

# Narratives of Ethnic Identity, Migration and Politics

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## A Multidisciplinary Perspective

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Eds. Monika Banaś and Mariusz Dzięglewski



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# **Narratives of Ethnic Identity, Migration and Politics**

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*Eds. Monika Banaś and Mariusz Dzięglewski*



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Ewa Popielarz  
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Proofreading:  
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Layout:  
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**KSIĘGARNIA AKADEMICKA**  
ul. św. Anny 6, 31-008 Kraków  
tel./faks: 012 431-27-43, 012 663-11-67  
e-mail: akademicka@akademicka.pl

Online bookstore:  
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# Preface

## Ethnicity – an Ambiguous Concrete Term?

Ethnicity is a term that covers in itself many meanings and provides at the same time reasons for lively discussions, fierce disputes, extensive debates and continuous theoretical deliberations. This ambiguity, or more precisely equivocality, is a derivative of a multitude of attempts to define this phenomenon, made, inter alia, by sociologists, anthropologists of culture, cultural experts, philosophers or political scientists.<sup>1</sup>

Ethnicity, as a conceptual category developed by representatives of various scientific disciplines, refers to extensive and complex sets of social and psychological phenomena that take place both in the public and private spheres. On the one hand, it is a very useful analytical instrument, yet, on the other hand, it is a set of features of individuals and communities that can be practically distinguished and that create individual and collective identity, on the basis of such attributes as e.g. language, origin, race, culture or multigenerational traditions. The foundations of ethnicity are very often rooted in deep primordial, conscious elements that constitute a bond based on a real or symbolic relationship, in which individuals that create a community express their belief and approval. A territorial, temporary, historical, ideological or even – when observing current times – economical component very often appears among these elements. The classical presentation<sup>2</sup> of ethnicity is no longer sufficient to describe phenomena that we observe today; it requires supplementation – a subsequent extension of the limits of this concept that is originally associated with a private, almost intimate sphere of consciousness that gives meaning to the life of an individual and a sense of belonging to a community. Ethnicity was initially understood as being related to a top-down, natural (and not acquired by choice) entitlement to be a community member. If a choice was made, it was the privilege of a community to accept an individual into its circle, exclude a person or refuse to accept him or her. While looking from such perspective at the concept of ethnicity, the key element of identity and of belonging form a set of features that

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<sup>1</sup> *Ethnicity. Theory and Experience*, ed. by D. Moynihan, N. Glazer, Cambridge 1975, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Compare e.g.: S. Ossowski, *Analiza socjologiczna pojęcia ojczyzny*, in: idem, *Z zagadnień psychologii społecznej*, Warszawa 1967, *Dziela*, vol. 3.

are related to origin. Three pairs of elements of a person's heritage create this set: biological and genetic as well as cultural and social, approved and supported by individuals who belong to the same group. Common cultural codes are shaped in the space formulated in such a way, under the influence of ethnicity that constitute the basic integration mechanism in the internalization processes of values and group standards.

The concept that is considered here, as we notice, can cover rich varieties of content in itself, full of signs, metaphors and symbols that hide many layers of meaning whose adequate interpretation and operationalization requires advanced cultural competences that are acquired, above all, by long-term acquisition of experience of the same material and symbolic-mythological space. However, two other cognitive perspectives also occur simultaneously next to a so “fundamentalistically” perceived primordial ethnicity. One of them treats ethnicity as a dynamic construct that is mainly shaped by historical circumstances, so by events that do not belong to the set of so called natural factors. In this case ethnicity becomes an element that is acquired and formed with the important participation of external entities, e.g. other groups or societies. An example of an ethnic awareness that emerged in such a way, arising as a protest response against British domination was (Northern-) American identification, that left a place in itself for “component” ethnicities that were represented by ethnic groups, which create the society of the future United States. Defining the boundaries of an ethnic group, according to Fredrick Barth, is a basic principle that regulates not only the process of reinforcing collective and individual identity, but also the shaping of relationships with the environment.<sup>3</sup>

This “constructivist” concept is in opposition to the first of the enlisted ones, creating at the same time with the third type of understanding ethnicity as a strategy of reaching goals, both political, economical and social. “Instrumental” ethnicity constitutes a reservoir of valuable (in the sense of usability) instruments used to acquire supporters for lobbying definite contents and securing community interests or those, which are defined as communal by the elites.<sup>4</sup> Examples of ethnicity perceived in such a way can be found in many societies, which lets us draw the conclusion that texts about ethnicity are very often and willingly used as instruments for building and strengthening one's own position. John and Jean Comaroff write about it in their work entitled „Etniczność sp. z o.o.”;<sup>5</sup> a catchphrase that encapsulates a lot of this idea's meaning. The authors provide not only examples of tribes and indigenous people of Africa, Australia and Latin America, but also of Europe, in which, inter alia, Welshness, Scottishness or Catalonianness provide a kind of an ethno-strategy, as

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<sup>3</sup> F. Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, Boston [1969].

<sup>4</sup> Compare: M. Banaś, *Etniczność na sprzedaż*, Kraków 2005; J.L. Comaroff, J. Comaroff, *Etniczność sp. z o.o.*, Kraków 2011; A.D. Smith, *Etniczne źródła narodów*, transl. by M. Głowacka-Grajper, Kraków 2009, especially pp. 11-16, Seria Cultura.

<sup>5</sup> J.L. Comaroff, J. Comaroff, *Etniczność...*

well as something like an ethno-product or ethno-brand.<sup>6</sup> As we notice, ethnicity itself can become a strategy to create a market in its literal meaning; it can also become a product that is sought out for, valuable good, which enables one to fulfill one's economic plans. Examples of this can be found in Indian reservations that run casinos, Namibian villages that sell original products of local craftsmanship, in the Tucharars-Caatani societies that certify shamans' services, or in Saams that have a trademark reserved for their *duodji* products.<sup>7</sup>

The definitional structure of ethnicity being more and more complicated and developed, questions are raised about its validity, especially in light of the following statement:

(...) ethnicity is neither a monolithic "thing", nor an analytical construct in and for itself – it should be understood as a loose, impermanent set of signs that serves to create and communicate relations that mediate to give sense to collective awareness, cultural similarity, this being a point of reference that gives meaning to common emotional conduct.<sup>8</sup>

Such a formulation of ethnicity contrasts with the much simpler understanding of it which does not, however, lose any of its topicality. This narrow, particular interpretation treats ethnicity as a kind of a bond of a communal nature, one which is contrasted with national or state solidarity. However, an ethnic bond is interpreted as an attribute of groups based on a belief in a common origin, which contains in itself an element of tribalism, an identity, based on systems of relationships of firstly, an actual and secondly, a symbolic nature. It has an impact on the perception of ethnicity in the evaluative manner, as the type of (self) group identification that is oriented towards "we" – one's own community – understood in positive categories.<sup>9</sup>

According to Nathan Glazer ethnicity and race constitute a part of a broader family of social identities – the family that also includes religious beliefs or language groups and can be defined by common – real or mythical – heritage, history and experiences.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, ethnicity constitutes a type of cultural "capital"<sup>11</sup> – a great potential asset that can be used both on the level of direct interactions and in the broader structural dimension. This potential – when skillfully used- enables a group

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 25-31, 44-51, 151-161.

<sup>7</sup> Compare: *ibidem*, pp. 82, 160-161; L. Mróz, *Tuchararzy-caatani dzisiaj. Dialog kultur czy rewitalizacja tożsamości?*, in: *Dialog na pograniczach kultur i cywilizacji*, ed. by T. Paleczny, M. Banaś, Kraków 2009, p. 178; M. Banaś, *Samów gry i zabawy*, „Zabawy i Zabawki” 2008, No. 1-4, p. 189.

<sup>8</sup> J.L. Comaroff, J. Comaroff, *Etniczność...*, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> M. Starniawski, *Odrębność rasowa jako kategoria strukturalno-polityczna*, „Przegląd Polonijny” 2000, No. 4, p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> N. Glazer, *Blacks and Ethnic Groups. The Difference and the Political Difference it Makes*, “Social Problems” 1971, Vol. 18, p. 447.

<sup>11</sup> Cultural features are typically related to *ethnicity* – according to Pierre van den Berghe, yet “racial” physical features are subjectively perceived by a group and/or people around it.

to establish collective identification insists the fulfillment of the economic and social interests of the group.<sup>7</sup>

While considering the problem of ethnicity it should be remembered that ethnicity does not exist by itself, but only in relation to another ethnicity (here: community). This notion is explained by Jarosław Rokicki in the following way: “In the light of such an interpretation (...) Poles are not an ethnic group in Poland, but they become one in for example the United States.”<sup>8</sup> The definitions of ethnicity that have been evoked so far present three main ways of interpreting this concept indicating to:

- as a group with diversified character of social bonds: natural, organizational, symbolic
- as a type of group identification; this identification can take a visible form at the level of social awareness.
- as social movements – group activities are motivated by the conviction a community has, of belonging to a definite group.

Rokicki asserts after Comaroff that “ethnicity” can be perceived as *an object* of analysis that is something which requires explanation or as a *principle* that serves to explain phenomena which constitute a part of human existence. Therefore, in one case ethnicity is the object of our observation, while in the other case – it is a way of explaining observed social phenomena. The alone-mentioned John Comaroff considers ethnicity to be a qualifying principle, according to which a group distinguishes “its members” from “strangers”. Such an understanding of ethnicity makes from it an element of collective awareness, a criterion of group divisions and at the same time

(...) an indicator of hierarchies of social groups within a homogenous political organism. That is why ethnicity is a feature of a community that defines its status [highlighting M.B.] of this community. Belonging to a given ethnic category, in the same way as in the case of belonging to a given race, defines the chances people have of access to economical goods, power, social and cultural goods that are so limited.

V. Isajiwa, one of the co-authors of the introduction to *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, indicates that the key attributes of ethnicity are the following:<sup>12</sup>

- common national or geographical origin or common ancestors,
- common culture, customs, religion, language,
- common racial and physical features,
- awareness of “we” type (should be supplemented here by the following statement: awareness of identity from other “Others” [comment made by M.B.]),
- sense of belonging to a group and the loyalty that results,
- domination of social bonds of *Gemeinschaft* type (in contrast to *Gessellschaft* [supplement M.B.]),

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<sup>12</sup> V. Isajiwa, *Definition of ethnicity*, „Ethnicity” 1974, No. 1, pp. 111-124, cit. after: J. Rokicki, *Rasa i etniczność...*, p. 34.

Ethnicity, as a conceptual category developed by representatives of various scientific disciplines, refers to extensive and complex sets of social and psychological phenomena that take place both in the public and private spheres. On the one hand, it is a very useful analytical instrument, yet, on the other hand, it is a set of features of individuals and communities that can be practically distinguished and that create individual and collective identity, on the basis of such attributes as e.g. language, origin, race, culture or multigenerational traditions. The foundations of ethnicity are very often rooted in deep primordial, conscious elements that constitute a bond based on a real or symbolic relationship, in which individuals that create a community express their belief and approval. A territorial, temporary, historical, ideological or even – when observing current times – economical component very often appears among these elements. The classical presentation of ethnicity is no longer sufficient to describe phenomena that we observe today; it requires supplementation – a subsequent extension of the limits of this concept that is originally associated with a private, almost intimate sphere of consciousness that gives meaning to the life of an individual and a sense of belonging to a community.

from the *Preface*



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