

Ethnic Group

An ethnic group is a human group or type of human group, the members of which present common characteristics, these varying considerably from one author to another, but they are, generally speaking, sought among somatic characteristics, and increasingly among behaviours and cultural factors. Ethnic groups are also characterised by the fact that their size is between the small group, such as the family, and entities of large size such as nations.

"Ethnic" is one of the many qualifiers for a human group, or type of human group. Beyond this very general characteristic, the specific features required to make up the definition show some consensus, as remarked above, but they are nevertheless diverse and unstable, so that the use of the term has been the subject of debate and controversy. It can even be thought that the weight of this debate is part of the very definition of an ethnic group. Nevertheless, a certain number of connotations can be pinpointed and retained as essential on account of the frequency of their association with the term in the literature. There is today a marked trend of refusing the definition of an ethnic group in terms of biological or "phenotypical" features of the individuals it comprises, thus clearly distinguishing the notion of the ethnic group from that of "race", despite the fact that numerous ambiguities remain, a point that we will return to below. Thus it is on the side of values and representations that factors of cohesion and ethnic belonging are sought: a common culture, a linguistic community, and more generally a feeling of belonging. This belonging is frequently sought in the past, by reference to a common history, mythical or otherwise. Generally speaking, belonging to an ethnic group does not arise from individual choice, it is imposed by others. As is remarked by Gavan Trevoux, "ethnic identity is not a matter of choice, but ascribed by others, within and without the ethnic group". The respective weights of this imposition from "within" and "without" are important elements in the meaning, and even the definition itself, of the ethnic group. The existence of cases where imposition from without is preponderant, if not the sole factor, leads to the notion of the "ascribed" (or prescriptive) ethnic group. Ethnic identity in this case is something to which individuals are "subjected", a quality that is assigned to them.

From the point of view of size, the ethnic group is generally considered to be fairly large, in particular well above the size of a group formed by "real" family or blood relationships. Thus it differs, by way of a minimum size definition, from groups such as the family, the extended family, the clan or even the tribe. If it may happen that certain ethnic groups see themselves as blood relations, it is most often by reference to a mythical, distant ancestor enabling the definition of a lineage involving sufficient numbers. The maximum size is less clear cut, since the phrase can be applied to very large groups, for instance the "Latino" populations in the United States.

It appears that the reference to a shared space or "territory" in the strict meaning of the word is less frequently associated with the definition of the ethnic group in the literature than are the other characteristics. A large part of the literature has tended, and still tends to restrict the term "ethnic group" to characteristic groups in non-European societies, sometimes with qualifiers that may be pejorative, such as "primitive". This practice is related both to the history of disciplines such as ethnology, and to a recourse to etymology: in Greek, *ethnos* refers to a people, or human group, but early on it came to be used to refer to groups felt to be "other". Ecclesiastical texts used it for the Pagans, and the resurrection of the term by Vacher de Lapouge in the 1890s in France was accompanied by a "semantic shift of the nouns previously used: nation is now restricted to the "civilised" states of the West, a people (people), seen as the subject of a historic destiny, is too noble for savages" so that the term ethnic group (*ethnie*) refers to "a sort of second-rate nation" (Bonte P & Izard M, 1991).

The notion of the ethnic group appears as possessing rather paradoxical status in the present day: it is widely used, and at the same time the object of very severe criticism. (As humorously remarked by the author of a note on the ethnic group published by the association Geza Roheim, "there is no such thing as an ethnic group, but there are a lot of them" (Geza Roheim, 2003).

The notion of the ethnic group is debated, or indeed rejected, along several lines of argument. One argument rejects, quite simply and even outright, the use of this notion on account of the fact that it carried a weighty heritage, that of the practice of using the term as a substitute for the notion of race. It is true that numerous groups, in particular in Africa, referred to as "races" were later referred to in terms of "ethnic group" when the word "race" came into disrepute, both on account of the use made of it in the mid-20th century, and on account of the progress of genetics, which showed that it was impossible to apply the concept to the species *homo sapiens*. Numerous authors, because they view the term "ethnic group" as merely the "politically correct" version of "race", reject its use.

A more complex criticism is based on actually disputing the reality of any "ethnic groups" in the societies in which they have most

frequently been distinguished, such as tropical Africa. For authors behind this argument, ethnic groups are very often "colonial inventions" that we owe to administrators, missionaries, and also researchers in certain periods and from certain schools of thought. This position does however require a degree of refinement, as is the case with Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, who recognises, for ethnic groups, the existence of roots that provide them with a certain degree of reality: "Over some twenty years, researchers have popularised the notion of the "ethnic invention". It is of course less of an invention than a conversion, for two reasons: on the colonial side the concern was to fix the populations. Thus linear boundaries were plotted, circumscriptions were delineated, roughly on the basis of the previous ethnic spaces... Thus the differentiations were systematised, seeking at the same time, of course, to divide in order to reign; on the African side the endeavour was to resist the colonial intrusion. Hence what could be more natural, more visceral, than referring back to their own past, its history, and in effect to the ethnic group and its mythical representations?" (Coquery-Vidrovitch C, 2000).

Despite the criticism of which it is the object – sometimes to the extent that it might even be considered as a form of taboo - the term "ethnic group" is still widely used. This is true both in the French literature for the term *ethnie*, and in English, where ethnic group and ethnicity are widely used. The survival of the term is partly the result of efforts that have been made to present a concept that takes account of the fluidity and the dynamics of the reality under study, as for F.Barth: "Instead of [viewing] the ethnic group as a human isolate handing down cultural elements unchangingly over generations, it can be considered that ethnic distinctions are based on and sustained by interrelationships and exclusion or inclusion mechanisms defining "borders" or boundaries" (Barth F, 1995).

But all in all, perhaps the vitality of this controversial term should be seen as something quite simple: the existence of human groups that are larger than the most extended families, based on shared behaviours and representations, and on self-recognition (rather than recognition by others), is something that can be clearly seen in reality. These groups therefore need to be named. Despite the weight of certain inheritances or marks of history, and the excesses that this may generate, the term ethnic group offers a convenient means to do this. Nevertheless extreme caution is required in the use of the term.

See also: segregation, "discontinuity"

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