

## Unit 24

# Boundaries and Boundary Maintenance

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### Contents

- 24.1 Introduction
- 24.2 Definitions of Ethnic Group
- 24.3 Frederik Barth—Ethnic Group and Boundaries
- 24.4 Ascription as the Critical Factor
- 24.5 Poly-ethnic Societies
- 24.6 Melting Pot and Beyond
- 24.7 Critique of Barth's Model
- 24.8 Conclusion
- 24.9 References

### Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you will be able to

- give definitions of ethnicity
- discuss ethnic group and boundaries
- analyse polyethnic societies
- describe the “melting pot” theory

## 24.1 Introduction

In the previous two lessons we talked about conceptualising ethnicity and construction of identity. It must be apparent to you by now that the notion of ethnic identity in the globalised world has emerged as the critical concept. It translates itself sometimes as nationalism, on others is responsible for creating sub nationalities within political nation states and determines notions of citizenship. In this lesson we will try and unfold some dimensions of this complex process of Boundaries and boundary maintenance.

## 24.2 Definitions of Ethnic Group

To begin with, we start with some simple definitions of ‘Ethnic Groups’. Macmillan’s *Dictionary of Anthropology* (1986) defines an ‘Ethnic Group’ as:

*Any Group of People who set themselves apart and are set apart from other groups with whom they interact or coexist in terms of some distinctive criterion or criteria which may be linguistic, racial or cultural. The term is thus a very broad one, which has been used to include social CLASSES as well as racial or national minority groups in urban and industrial societies, and also to distinguish different cultural and social groupings among indigenous populations. The concept of ethnic group thus combines both social and cultural criteria, and the study of ethnicity focuses precisely on the interrelation of cultural and social process in the identification of and interaction between such groups.*

Max Weber (1958) defined ‘Ethnic Group’ as:

*Those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or*

*be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists. Ethnic membership (Gemeinsamkeit) differs from the kinship group precisely by being a presumed identity, not a group with concrete social action, like the latter. In our sense, ethnic membership does not constitute a group; it only facilitates group formation of any kind, particularly in the political sphere. On the other hand, it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organised, that inspires belief in common ethnicity. This belief tends to persist even after the disintegration of the political community, unless drastic differences in customs, physical type, or, above all, language exist among its members. ....Groups, in turn, can engender sentiments of likeness which will persist even after their demise and will have an 'ethnic' connotation. The political community in particular can produce such an effect. But most directly, such an effect is created by the language group, which is the bearer of a specific 'cultural possession of the masses' (Massenkulturgut) and makes mutual understanding (verstehen) possible or easier. (Weber, 1958)*

These definitions draw our attention to subsequent boundaries that ethnic groups evolve to form 'enclosures'. These enclosures are not defined by geographical space or political identities but are distinguished by cultural, linguistic or religious connectivity. Fredrik Barth, who can be called as the original author of construction of this notion of boundaries in his famous essay of 1969 titled 'Ethnic groups and Group boundaries' states categorically:

It is clear that boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them. In other words, categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on the absence of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories.

To this he adds another important dimension that we will be debating in this lesson:

*Ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built. Interaction in such a social system does not lead to its liquidation through change and acculturation; cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence (Barth, 1969).*

It is often argued that boundaries are sustained because people remain confined to cultural spaces. Even when they immigrate, they retain their 'cultural stuff' and do not surrender their individual cultural markers. It was with these perceptions that Barth's historic contributions shifted 'focus of investigation from internal constitution and history of separate groups to ethnic boundaries and boundary maintenance'. Before I dwell any further on Barth's contributions in a separate section of this lesson, I want to emphasise that the construction of boundaries as understood in sociological writings is different from the way boundaries were construed by political scientists. Territoriality certainly plays an important role in assertion and reassertion of these diacritic but is not quintessential to the formation of these categories. Political scientists would largely focus on the relationships that different ethnic groups share with the state. Read with care the following paragraph

by Paul Brass— a name to reckon with, in understanding processes of elite formations and development of ethnic identities. Brass is often described as proponent of Instrumentalist school. He writes in his 1991 publication, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*:

*Ethnic identity formation is viewed as a process that involves three sets of struggles. One takes place within the ethnic group itself for control over its material and symbolic resources, which in turn involves defining the group's boundaries and its rules for inclusion and exclusion<sup>2</sup>. The second takes place between ethnic groups as a competition for right, privileges, and available resources. The third takes place between the state and the groups that dominate it, on the one hand, and the populations that inhabit its territory.*

Elaborating on these concerns, Brass poses certain significant questions such as:

Is the study of ethnicity a sub-branch of interest group politics or of class analysis or a separate subject in its own right? Or, to put it another way, are interest groups, classes and ethnic groups to be treated as analytically separable and coequivalent or is one or another category primary?

Brass also has definite opinion about sociological analysis of ethnicity and boundary maintenance. In his critical comments, he asserts:

*Most sociological theories that are relevant to a discussion of ethnic groups and the state focus on society as a whole and take as their main theoretical issue the conditions for conflict or cohesion, national integration or internal war and treat the societal units-interest groups, classes, or ethnic groups—as givens rather than as objects for examination themselves. Too often neglected is the issue of how identity and cohesion within groups are formed and maintained in the first place, how political mobilisation of groups occurs, and how and why both group cohesion and mobilisation often decline. (Brass, 1985).*

Given these deliberations, one may argue that ethnic identities are political positions, acquired and assumed through processes of cultural articulation and re-enforced through repetitive calls to threat to survival of these identities. They are primordial in the sense that people may be born as Hindus, Muslims, Jew, Whites or blacks. But assertion of these inherited categories of identification is dependent on situations in which individuals are involved and what kinds of advantages they perceive for itself in the given circumstances. One must also remember that these categories of ascription are also negotiable. Boundaries that an individual draws are always in inter-active situations. Boundaries are never drawn in social isolation. It is often my boundary versus your line of demarcation. The process remains the same irrespective of the fact whether it is a situation involving two individuals or ethnic groups. Even when dialogue is pursued or positions of confrontation adopted within the construct of a nation state, ethnic groups often assume categories in which those in power are perceived to be as status groups in control, thus different and domineering. Construction of situations of minority-majority conflicts, religious or linguistic conflicts or regional disparities are all construed in a patterned manner.

It is also interesting to underscore the fact that ethnicity is relative. In the context of maintenance of *boundaries* between various groups, Jenkins

notes '*ethnicity* shifting with the contexts of its mobilisation' and reasons that '*ethnicity* is a function of inter-group relations; in the absence of such relations and their concomitant group boundaries *ethnicity* is unthinkable' (1997:90-91). The positions that are taken by Brass, Barth and Jenkins *ethnicity* becomes a resource that is encashed, manipulated, negotiated both with and between groups. But when it comes to talking about boundary maintenance, we tend to focus on inter-group constructions and how identity is manipulated within groups for assertion of differences.

### 24.3 Frederik Barth—Ethnic Group and Boundaries

Before, I dwell any further on the notion of manipulation and instrumentalities of maintaining ethnic group boundaries; it is essential to repeat some of assertions made in the seminal essay by Barth. To begin with, the definition of ethnic group as given by Narroll (1964) and described as an ideal type definition that essentially reviews ethnic group being viewed as =race=a culture=language=society is repeated:

- ethnic group is largely biologically self-perpetuating (Primordial)
- shares fundamental cultural values, realised in overt unity in cultural forms
- make up a field of communication and interaction
- has a membership, which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order.

Barth's discomfort with this definition emanates from his position that 'it allows us to assume that *boundary maintenance is unproblematic* and follows from the isolation, which the itemised characteristics imply: racial difference, cultural difference, social separation and language barriers, and spontaneous and organised enmity'. Elucidating his point of view, Barth further asserts in the same paragraph:

This also limits the range of factors that we use to explain cultural diversity: we are led to imagine each group developing its cultural and social form in relative isolation, mainly in response to local ecologic factors, through a history of adaptation by invention and selective borrowing. This history has produced world of separate peoples, each with their culture and each organised in a society, which can legitimately be isolated for description as an island itself.

#### Reflection and Action 24.1

Outline Barth's position on boundary maintenance, and then discuss its various aspects.

Barth in his analysis prefers to look at sharing of these important attributes not as being primacy or definitional attribute but as 'implied' or 'resultant'. These attributes may be examined as repositories for 're-inventing' oneself and not necessarily as morphological attributes for establishing group identities within contained geographical spaces. People may move away, yet retain some if not all of their core cultural attributes. They may also live at the same place but modify some of their cultural traits for ecological adjustments or for social adaptation without allowing their sense of belonging to their specific cultural group being invaded in any form. In Barth's own terms:

It is thus inadequate to regard overt institutional forms as constituting the cultural features, which at any time distinguish ethnic group – these overt forms are determined by ecology as well as by transmitted culture. Nor can it be claimed that every such diversification within a group represents a first step in the direction of subdivision and multiplication of units. We have also known documented cases of one ethnic group, also at a relatively simple level of economic organisation, occupying several different ecologic niches and yet retaining basic cultural and ethnic unity over long periods (cf; e.g., inland and coastal Chukchee (Bogoras, 1904-9) or reindeer, river, and coast Lapps (Gjessing, 1954; Barth, 1969).

After asserting importance of retaining cultural features, and their importance as building blocks of 'identity formations' within ethnic groups, Barth highlights the most critical feature of ethnic group formation the fact of 'ascription'.

## 24.4 Ascription as the Critical Factor

Ethnic groups are recognised as status categories. Within these categories it is crucial that members of these groups ascribe themselves to these formations and their membership is so recognised by the others. Processes of interaction are thus determined by this concept of belongingness, which is not only attributed by the self to the group but is also recognised by the others. Denial of this ascription is problematic for the survival of the individual in a group and that of group in any inter-ethnic situation. Cultural emblems like dress, dialect, symbols play a significant role in the assertion of ascription. Emphasising the criterion of ascription, Barth(1969) states:

When defined as an ascriptive and exclusive group, the nature of continuity of ethnic units is clear: it depends on the maintenance of boundary. The cultural features that signal the boundary may change, and the cultural characteristics of the members may likewise be transformed, indeed, even the organisation formation the group may change-yet the fact of continuing dichotomisation between members and outsiders allows us to specify the nature of continuity, and investigate the changing cultural form and content.

### Box 24.1: Investigating Ethnic Boundaries

Barth argues that for researching that he terms 'investigating', the 'ethnic boundary' that defines the group becomes critical for analysis and not the 'cultural stuff' that comprises the group. This is a position that is confronted by various scholars in particular by Jenkins. The 'cultural stuff' in Barth's definition comprises of language, religion, laws, traditions, customs-infect all the attributes that Tylor addressed in his famous definition of culture. This definition of 'ethnic group' is said to be in direct line with the contention of ethnic group' held by Max Weber-as defined in the beginning of this lesson. According to Jenkins this argument is partly justified and should remain central to our understanding of ethnicity. But he also believes that if we follow this in letter and spirit, we run the risk of considering 'cultural stuff' as irrelevant to the process of boundary maintenance.

It is actually this 'cultural stuff' that outlines distinctiveness and sustains differentiation. In Jenkins words:

*In insisting that there is no simple equation between seamless tapestry of cultural variation and the discontinuities of ethnic differentiation, it*

*prevents us from mistaking the morphological enumeration of cultural traits for the analysis of ethnicity. However, this argument might also be construed as suggesting that the cultural stuff out of which that differentiation is arbitrarily socially constructed is somehow irrelevant, and this surely cannot be true. For example, a situation in which As and Bs are distinguished, inter alia, by languages that are mutually intelligible for most everyday purposes—as with Danish and Norwegian (These were the communities that Jenkins was analysing for constructing his model of ethnicity)—would seem to differ greatly from one in which the languages involved are, as with English and Welsh, utterly different. (1997:107).*

One may infer then that in polyethnic societies, every ethnic group draws boundaries using its 'cultural stuff' as critical in maintaining these cultural, often political and economic categories. Yet, one need not forget that 'boundaries' may persist, even when there is 'little cultural differentiation'. As Sollors would put it:

The cultural content of ethnicity (the stuff which Barth's boundaries enclose) is largely interchangeable and rarely historically authenticated.

## 24.5 Poly-ethnic Societies

Barth in his construction of 'ethnic boundaries' prefers to use the term poly ethnic instead of more commonly used Greco-Roman term 'multi-ethnic'. He takes us back to the work of Furnivall (1944). Furnivall had said that in a plural society -'poly ethnic society integrated in the market place, under the control of a state system dominated by one of the groups, but leaving large areas of cultural diversity in the religious and domestic sectors of activity.....but what has not been appreciated by later anthropologists is the possible variety of sectors of articulation and separation, and the variety of poly-ethnic systems which entails' (ibid,301).

We in India experience these differentiations in our day-to-day activities. India with its diverse populations, regional differences, linguistic pot pourri and multi religious character shares a unique political umbrella. Ethnic differences are articulated and once accompanied by political ambitions often emerge as strong movements. However, what has been remarkable about these articulations is that homogeneity is never perceived as the common plank against which dissidence is to be voiced. These movements may have been symbolic of seeking representations that were largely 'cultural' but were imbued with political meanings- something that Brass like to term as instrumentalities for achieving political ends. Barth (1969) in this regard has opted for a distinct position arguing:

*Nothing can be gained by lumping these various systems (poly-ethnic, multi-cultural systems) under the increasingly vague label of 'plural society'.....*

What can be referred to as articulation and separation on the macro -level corresponds to systematic sets of role constraints on the micro-level. Common to all these systems is the principle that ethnic identity allowed to play, and partners he may choose for different kinds of transactions.

In other words, regarded as a status, ethnic identity is similar to sex and rank, in that it constraints the incumbent in all his activities, not only in some defined social situations. One might thus also say that it is imperative,

in that it cannot be disregarded and temporarily set aside by other definitions of the situation. The constraints on a person's behavior which springs from his ethnic identity thus tend to be absolute and, in complex poly-ethnic societies, quite comprehensive; and the component moral and social conventions are made further resistant to change by being joined in stereotyped clusters as characteristic of one single identity.

#### Box 24.2: The Ethnic Nuclei

It is ironic, that even when we try to deny mostly as a patriotic gesture that we are 'Indians first and foremost and Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs or Punjabis, Bengali, Gujarati etc. later, we do sustain and nurture with enormous amount of jealousy our primary identities and subsequently boundaries associated with these identities.. In an effort to remind ourselves about our sub-conscious or conscious boundaries, we often pay ritualistic tribute to cultural traits that tell us – 'we are different'. It can be dress, pride in our rational food or art form. Each of these is a symbolic and essential attribute to assertion of our status in society that is essentially poly-ethnic. We do this also to reorganize ourselves and to sustain what some authors would like to call the 'ethnic nuclei'.

Barth in his work has categorically stated that it is not only the marginalised or ridiculed in the society, responsible for pronouncing the ethnic boundaries but also all members of an ethnic groups in a poly ethnic society can act to maintain dichotomies and differences—sometimes as in the case of Bourne making what one may believe sound intellectual statements.

## 24.6 Melting Pot and Beyond

It was submersion of individual ethnic nuclei in a larger, somewhat abstract perception of 'national identity' that dominated ethnic debates in America in the post world war II period. A debate that assumed in the light of statements made by Bourne that America was emerging as near perfect example of a 'melting pot of races' - an institution in which all races, groups coming from various parts of the world to settle in America melt their boundaries in a common pot of 'American National Identity' -the trans national Identity.

Milton Gordon (1964) in his book *Assimilation in American Life* made sustained effort to distinguish pluralism from assimilations. The concept of Melting pot implied assimilation at the expense of individual communities forgoing their individual identities and evolving the nationalistic 'American individual'. The concept of 'Melting pot' rooted in notions of 'Anglo-conformity' 'demanded the complete renunciation of the immigrant's ancestral culture in favour of the behaviour and values of the Anglo-Saxon core group', according to Gordon.

#### Reflection and Action 24.2

Explain the concept of the "melting pot" theory. Put your answer down in your diary.

Newman has evolved a formula to explain this when he suggests that  $A+B+C=A$ . In this case A is the dominant culture and others are expected to submerge their differences in this encompassing identity. This may also imply that  $A+B+C=D$ , that is, different cultures when put together in a Melting pot give up their individual identities to evolve a different identity that is common

to all and symbolises the citizen in a democratic state. Werner Sollors in the following discussion elaborates on some components of this debate among the students deliberating on notions of ethnicity and boundary maintenance in America:

*In common usage, 'melting pot' could stand for both these concepts. The resulting ambiguity -did melting pot translate into  $A+B+C=D$  or into  $A+B+C=A$  further contributed to make this image the perfect fall guy in maddeningly circular debate about ethnicity. As 'D' it could be denounced from boundary -constructing ethnic point of view. If the remainder of commitments to what Orlando Patterson has referred to as 'the universal culture' made this position embarrassing, the 'A': melting pot or amalgamation was denounced as a mere smoke screen for Anglo-Saxon conformity (or, in a variant, for racism). The most persistent rhetorical feature of American discussions of the melting pot is therefore contradictory rejection that asserts ethnicity against  $A+B+C=D$  and then recoils to defend universalism against  $A+B+C=A$ . 'Refuting' the melting pot-an activity American writers and scholars never seem to cease finding delight in (some studies have termed these debates as mushrooming of an anti melting pot industry)—allows us to have the ethnic cake and eat universalism, and to denounce universalism as a veiled form of 'Anglo-conformity' at the same time.*

Inherent in these debates is the suggestion that cultures do not have temperatures and predicting their malleability beyond a point where they lose both form and content is a mere figment of imagination. In other words the industry that grew up denouncing an ephemeral notion of melting pot simply suggests that come what may, 'boundaries somehow sustain themselves' and thus acquire significant dimensions in any study of ethnic groups.

## 24.7 Critique of Barth's Model

There is no denying that Barth's model offers interesting insights into processes of cultural configurations and their perseverance, irrespective of forces demanding change and continuous pressures of accommodation. To argue that there is no structure or to put it in Sollors words 'there is no emperor, there are only clothes', is a proposition that some scholars find difficult to comprehend. In his comments on Barth's study of Swat Pathan, Louis Dumont offers a subtle statement: 'The main thing is to *understand*, and therefore ideas and values can not be separated from "structure".

Jenkins and Abner Cohen find Barth's arguments restrictive. In their opinion Barth fails to incorporate dynamic nature of ethnicity in his efforts to evolve a model of 'enclosures' defined by 'self ascriptive boundaries'. Cohen's logic is: (Barth's) *separation between 'vessel' and 'content' makes it difficult to appreciate the dynamic nature of ethnicity. It also assumes an inflexible structure of the human psyche and implicitly denies that personality is an open system given to modifications through continual socialization under changing socio-cultural conditions.*

Talal Asad (1972) in his work 'Market Model, Class Structure and Consent: A Reconsideration of Swat Political Organisation' want to maintain Boundaries' places Barth in Hobbesian tradition.



### Box 24.3: Boundary Maintenance

Common arguments found in the literature that can be decoded as critique of Barth's model take the course that 'Barth's theory leaves us guessing about the reasons why people want to maintain boundaries. Is it a primordial trait according to which human beings want to distance themselves from others, create and maintain boundaries, even when the area that is enclosed by these boundaries appears to be, at least from a structural view, identical?' (Sollors, 1981). Or to put it in the words of Joshua A. Fishman-'If there can be no heartland without boundaries, however distant they may be, there can be no boundaries unless there is a heartland'.

#### a) Sustenance of Boundaries

Critique notwithstanding, there is evidence to suggest that ethnic groups sustain boundaries and retain identity markers to distinguish categories of ascription. We will briefly review some factors that support this process of boundary sustenance. It is understandable that under different circumstances, critical factors sustaining definitions and boundaries are likely to be different. A crucial factor that impacts is the element of security. Barth argues:

In most political regimes, however, where there is less security and people live under a greater threat of arbitrariness and violence outside their primary community, the insecurity itself acts as a constraint on inter-ethnic contacts.

This sense of insecurity promotes a sense of enclosure within the community and results in hardening of boundaries vis-a-vis other groups. It may further be added that if there are historical and cultural factors that purport differences, the pace at which boundaries are sustained may be accentuated. Essays listed in Barth's edited volume showed that in each case boundaries were maintained by a limited set of cultural features. It may also be remembered that 'the persistence of the unit then depends on the persistence of these cultural differentiae'. Barth in his concluding remarks posits:

However, most of the cultural matter that at any time is associated with a human population is not constrained by this boundary; it can vary, be learnt, and change without any critical relation to the boundary maintenance of the ethnic group through time, one is not simultaneously, in the same sense, tracing the history of 'a culture': the elements of the present culture of that ethnic group have not sprung from the particular set that constituted the group's culture at a previous time, whereas the group has a continual organisational existence with boundaries (criteria of membership) that despite modifications have marked off a continuing unit.

Within the precepts of notions of Nation-state, the Majority-Minority situations further the process of ethnic distancing and segment boundaries. Minority situations are often under pressure for fear of rejection by the host population.

As an epilogue to these three chapters on *ethnicity, Identity and Boundary maintenance*, and to provide a perspective on how relevant these *concepts, constructions and Boundaries* are for understanding contemporary political and social realities; a section on Nationalism, Citizenship and boundaries is incorporated.

## 24.8 Conclusion

'Nationalism is the political doctrine which holds that humanity can be divided into separate, discrete units-nations-and that each nation should constitute a separate political unit-a state. The claim to nationhood usually invokes the idea of a group of people with a shared culture, often a shared language, sometimes a shared religion, and usually but not always a shared history; to this it adds the political claim that this group of people should, by rights, rule themselves or be ruled by people of the same kind (nation, ethnicity, language, religion etc.)'(Jonathan Spencer, 2002). This conception assumes nations to be homogenous following classical precepts of ethnographic explorations that argued that 'people can be classified as belonging to discrete, bounded cultures or societies'. The construct of a Poly-ethnic society comes loaded with notions of multiple nationalities that are bounded to each other by a common perception of loyalty, while retaining distinct boundaries that do not disturb the precinct of internationally accepted territoriality.

Some recent studies on the subject attempt to study the 'nation-state from the point of view of modern ethnicity theory..... equating regional politics=ethnicity=building blocks of new nations in the post 1947 era, as "self consciousness of a group of people united or closely related, by shared experiences such as language, religious belief, common heritage or political institutions". Increasingly, it is now being perceived that the notion of sovereign nation-state and an over arching concern with one's own nationalism is instrumental in generating violence within the confines of 'legitimate perceptions' of protection of defined national/ethnic boundaries. If people in Kashmir, Bodoland or other parts of the Indian Nation state are fighting for the protection of their perceived boundaries the 'armed forces' are struggling to keep 'national boundaries' intact.

'Ethnicity emerges out of the cusp between the relation between the *citizen* and those officially defined as *outsider*, *stranger* or *Marginal*. But, it emerges not purely from the logic of citizenship and development, but from the structure of electoral logic, from the normalcy of Majority-Minority politics' (Visvanathan, 2003).

The world today is witnessing upheavals often rooted in notions of 'self'. I am referring back to first and second lesson talking about how individuals perceive and construct 'identity' and its collective translation into 'ethnicity'. We often come across essays on 'resurgence or revival of ethnicity' and how in the context of 'nation-state', these constructions pose problems of 'instability'. I am not making any efforts in these concluding remarks to answer any queries that may trouble your mind as you try and understand these complex processes affecting our lives. I am closing these lessons by repeating some questions that social scientists often pose to themselves and to fellow students to get closer to empirical processes that are unfolding before us.

By the sixteenth century.....the word nation expanded to include a people, a population. National identity now derived from membership in a people and finally nation referred to a "unique people" or a "unique sovereign people". And it is the trajectory of definitions that became problematic. The nation, instead of being an open category, threatens to become an exclusionary

process. The seeds of ambivalence and violence are rooted here and it steps from

- The idea of citizenship as a static entity
- The problematic nature of identity
- The positivism between territory and a people and the fixity of boundaries
- *The genocidal nature of the exclusionary process.*

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