingly popularity of the kinship approach naturally rests on Connor’s observation that descent matters to both families and ethnies, and on the obvious imperative that we must understand how the descent criterion in ethnies affects processes of political mobilization. I agree with the latter point (Gil-White 1999, 2001a, 2005), but

looking at families will not give us theoretical purchase because ethnicity is not a kinship affiliation, as I now demonstrate.

First, though two persons linked by kinship will share a common ancestor,¹⁶ with mixed marriages and unilineal rules for the transmission of ethnic ascription, they could have different ethnic statuses. This observation undermines the idea that ethnicity is perceived by ordinary people as a large kinship category embracing smaller ones.

Second, though it is rare for people to join the kinship units (e.g. clans) of another ethnies, when it happens the new entrants do not automatically gain membership in the new ethnies (e.g. Barth 1963, Hjort 1981). This undermines the idea that ethnicity is the outer circle for large kinship units of the *clan* type.

Third, the rhetoric of ethnic 'kinship' is usually that of a founding father myth or vague end-point common-origin myth, and has nothing to do with the tracing of actual genealogies (that happens in what should properly be called 'kinship': lineages and clans). The exception is when members of the ethnies live intimately with non-members (e.g. slaves), who may mix somewhat with the dominant ethnies. This is the case of the Kirghiz (Shahrani 1979, p. 151), who traditionally required that a person be able to show that her ancestors in the male line were Kirghiz for seven generations before being considered a 'true' Kirghiz, rather than (at least a nominal) slave. But this is an exception that proves the rule: only when there is a reason to question one's parents' 'true ethnicity' is there any resort to genealogical trees. And even when this happens, as in the case of the Kirghiz, the point is not to find a particular ancestor (as in kinship) but merely to show that you have 'sufficient blood' of the X type (a *very* different kind of question, underlain by a different psychology). In the absence of doubt, it is enough that your parents are X

in order to claim X ethnicity—genealogy is neither here nor there (cf. Keyes 1976, p. 205).

Fourth, though it is very common to hear nationalists talk about the ‘motherland’ and referring to coethnics as ‘brothers’, this is metaphorical rhetoric. Many companies also describe themselves as ‘a family’, but I don’t see any theoreticians rushing to analyze the modern firm as a ‘kinship group’.

Finally, and this is the most important point, kinship does not have a monopoly on descent-based membership criteria. All members of a duck species are such by virtue of biological descent from other members, and yet we don’t think of them collectively as a *family*. Just because two individuals are X by descent, therefore, it doesn’t automatically follow that X is a ‘kinship group’ (*or* category!).

The above observation may propel the intuition that we reason about ethnies in a manner analogous to species. However, I believe this is not analogy but *homology* (Gil-White 2001a, 2001b, 2005). In other words, in my view this is not a case of two separate psychological adaptations behaving similarly; rather, certain cognitive processes that first evolved to reason about species were then recruited to process a new set of inputs having to do with ethnicity. This explains the common elision between the terms ‘species,’ ‘race,’ and ‘ethnicity’ and also the strong tendency to *racialize* ethnic categories despite the fact that it is easily shown—as in the case of the supposed ‘races’—that they are not genuine biological populations.

Concluding remarks

I end with the following recommendations:

1. Let us use the word *ethnie* and define it, explicitly, as ‘a collection of people who, at a minimum, *represent themselves* as a self-sufficiently and vertically reproducing historical unit implying cultural peoplehood’.
2. Let us define *nationalist* as ‘someone who believes his/her *ethnie* should become/remain a unified and politically sovereign unit’.
3. Let us not talk about ‘nations’ at all.
4. Let us not talk about ‘ethnic *groups*’ at all.
5. Whenever necessary for reasons of clarity, let us be generous in our use of the terms ‘ethnonationalism’ and ‘ethnonationalist’.

If these definitional recommendations are reasonable and useful, then they also point out—as good definitions must—what the student of nationalism must explain. She must (at least) explain:

1. Why did an ancient and mostly non-political form of parsing humanity—ethnicity—become the locus of political activity for so many people in modern times?
2. What historical coincidences made it possible for nationalists to mobilize large numbers of coethnics, and also for the nationalist idea to become so ‘self-evident’ in such a short period of time?

Given the definition of ‘ethnie’, it is obvious that any attempt to answer these two questions will have to address the peculiarities of ethnic psychology. Thus, a third question must be answered:

3. Given that ethnies are perceived by ordinary human beings—whether nationalists or not—to be ‘natural kinds’, how has this perception, and the cognitive processes it sets in motion, been responsible for the tremendous emotional power that ethnonational projects are able to muster among their adherents?

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¹ Many different and confused technical meanings have been attached to common words by means of this process, for example, to the common term ‘prestige’ (see Henrich & Gil-White 2001).

² I have borrowed the term ‘ethnie’ from Anthony Smith (1986).

³ Note: If you disagree that the extensions used by scholars for ‘ethnie’ largely overlap, then the responsible thing to do is to *stop* using the word, for it does not achieve the minimum requirement of communication. There is hardly any use to a word unless people agree to the set of referents it denotes. Of course, agreement on the set of referents does not mean that scholars have agreed on an analytical intension for them, and that is what we are concerned with here.

⁴ It is important to determine whether certain types of culture are more important than others in the formation of ethnic group boundaries (Nagata 1981:90-91). See Gil-White (1999, 2001a, 2005) for an argument that what matters is *interactional norms*.

⁵ The expression ‘we are a people’ makes much less sense for a family or firm than it does for an ethnies—I am exploiting common usage here. The specification ‘*cultural* peoplehood’ is meant to clarify why: ethnies are assumed to be the repositories of cultural differences, and these cultural differences are importantly linked to a sense of *kind* membership. ‘Peoplehood’ and ‘a sense of *kind*’ are synonyms here.

⁶ Barth 1969 is responsible for shifting the scholarly consensus on ethnicity towards this subjectivist perspective, which in fact originates with Max Weber, as shown further below in the text. This view is now widely accepted and I will not belabor here; but Gil-White 1999 has an extended discussion of the importance of this shift.

⁷ <http://www.anth.ucsb.edu/glossary/glossary.html>

⁸ The problem with sub-Saharan Africa is that many people who write about it seem to think that those who live south of the Sahara are not entitled to have ethnies, and so they label sub-Saharan ethnies ‘tribes’ even when there is no political organization at that level. And what do these scholars call the sociopolitical entities *within* sub-Saharan ethnies? *Tribes!* (cf. Connor 1994:107-108).

⁹ For an extended discussion of why biologists say there are no human races, and why laypeople are so resistant to the demonstration, consult: Gil-White, F. J. 2004.

Resurrecting racism: The current attack on black people using phony science:

Investigative and Historical Research.

www.ihrhome.com/resurrect.htm

¹⁰ Note: the stereotype about blondes is really a stereotype about attractive women, in a culture that considers blondes to be especially attractive. I predict that people holding this stereotype of blondes will be unsurprised to find that no such views are held about them in cultures where they are considered unattractive (e.g. the Torguuds of Western Mongolia), hence the stereotype is not really essentialist.

¹¹ Except in works such as Jon Entine's *Taboo: Why black athletes dominate sports and why we are afraid to talk about it*. He claims support from the work of a few people who are at least published in scholarly journals, such as Phillippe Rushton, but Rushton's scientific standards are not better than Entine's, and they are hardly mainstream. For interested readers, the following book examines both Entine's arguments and the arguments of those he relies on (such as Phillippe Rushton): Gil-White, F. J. 2004. *Resurrecting racism: The current attack on black people using phony science*. Investigative and Historical Research.

www.ihrhome.com/resurrect.htm

¹² Matters are not made any better by the fact that many 'constructivists' self-consciously perceive themselves to be on a righteous crusade to cleanse the non-existent 'primordialists' from academic scholarship.

¹³ Notice, for example, how the United States was described in Federalist Paper #2: 'Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people – a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and their customs, and who, by their joint counsels, arms and efforts, fighting side by side throughout a long and bloody war, have nobly established their general

liberty and independence’.—Concerning Dangers from Foreign Force and Influence, for the *Independent Journal*, October 31, 1787, by ‘Publius’ (a pseudonym for John Jay).

¹⁴ Attempts to make such general statements must inevitably ignore, distort, or contradict biological science. For example, Jon Entine’s book ‘Taboo: Why blacks dominate sports and why we are afraid to talk about it’. For a refutation of Entine by this author, see: Gil-White, F. J. 2004. *Resurrecting racism: The current attack on black people using phony science*. Investigative and Historical Research.

www.ihrhome.com/resurrect.htm

¹⁵ For example, Arafat’s Fatah established itself by directing much of its terrorist violence against Palestinians who sought accommodation with the State of Israel (Sachar 1979:682-685). The paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland—on both sides—have inflicted a strikingly large percentage of their casualties on coethnics (O’Leary & McGary 1996:ch.1). It is not hard to make the case that the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka (LTTE) have killed more Tamils than Sinhalese, for their strategy was to murder all political opposition within the Tamil community (see Swamy 1996), and in this they resemble Fatah. The same can be said for the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army), which directed considerable violence against any ethnic Albanians in Kosovo who did not wish to participate in its anti-Serb racist program. See, for example, ‘How to lie with (or without) statistics. An examination of Patrick Ball’s indictment of Milosevic’; Emperor’s Clothes; 30 October, 2003; by Francisco Gil-White.

<http://emperors-clothes.com/gilwhite/ball.htm>

¹⁶ Unless, of course, they are *affinal* relatives, but such relatives know themselves not to be related by descent, so this cannot be the kind of ‘kinship’ people have in mind when they point out that coethnics believe themselves to share common descent.