

The study of ethnicity needs better categories

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

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It has been difficult to make progress in the study of ethnicity 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. I 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; and 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.

What is—ideally—a scientific definition?

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... One cannot think theoretically without concepts, and one either chooses them carefully or wastes the time subsequently spent theorizing. One should therefore give definitional issues the time and attention they deserve, and I accordingly begin with a brief reflection on what it means to make an analytic 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 definitions.

In philosophy, linguistics, and cognitive science, 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.

In some domains of scientific inquiry, making new definitions is not especially problematic. Particle physicists study phenomena that laypeople never see, and for which the only vocabulary is the set of neologisms invented by particle physicists. They can often therefore just choose a term, even one already in common use (e.g. ‘spin’), give it an entirely novel technical definition, and be done with it. Social scientists, on the other hand, cannot do this because we examine phenomena in which the layperson *swims*, and for which the scientist—as layperson—already possesses a rich vocabulary. The common word is thus often a rough guide to something that was already of interest, and about which a rough conception was already had. 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 X includes *some but not all* of the phenomena that C (some common term) refers to. Tim is now tempted to do this: lop the meaning of C here, and also there, and—presto!— $C = X$. This, amazingly, 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).

It is not hard to see, upon reflection, that Tim’s technical definition cannot win. Tim’s definition will be presented only at the beginning of his argument, and his readers will be exposed to this definition 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 the 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, Loveman, & Stamatov (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. 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.

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

What is an ethnief?

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 scholars of ethnicity all ‘know an ethnief when they see one’ (‘ethnief’ here substitutes for ‘ethnic group’—it is one of my proposed terminological reforms, and I justify it further below). Thus, if we were to write down a separate list giving the extension of ‘ethnief’ 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.²

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

² Note: If you disagree that the extensions used by scholars for ‘ethnief’ largely overlap, then the responsible thing to do is to *stop* using the word, for it does not achieve the minimum requirement of communication—it is a useless string of letters. 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.

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 ethnies 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).³
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.*

Notice, then, that a collection of human beings is an ethnies whenever the members themselves *believe* certain things.⁴ 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: what accounts for the fact that people believe such things about themselves? But I shall defer that question, which is an evolutionary 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, as I define them, and other social categories that can be clearly distinguished thanks to this definition.

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

³ It is important to determine whether certain types of culture are more important than others to the formation of ethnic group boundaries (Nagata 1981:90-91). See Gil-White (1999, 2001a, 2002c) for an argument that what matters is *interactional norms.*

⁴ 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, which is now widely accepted, and which I will not belabor here; but Gil-White 1999 has an extended discussion of the importance of this shift.

- 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 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 did 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.

A. Ethnies are not clans

An anthropology glossary says:⁵

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.

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.

⁵ <http://www.anth.ucsb.edu/glossary/glossary.html>

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, when they are not. I shall return to the differences between ethnicity and kinship further below.

Another difference is that clan members typically 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.’

Notice how consideration of an anomalous borderline case immediately motivates a causal hypothesis for a particular form of ethnogenesis—a sure sign that the definition is useful.

B. Ethnies are not religions

The English category RELIGION includes a staggering variety of things, from animism (which practitioners perceive as part of their theory of nature, rather than a separate domain), to 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 co-religionists 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 ethnie (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 (1975:113–14) 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: only if the analytic definition of ethnîe that I have proposed were valid would scholars argue that Jews are not a good example of an ethnîe on the grounds that one can apparently gain membership by means *other* than descent.

Similarly, scholars on the other side who argue that Jews *are* genuinely an ethnîe are using the very same definition, and once again the evidence comes from how they defend their position. Their argument is that those descended from a Jewish mother will be considered Jews even if agnostic or atheist. These scholars will also point out that converted 'Jews' tend not to be considered 'real' Jews (though they may be accepted as practitioners of the Judaic faith), because the descent criterion is paramount. 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 1990:17)

"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 (1988:81-83)

Thought experiments can help test our intuitions here. 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 Jew, there is a second question: if our protagonist should, after some time, become an atheist, would he still be a Jew? No. Yet an atheist with a Jewish mother will be considered a Jew by both Jews and Gentiles. And such are the reasons why so many scholars insist that Jews are an ethnîe despite the fact that what distinguishes Jews culturally is principally their religion.

Even for non-believing Jews, the Judaic faith is their culture, and it is their culture *by birth*. Consider the following:

"...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 1963:140-142)

"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.* 1997:303)

The last point demonstrates that the Jewish religion is always the focus of cultural distinctiveness even when its claims are not believed! It is this thoroughly cultural and thoroughly descent-based identification that makes Jews an *ethnie* for so many scholars, and it is this that prompts their need to distinguish Jewish ethnicity from belief in the Judaic faith. All of which suggests, of course, that explicitly or implicitly they are using the definition of ‘*ethnie*’ that I am explicitly defending here.

Finally, Jews have traditionally maintained relatively strong normative endogamy, and it is based on descent rather than on religious confession. To give a particularly telling example, Ara (1992:224) notes, in a study of the 19th c. Jews of Trieste, that one of the things that made them endure as a self-identifying group was the fact that even Jewish converts to Catholicism preferred to marry Jews. If this sort of thing is what makes scholars more likely to consider Jews an *ethnie*, they agree with my definition.

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.

C. Ethnies are not tribes

Why is a tribe not an *ethnie*? There is a long history of abusing the term ‘tribe.’ Smith (1986:21) 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, 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).⁶ 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 ethnic 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,

⁶ 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 they call the sociopolitical entities *within* sub-Saharan ethnies? *Tribes!* (cf. Connor 1994:107-108).

members of a tribe are usually coethnics, but that is because tribes are typically smaller than ethnies. Whereas the first connotation of tribe is sociopolitical (tribes can in fact be multi-ethnic; e.g. Barth 1956, 1963) for an ethnie the first connotation is cultural. This of course brings us back to a crucial distinction: political units do not quintessentially require membership by descent. Naturally, in the case of an ethnie small enough to organize itself entirely under one chief, the tribe is coextensive with the ethnie, and for such a collection of people the terms may be used interchangeably—but this is a special case that proves the rule.

D. Ethnies are not races

This distinction is a tricky one, and for this reason it has to be made explicit with particular care. I borrow here from an earlier paper of mine (Gil-White 2001).

‘Race’ in the technical sense. To the biologist a race is a *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 of a morphological or genetic discontinuity. In fact, there simply *are* no human races in the technical, biological sense (see (Boyd & Silk 2000:481, 540-552; Brown & Armelagos 2001).

The lay category of ‘race’. This is a category of people made on the basis of morphological features—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. It seems that lay categories of race are much more than just phenotypic categories with explanatory or predictive beliefs attached; the people who use them think they are looking at biologically meaningful groupings. That is, laypeople appear to consider their categories of race as ‘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 suggest this is so, and also that the intuitions which are commonly recruited to give sharp phenotypic contrasts an essentialized and naturalized representation are active at a very young age and may even be innate.

‘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 ‘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 possible also that laypeople reify their ethnic categories as natural, biological cuts of humanity endowed with transmittable ‘essences’—that is, they may thoroughly racialize them. I think this is likely.

In this section the relevant borderline case to consider is when members of an ethnief abandon normative endogamy, for this challenges the ideological claim of self-sufficient reproduction that is the basis for the false intuition that ethnief are biological units. 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 that 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 ethnief. For example, some worry this is happening to American Jews despite the (admittedly weakened) rule of matrilineal descent (Dershowitz 1997; Abrams 1997). Such processes may merge two intermarrying ethnief into a new ethnic identity. Several ethnief 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]: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*. Any reader not satisfied that it passes the test should discard it, but this is the arena and method in which such decisions should be made.

However—and this is very important—if my definition of ‘ethnief’ 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 ‘ethnief,’ 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. Perhaps this scholar is looking at an example of ethnogenesis, or ethnic dissolution, or something else entirely. Whatever the case, what we mean by ethnief is what we mean by ethnief. Period. Finding an example of something that *isn't* an ethnief cannot change the meaning of the word. (After all, we have other words, and if we are lacking some we can make them up; there is absolutely no shame in not being an ethnief, and every human collectivity should be addressed by its proper name; cf. Gil-White 1999:804-808).

Staying with the example, something one *could* do is to say that the Fs, thought by some to be an ethnief (if this was the case), are not really such, or at the very least not a very good example of one—and the case could be made by pointing out that Fs don't believe descent is necessary for being F. 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 (1999:348) 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 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 (1968:389)

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 though common descent or origin...—Nagata (1981:98-99)

. . .[ethnic groups] are social phenomena which call upon primordial sentiments and bonds based upon common ancestry.—Bonacich (1980)

. . .ethnie. . .human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories, and cultures, having an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity.—Smith (1986:32)

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 (1994:83-84; 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 (1999:355-356)

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? 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 (1996:15, 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.⁷ The alleged ‘primordialists/essentialists’ scholars, as represented by their self-declared opponents, do not really exist.⁸

That is, they do not exist among scholars of ethnicity, but they certainly do exist among ordinary laypeople (see Gil-White 1999 and 2001a 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 ethnie, 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.’*⁹

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

⁷ Except in works such as Jon Entine’s *Taboo: Why black athletes dominate sports and why we are afraid to talk about it*. But Entine is neither a scholar nor a scientist, and his book is a string of incoherencies. For a review of this book that exposes how little Entine understands of the science he claims to be reviewing for the lay reader, see [\(include link!\)](#)

⁸ 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.

⁹ Brubaker, Loveman, & Stamatov (2002) remark on the stagnation of constructivist theory as follows: “That race, ethnicity, and nationhood are constructed is a commonplace observation; *how* they are constructed, however, is often unspecified, or at best only vaguely suggested. The term ‘social construction’ might be taken to suggest a ‘bottom-up’ concern with mechanisms, building blocks, nuts and bolts (Elster 1989); but in fact constructionist analyses seldom address in detail the micro-mechanisms through which ‘identity’ or ‘race’ or ‘ethnicity’ is constructed.”

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]:93)

...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]:75)

I will argue below against Connor's practice of referring to ethnies as 'nations'—even when discussing nationalism. But disregarding for the moment this terminological difference, notice how the quotation makes clear that those who take the descent criterion seriously tend to say exactly what they mean: it is *the members of an ethnie* who consider descent crucial for membership, 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!—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: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 primarily 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 1992:6). I ignore the first because I hardly see it; even in allegedly quintessential examples of it the romance of ethnicity creeps in considerably.¹⁰ 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.

¹⁰ Notice, for example, how the United States was described in the Federalist Papers: “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.” (Madison et al. 1987: 91)

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—more so than any competitor in the field; 2) his usage of various terms has been a considerable improvement over how others in his field write and speak; and 3) he has been influential. Thus, by criticizing how Walker Connor uses key terms, and suggesting improvements, 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]: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 a usually largish category often comprising *several* distinct ethnies which are the product of fission from what was once a likely 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 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. Notice 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.” So, for Connor, people can have *either* a village, clan, or tribe identity, *or else* a cultural identity, becoming a ‘nation’ only if the former identities are given up for the latter. This appears to assume that identities are mutually exclusive—unstackable hats that cannot be worn simultaneously. Perhaps what Connor means is that, in nationalism, ethnicity displaces whatever identity previously occupied the privileged spot as the most legitimate locus for political activity (and that status surely *is* mutually exclusive with other identities). But, even so, what Connor misses is that one can have a political identity at the village level and a merely cultural one at the ethnic level—identities need not all be 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 is a mere allegation by members; e.g. Moerman 1968). Anthropologists thus maintain that if people are not conscious of belonging to an ethnie, then there *is* no ethnie.

Connor’s isolation from these terminological distinctions leads to his infelicitous terminology, which in turn causes him to misread Max Weber. He quotes the following passage from the German sociologist (Connor 1994[1978]: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 (1968:923)

Notice that Weber is making *the exact same distinction* between cultural identity and political mobilization that I am defending here, but Connor reads the passage very differently. For him, the fact that these Poles did not yet have a nationalist project is automatically evidence that they were not ethnically self-aware! About the above passage, Connor says:

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”? I hardly think so. Weber explicitly refers to their ethnic identity. What these Poles didn’t have 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, they knew themselves to be Poles, but they had yet to reach the ‘conclusion’ that this was in 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]:93-94)

Notice what is conceded in this example (which Connor likes so much he has reused it; 1994[1993]: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 previously was 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, 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]: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’ 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]:211-226). Such scientifically useless talk is best left to the politicians, as Brubaker (1996:16) 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 the argument when he argues that *ethnies* 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 (Boyd & Silk 2000:481, 540-552; Brown & Armelagos 2001). This fiction informs every racial categorization at some level, because the categories are falsely assumed by ordinary people to correspond to ‘natural’ boundaries. This point is often repeated; what is often 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 alleged ‘race’—whether or not they allege biological causation—are meaningless.¹¹

Ethnicity is different. Since Barth (1969) there is 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 have no material substance (cf. Barth 1994).

Barth taught us that “[ethnic] boundaries are basically psychological in nature...” (De Vos 1995:16). Thus, 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’ (because it is nations that are deserving) even before his coethnics are all kindled by his prophetic assertion. 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, by contrast, do require psychological identity as a prior. So ethnies are of a different order of reality than races and nations—in the case of ethnies, it is psychological identity that determines whether they exist.

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’ (1996:16-22). 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 ethnie 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. Period.

¹¹ 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: [give link](#).

Why 'ethnie' and not 'ethnic group'?

I believe the term 'ethnic group'—despite being perfectly widespread—should be abandoned wholesale.

The intuitions and connotations of 'group' are well-reflected in the emergence of 'small-group research' in psychology (see Homans 1968:259), 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 (1968:265)

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 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 direct tests 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 and Turner 1979)—*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 if (1) we label such abstract categories ‘groups’; (2) we call the practically uninterpretable result ‘in-group favoritism’; and (3) 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)

The studies which Horowitz (1985) refers to are none other than these ‘minimal group’ experiments.¹²

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, 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 develops more easily than between others.

The ‘minimal group’ results don’t seem to generalize at all. 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 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-

¹² Horowitz (1999:347), speaking of ethnic conflict, observes correctly that “...there are bite-sized pieces into which ethnic conflict can be sliced. There is no a priori reason to swallow it whole.” But an identical argument applies to person categories: there is no a priori reason to assume that a single cognitive mechanism handles them all, and much obvious evidence to suggest otherwise.

White 2002b; 2002d). 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 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.

‘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 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. 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.’¹³

¹³ 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.

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 (1999:353)

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 us to choose the wrong payoff matrix to describe the phenomena we study. Fearon and 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, 2002c; Nave 2000; McElreath, Boyd & Richerson 2002). 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: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.

Ethnicity is not 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]: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]:74-75)

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

I naturally agree that ethnic ideology requires descent for membership. And I also concur that we should investigate how this makes ethnicity different from other identities—and in particular how it assists political mobilization (Gil-White 1999, 2001a, 2002c). But I believe the premise of both Horowitz and Connor is wrong: ethnicity is not a kinship affiliation. My reasons are several.

First, though two persons linked by kinship will share a common ancestor,¹⁴ 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 1979:151), 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 1976:205)

¹⁴ 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.

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, 2002a). That is, the cognitive processes which humans use to reason about species categories are essentially the same ones deployed when reasoning about ethnies. This explains the common elision between the terms ‘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 the 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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