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**How (not) to think about
ethnicity in immigrant societies:
A boundary making perspective**

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Abstract

Since its beginnings in the Chicago school, migration research has assumed that distinguishing between various immigrant communities and autochthons is the obvious starting point for understanding ethnicity. I show that this implies a Herderian perspective on the world which naturalizes its division into a series of distinct “peoples”. Three major analytical and empirical problems of this approach are discussed, on the basis of comparative anthropological research. A more promising approach is the boundary-making perspective that looks at the dynamics of the emergence and transformation of ethnic groups. Seen from this perspective, “assimilation” and “integration” appear as reversible, power-driven processes of boundary shifting, rather than the result of overcoming cultural difference and social distance. The last section discusses four research designs that are most adequate for future work along these lines. They take territories, individuals, social classes, institutional fields or event chains instead of ethnic communities as units of analysis and observation.

Key words:

Ethnicity, assimilation, boundary-making, Herder, group formation

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How not to think about ethnicity¹

In the eyes of 18th century philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, the social world was populated by a multitude of nations and ethnic groups, analogous to the species of the natural world. Rather than dividing humanity into “races” depending on physical appearance and innate character (Herder 1968:179) or ranking peoples on the basis of their civilizational achievements (*ibid.*:207; 227), as was common in the French and British traditions of the time, Herder insisted that each nation represented one distinctive manifestation of a shared human capacity for cultivation (*Bildung*) (e.g. *ibid.*:226). In the naturalist language of the times, he stated that

if each of these nations had remained in its place, one could have perceived the world as a garden, where this human nation-plant flourished here and another one there, each following its own *Bildung* and nature (Herder 1968:326).

Ethnies and nations represent the main actors on the stages of Herder’s world history, which is therefore a tale of their emergence and decline, their migrations and adaptations to local habitat, but also their mutual displacement, conquest, and subjugation. According to the Herderian tradition of thought, *ethnies* and nations are total social phenomena, constituted by three isomorphous aspects. First, they form communities held together by close ties among their members (cf. *ibid.*:407), thus representing what the founder of romantic political theory, Adam Müller, later called a “*Volksgemeinschaft*”. Secondly, they represent identities formed around a sense of shared destiny and historical continuity (*ibid.*:325). Identification with, and being categorized as member of, an ethnic community coincide in an unproblematic way. And finally, each ethnic culture and language enshrined a unique world view, the “*Genius eines Volkes*” in Herderian language (cf. *ibid.*:234). The boundaries of society, the horizon of identity, and the realms of shared culture thus coincided. Community, ethnic category/identity, and culture became synonymous.

The social sciences have largely inherited this Herderian view and have taken ethnic groups and nations to be the constituent parts of human society. Is this because the human brain is hard-wired to perceive ethnic or national groups in analogous terms to species in

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the natural world, as some anthropologists and psychologist have argued recently (Hirschfeld 1996; Gil-White 2001)? Or is it because nationalism has become the most powerful political ideology of the modern world, shaping both the political landscape *and* the categorical lenses through which we observe it (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002)? Whatever the answer, is it remarkable that more demanding social science approaches that analytically distinguish between community, ethnic category, and culture, had little influence on mainstream social science. This is illustrated by the fate of Max Weber's brilliant analysis of race, ethnicity, and nationhood that he scattered over several chapters of *Economy and Society* (Weber 1978a: 385-398, 922-926). It had little impact on mainstream social sciences until they were re-discovered half a century later.

Herder's heritage in immigration research

Herderianism continues to be well represented in the landscape of contemporary research, including much research in the field of migration and immigrant integration, as this section will show (drawing on Wimmer 1996). The classic assimilation paradigm in migration studies, which has experienced an extraordinary revival both in the US and in Europe (Alba and Nee 1997; Esser 2006), also assumes that the boundaries of culture, category/identity, and community coincide in an unproblematic way. The units of analysis are communities of immigrants from a particular country of origin who make their way into the social mainstream. At the end of the process, the communities are dissolved through intermarriage and spatial dispersion, minority cultures are diluted through processes of acculturation, and ethnic identities become ever thinner until all that remains is what Herbert Gans has famously called "symbolic ethnicity" (Gans 1979). The more sophisticated versions of assimilation theory, including the original typology developed by Gordon, did indeed analytically distinguish between the social, the cultural, and matters of social classification and identity and posited that assimilation proceeded with different speed on these parallel pathways (Gordon 1964). However, by taking ethnic groups as units of analysis and by assuming their bounded and coherent character during the first stages of the process, Gordon nevertheless continued to think within a Herderian framework.

This also holds true for the "new" versions of assimilation theory that revised some of the assumptions of "old" assimilation theory, most importantly the conviction that all roads should and will lead, in the end, to the mainstream. Westport and Gordon even believed, it may be recalled, that the black population in the United States would follow the

assimilatory pathways that voluntary migrants from Europe had presaged. Newer versions of assimilation theory foresee different possible end results of the process, including persistent non-assimilation of immigrant communities. In “segmented assimilation theory” (Portes and Zhou 1993), the most prominent neo-assimilationist approach, what is “segmented” are the pathways of immigrant incorporation (confusingly still called “assimilation”). Two new outcomes are added to the tableau. First, ethnic communities/identities/cultures may persist over time and allow individuals to achieve upward social mobility without having to develop social ties with mainstreamers, without having to acculturate to mainstream culture, and without necessarily identifying with the national majority. Besides this ethnic enclave mode of immigrant incorporation, there is a “downward assimilation” path where immigrants develop social ties with, identify with, and acculturate to the black segment of American society, rather than the “white mainstream”. As this short characterization makes clear, however, the basic analytical scheme of “old” assimilation theory is maintained: It is ethnic communities/cultures/categories conceived as a Herderian whole that move along the three possible paths of assimilation, and it is ethnic communities/cultures/categories that end up either in the mainstream, the ethnic enclave, or the stigmatized world of black America.

Socio-psychological research that derived from the anthropological branch of the Chicago school has developed into similar directions. John W. Berry’s well-known typology of “acculturation” strategies distinguished between assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization (Berry 1980). Despite the distinct individualistic language that often characterizes work in this tradition, the basic dimensions are nevertheless defined in collectivistic terms and refer to group-level processes. The typology is based on the distinction between culture and community. Assimilation can proceed on one, both, or none of these two dimensions, producing the following four-fold typology. Social and cultural assimilation combined produces “assimilation”, social assimilation combined with cultural retention is “integration”, cultural non-assimilation together with social non-assimilation receives the “separation” label (the ethnic enclave mode), while both cultural assimilation together with social non-assimilation is “marginality” (equivalent to “downward assimilation”). While this scheme certainly represents an advantage over straight-line assimilationism, it nevertheless remains tied to the same basic outlook on the social world. It is made up of different kinds of peoples, each characterized by a unique culture and, at least initially, a separate social universe.

Assimilation theory's nemesis, multi-culturalism or "retentionism" in Herbert Gans' terms (Gans 1997), leads back to full-blown Herderianism. Multi-culturalism postulates that even across generations, such cultures, identities and communities remain vital, viable, and visible. Contrary to classic assimilation theory, it conceives such ethnic persistence as highly desirable and does not believe that the compartmentalization of society into a series of ethnic enclaves represents an obstacle to the social mobility of immigrants or the social cohesion of the society at large. Normative positions (that "cultures and communities" should be maintained) often trumps over empirical questions (whether they actually *are* maintained) (cf. Waldron 1995). If they are *not* maintained and therefore "lost" to assimilation, it is because these cultures/communities/identities have been suppressed and not given public recognition by the dominant community, otherwise they *would* have been maintained. Thus, even if such cultures and communities no longer exist, they still provide the framework through which multi-culturalists observe the world (see e.g. Modood Forthcoming).

A similarly straightforward Herderianism dominates much of ethnic studies at American universities. Most scholars working in these fields assume the givenness of ethnic categorizations, the integrity and coherence of ethnic cultures, and the boundedness of ethnic communities. Without such assumptions, the very principle of constituting "Asian American Studies", "Native American Studies", "Chicano Studies", "African-American Studies" as separate social science disciplines each focused on a clearly identifiable object of analysis would be questionable. These disciplines thus resemble, in design if not in actual research practice, the history and folklore departments of recently founded nation-states which were documenting their people's history of oppression and eventual liberation from foreign domination, their people's cultural uniqueness and civilizational achievements, and so forth (on the nationalist foundations of ethnic studies, see Espiritu 1999:511; Telles and Ortiz Forthcoming, chapter 4; for a textbook representing this perspective, see Aguirre and Turner 2007). US-style ethnic studies have had, for better or for worse, quite some impact on the research scene in Europe, especially in Great Britain (Banton 2003).

Some more recent approaches have criticized both assimilationism and multi-culturalism but remain so closely tied to it that they mirror their basic view on the social world even in an apparent gesture of rejection. Such is the case in the recent wave of research on creolization (Palmie 2006), hybridity (Bhabha 1995; Werbner and Modood 1997) or multiple identities, much of which is coined in a cultural studies language. The

biological metaphor of hybridity assumes that a new species is born out of the crossing of two already existing species. While the hybrid culture remains open to both parent cultures and is thus less bounded and restricted than the original ones, the world remains populated by groups, hybrid and others, that are defined by their distinguishable cultural features, their separate identities, and their communitarian character (cf. Caglar 1997; a similar critique of the “multiple identities” school is offered by Anthias 2002).²

The literature on transnationalism (Glick Schiller *et al.* 1995; Vertovec 1999; Portes 2001) suffers from similar problems. It has greatly helped to overcome another feature of Herderianism that I have not discussed so far: the idea that each ethnic or national group occupies a specific territory, the cornerstone of the nationalist variants of this tradition of thinking. Transnationalism showed that some ethnic groups, particularly migrant communities but also long established diasporas, actually live in various places at the same time. They thus seem to traverse the grid of nation-states. Still, the world is made up by clearly demarcated communities of identity and shared culture, albeit now including some deterritorialized communities stretching over several nation-states.

Three problems with the orthodox approach

The Herderian view has not only influenced the way the social sciences portray immigrant societies, but even more so how lay members of society talk about and perceive the social world they inhabit. Common-sense concepts of society and professional social science discourse reinforce and complement each other nicely—which adds to the plausibility of both and assures that sociologists of immigration have an audience in the wider public, such as when they warn of the decline of the “assimilation capacity” of the new immigrants (Portes and Rumbaut 2001), the increasing “cultural distance” between autochthons and *Ausländer* (Hoffmann-Nowotny 1992), demand recognition of the culture of immigrant communities (Wieworka 1996), and so forth. However, the prize for such cohabitation with common sense is analytical fuzziness, as will be shown in this section. A breach with common sense might make it more difficult to convey sociological insights *tel quel* to the wider audience, but it may make these insights more powerful. Would the

² The same could be said about the “mixed race” scholarship and activism in the United States, which mostly sees peoples of mixed background as constituting yet another, separate “race”, not unlike the racial thinking in late colonial Mexico, which described the various mixtures of peoples each producing a separate “casta” with a distinguishable character and social status.

Darwinian-Mandelian synthesis in post-War biology ever have emerged if lay concepts of how humans came into the world were not overcome?

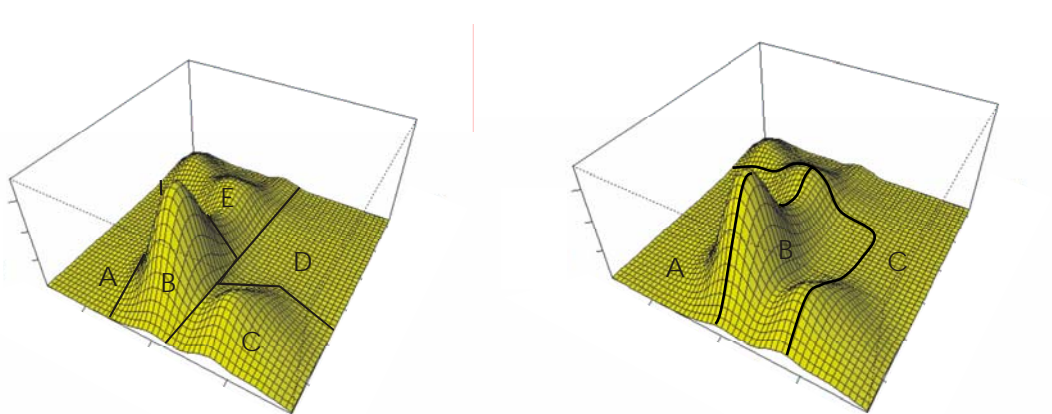
The comparative literature on ethnicity offers an important starting point for a more distanced and analytically more precise understanding of the empirical issues that immigration research has been struggling with. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of these insights have been gained in anthropology, where identification and familiarity with the lay concepts cannot be taken for granted and where, perhaps more importantly, the researcher might encounter societies that have not (yet) adopted Herderian (or proto-nationalist) modes of classification. Three insights from this research tradition are especially relevant for research on immigrant integration,³ and they all point towards the problematic nature of assuming the equivalence of culture, community, and ethnic category. I will discuss these three points subsequently.

The Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth was first to question the assumption that culture and ethnic category map onto each other in an unproblematic way (Barth 1969). Let me illustrate Barth's view with the following two graphs (figure 1). The left hand side model represents the Herderian orthodoxy, according to which ethnic groups simply reflect the landscape of cultural difference and social connectedness. The more similar two persons are in terms of culture, here described as a three-dimensional space (perhaps representing similarities and differences in terms of language, degrees of religiosity, and gender relations), the more likely they are belonging to the same ethnic category. Barth showed in a collection of ethnographic essays, that in many cases across the world this is actually not the case (see the right hand side model). Rather, ethnic distinctions resulted from marking and maintaining a *boundary* irrespective of cultural differences as observed by the outside anthropologist, and despite the flow of cultural traits, individuals and social relationships across the boundary.

³ On anthropology and immigration research see also Vertovec (Forthcoming).

Figure 1

A Herderian and a Barthian world



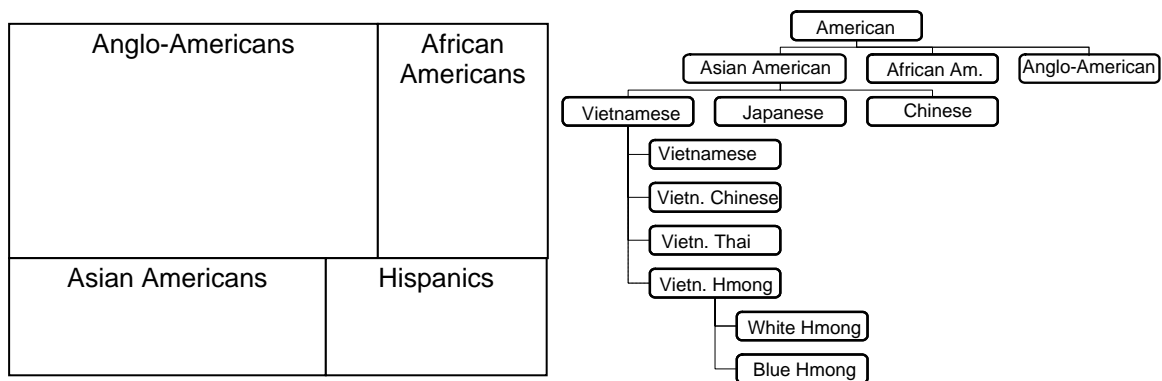
Barth's boundary approach thus implied a paradigm shift in the anthropological study of ethnicity: researchers would no longer study "the culture" of ethnic group A or B, but rather how the ethnic boundaries between A and B were inscribed onto a landscape of continuous cultural transitions and uninterrupted social relationships. As a corollary, the definition of what constitutes ethnicity changed: it was no longer synonymous with objectively-defined cultures, but rather referred to the subjective ways how actors *perceived* cultural difference. Ethnicity is thus a matter of social categorization (and identification), rather than a feature of the cultural world itself. This brings us back to the one author Barth never cites: Max Weber and his definition of ethnicity as a "subjektives Zugehörigkeitsgefühl" (a subjective sense of belonging), expressed in the idea (not necessarily the fact) of shared culture, common history, or phenotypical similarity (Weber 1978b).

To put it briefly, the Weberian/Barthian tradition has shown us that ethnic categories/identities should be distinguished from cultures. Another branch of anthropological thinking, starting from Moerman (Moerman 1965) and leading up to the so-called situationalist school (Nagata 1974; Okamura 1981), demonstrated that ethnic communities should also be distinguished from identities/categories and should not be treated as homologous and co-extensive aspects of social reality. The Herderian view, by contrast, assumes that a "Volksgemeinschaft" is always held together by a "Volksgeist", or to use more contemporary language, that ethnic communities correspond to ethnic identities and categories.

However, many examples show that ethnic categories and identities may be of a relational nature⁴ and produce a hierarchy of nested segments, as the Figure 2 illustrates. It refers to the range of possible categories that a person of Hmong origin living in Southern California may identify or be associated with (see the right hand model). The Hmong represent a small tribal group that stood out for their loyalty to American troops during the Vietnam war and were thus granted collective asylum. In opposition to a white Hmong, she would identify as a Blue Hmong. If she encounters a Chinese from Vietnam, her Hmong identity would be the most salient. If she meets an African American, she would be Asian American, and so on.

Figure 2

A Herderian and a Moermanian view on American ethnicity



Not all of these levels of categorical differentiation, however, are socially relevant. Only few can be described, in sociological terms, as corresponding to anything that resembles a community. Community and ethnic categories are to be analyzed in separate terms and should not be conflated. This does not imply that there are no systematic relationships between the two, quite to the contrary. An interesting range of hypothesis comes to mind that specify this relationship. One might for example assume that the fault lines in the categorical system of ethnic classifications that do correspond to a community with dense networks of social interactions are more important for structuring life courses and personal identities than others (Modood Forthcoming). But one might also assume that politics, rather than the everyday web of social relations most powerfully structure these

⁴ Keyes (1976); Jenkins (1997); Burgess (1983); Okamura (1981); Waters (1990:52-58); Okamoto (2003); Brubaker (2004, chapter 2).

identities and life courses. After September 11, to give an example, the American vs. Non-American level of identification was much more salient and important than all the other subdivisions (Collins 2004). Finally, one might also find that those levels of ethnic differentiation along which individuals experience racial discrimination are the most relevant for the formation of identities (Bonilla-Silva 1996). Whatever the empirical answer to this question, it seems clear that distinguishing between community and category is necessary in order to even ask it in the first place.

A third important insight that has not yet been fully assimilated into mainstream migration research is the fact that identification with a category and categorization by others might not coincide. We may have to distinguish between identity and category. This insight has slowly grown over the past two decades. Important contributions were Richard Jenkins' discussion of the Janus-faced nature of ethnicity: it operates both as a category of self-ascription and categorization by others, and the two do not necessarily overlap (Jenkins 1997). To give an example, one might see oneself primarily as Vietnamese American, while mainstream Anglos will lump all individuals of East Asian descent into the category "Asian" (cf. Kibria 2002).

Jenkins calls categories of identification "ethnic groups", while categories imposed by outsiders remain just that: "ethnic categories". This terminological choice might be more confusing than illuminating because self-categorization and categorization by others are processes of a similar nature, albeit with potentially different outcome. But the general point that Jenkins makes is valid: That ethnic categories might be contested rather than universally agreed upon and that contestation is part of the broader struggle over power and prestige, the legitimacy of certain forms of exclusion over others, of discriminating against certain types of people and favoring others.

This point has later also been raised by scholars using Bourdieusian language. They described processes of ethnic categorization as part of the politico-symbolic struggle between different "visions of the legitimate divisions" of the social world (Wacquant 1997; Loveman 1997; Brubaker 2004, chapter 1; Wimmer 1995). Individuals and groups struggle over who should be allowed to categorize, which categories are to be used, which meanings they should imply, and what consequences they should entail. Contrary to the Herderian view, which assumes that ethnic groups provide a quasi-natural horizon of identity to all human beings, this school of thought describes ethnicity as classificatory practice: an attempt to make one's own view of who belongs and who does not generally accepted and

consequential for everyday life. The outcome of these classificatory struggles is principally open. In some cases, it leads to widely shared and taken for granted ethnic distinctions with only minimal space for individual re-interpretation, disidentification and boundary crossings (such as in Northern Ireland: Wright 1987; among Mongolian herders: Gil-White 1999). In other cases, no consensus over where the boundaries between ethnic groups lie has emerged, and individuals vary dramatically in their views on the social universe and their own place within it (on Brazil: Harris 1970; Ghana: Sanjek 1981; Northern Thailand: Moerman 1965). It is in such situations that the Herderian perspective collapses completely: Unable to identify which the “ethnic groups” are that make up a society, the researcher shares the confusion of his informants.

In summary, the Herderian school of thinking collapses ethnic identities, categories, communities, and cultures into one single social phenomenon and thus lacks the analytical tools to properly understand their interrelationship: that ethnic categories may cross-cut groups of shared culture, while the boundaries between them are marked with cultural diacritica; that ethnic categories are relational and segmentary in nature and that therefore not all correspond to communities held together by dense webs of social ties; that ethnic categories may be contested rather than uniformly agreed upon, and that ethnicity therefore is the result of classificatory struggles rather than a given division of the human population that both researchers and members of society simply describe.

However, this threefold revision of the Herderian notion of ethnicity does not imply that ethnic categories *always* and *necessarily* cross-cut zones of shared culture; some ethnic categories *do* correspond to communities of bounded social interaction; and some ethnic categories are *not* contested, as mentioned above, but widely agreed upon. In other words, some peoples in some places do indeed live in a world that comes close to the Herderian ideal. This does not, however, represent a problem for the approach advocated here, quite to the contrary: A Herderian world might very well be the outcome of the classificatory struggles and become stabilized and institutionalized over time.

As the anthropological record shows, however, this represents only one possible outcome of the process of ethnic group formation. In other instances, the process leads to Barthian/Moermanian/Bourdiesian worlds. Furthermore, the historical perspective reveals that Herderian worlds can transform themselves into Barthian/Moermanian/Bourdiesian ones and the other way round: culturally “thin” (Barthian), segmentally differentiated (Moermanian), and contested (Bourdiesian) systems of ethnic classification may transform

into culturally thick, undifferentiated and largely agreed upon systems *à la* Herder. Compare the situation in South-Western Darfur in the mid sixties, when “non-Arabic”, peasant Fur clans were crossing the boundary into the “Arabic”, sheep-herding Baggara ethnic category (Haaland 1969), with the situation today. The conflicts along the “Arabic”-Non-Arabic line—only one of the possible ethnic divisions in a system characterized both by contestation and segmental nesting—have led to a hardening of the boundary and to a de-differentiation of the system of classification (cf. de Waal 2005).

A similar shift to a Herderian world was brought about by the institutionalization of the “one drop rule of blood” to determine who belonged to a clear-cut and undifferentiated “black” category, thus erasing the various “mixed” categories that had existed in the US South before (Lee 1993; Davis 1991). At the same time, life became less Herderian for others: for Jews, Italians and Irish who managed to become accepted as an ethnic sub-category of the “white” category (Saks 1994; Ignatiev 1995), which therefore underwent segmentary differentiation and new internal contestation (how “mainstream” are Jews and Catholics?). Similarly, Polish workers in the coal mining areas of Germany were the object of a policy of Germanization and finally became part of a culturally “thick”, undifferentiated Herderian nation, the Germans (Klessman 1978), while a century later cold-war partition and re-unification led to the segmental differentiation of the national category into “Ossis” and “Wessis” (Glaeser 1999). In order to understand such processes of ethnic change, of the formation, transformation, and dissolution of ethnic boundaries over time, we need analytical language that allows us to describe them adequately and precisely.

How to think about ethnicity: The group formation paradigm

Over the past decade or so, a new paradigm has appeared in the social sciences that builds systematically on the contributions from anthropology and comparative ethnicity summarized in the preceding section. I call this the ethnic group formation or, alternatively, the boundary-making paradigm (cf. for the following Wimmer Forthcoming b). It can be characterized by four axiomatic assumptions that derive from the various critiques of the Herderian approach summarized above. First, ethnic groups are seen as the result of a reversible social process of boundary making rather than as given component parts of the social world (constructivist assumption). Secondly, actors mark ethnic boundaries with cultural diacritica they perceive as relevant, such as language or dialect, dress patterns, different family structures, house types, or phenotypical markers such as skin color or facial

features. These diacritica vary from society to society and are not equivalent to the sum of “objective” cultural difference that an outside observer may find (subjectivist assumption). Depending on the type of markers, we may distinguish between ethno-linguistic, ethno-regional, ethno-religious, ethno-cultural, ethno-national and ethno-somatic categories. “Race” and “nation” are considered to be specific outcomes of the more general process of ethnic group formation, rather than ontologically separate phenomena following a distinct social logic.

Third, ethnic boundaries result from actions of individuals on *both* sides of the boundary and from their interactions *across* the boundary. Ethnic groups therefore do not grow naturally from the social cohesion between individuals that share culture and origin, but result from acts of social distancing and closure *vis-à-vis* members of *other* categories (interactionist assumption). Consequently, privileging co-ethnics and discriminating against ethnic others in the various domains of social life—from making love to making war—represents the basis mechanism in processes of ethnic group formation and stabilization.

Finally, the boundary perspective focuses on processes of group *making*, rather on the geometry of group *relations*, as for example in the US and British “race relations” approach (Niemonen 1997). To put it differently, it implies that the *formation* and *transformation* of ethnic groups is what should be at the centre of our attention, rather than to look at how stable ethnic entities enter into variable relations with each other (processualist assumption). To be sure, this processualist understanding does not imply that all categories and groups are constantly changing, varying from situation to situation according to how manipulative actors see fit, as the more exaggerated versions of the constructivist paradigm assume. The boundary-making approach should also be able to analyze the emergence and the conditions of reproduction of historically stable and situationally less varied boundaries that leave little room for individual manipulation.

The boundary-making approach has recently gained some ground in migration research (Alba 2005, Zolberg and Woon 1999, Waldinger 2003b, Waldinger Forthcoming, Bommers 1999) and others, including myself, have used the boundary making language to review central issues of the field. While there are many differences in theoretical orientation of these authors, and even some quite substantial and explicit disagreement between them, their analysis nevertheless proceeds along similar ways. While it is too early to offer a review of the substantive empirical results that this emerging tradition has produced, we can describe in how far it differs from the standard approach in immigration research. I will do

so in five movements, each building upon the previous one and leading from basic theoretical issue of how to conceive the object of inquiry to the bread-and-butter question of choosing an adequate research design.

Making immigrants and nationals

The boundary-making approach denaturalizes the distinction between immigrants minorities and national majorities on which the field of immigration research is based. The consequences are twofold. First, a comparative perspective forces itself on the observer because it becomes obvious that the boundary between immigrants and nationals displays varying properties: who is counted as an immigrant (including second and third generations), and who is not varies from country to country and from situation to situation. The enormous difficulties that cross-national researchers have in finding comparable data in nationally generated statistics testifies to this variation (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik 2003). Are French settlers who return from Algeria immigrants? Are *Aussiedler* immigrants or returning nationals? Are third and fourth generation immigrants still counted as minorities, as long as they are not “fully integrated” (as in the Netherlands), or are they disappearing from the screen of official statistics and thus also largely from social science analysis (as in France), or are they sorted into racial categories depending on the color of their skin as in the United States?

The distinction between immigrants and nationals varies because it is part and parcel of different definitions of where the boundaries of the nation are drawn (Brubaker 1992).⁵ The definition of the nation’s boundaries may change over time because nation-building is an ongoing process undergoing revisions and reversals, as the recent wave of introduction of dual nationality laws in many countries, the abandonment of white preference immigration policies in the US, Canada and Australia or the recent shift to a partial *ius sanguinis* in Germany illustrate (cf. the rather optimistic assessment of such changes by Joppke 2005). From a boundary making perspective, therefore, the division between nationals and immigrants is part of the ongoing process of nation-building and needs to be studied rather than taken for granted if we are to adequately understand the dynamics of immigrant incorporation.

⁵ The comparative literature that illustrates these points is quite substantial. See, among others, Bleich (2004); Janmaat (2006); Kastoryano (2002); Lentin (2004); Muro and Quiroga (2005); Phalet and Oerkény (2001); Sniderman *et al.* (2000); Szoke (1992); Triandafyllidou (2001); Wieworka (1994); Zapata-Barrero (2003).

This leads us to the second consequence of the de-naturalization of the immigrant-national distinction. While migration appears from the mainstream point of view as a straightforward demographic process (individuals “moving” across countries), the boundary-making approach reveals the political nature of the process. “Immigration” only emerges as a distinct phenomenon and political problem to be “managed” once a state apparatus emerges that assigns individuals passports and thus membership in national communities (Torpey 1999), that polices the territorial boundaries, and that has the administrative and political capacity to distinguish between desirable and undesirable immigrants (Wimmer 1998).

Focusing on the politically constituted nature of the immigrant-national distinction also helps to broaden the perspective and to connect migration studies to other topics and fields. More specifically, it reveals that the creation and subsequent transformation of the immigrant category goes hand in hand with the making of domestic ethnic minorities (black Americans, Quebecois, Irish, etc.) during the process of nation-state formation. They represent different aspects of the definition of the national core group, in the name of which modern nation-states govern, and the demarcation of its boundaries towards ethnic minorities and immigrant groups. Both are seen and treated as human beings with a less dignified culture, and a problematic relationship to the state, and thus less qualified to enjoy the rights of citizenship (Wimmer 2002). Assimilation theory, both old and new, as well as multiculturalism do not ask about this historical genesis and subsequent transfiguration of the immigrant-national distinction, but take it as a given feature of the social world too obvious to need any explanation (cf. Waldinger 2003a). Thus, the social forces that produce the very phenomenon that migration research is studying and that give it a specific, distinct form in each society vanish from sight.

Making nationals out of immigrants: Rethinking assimilation as boundary shifting

De-naturalizing the distinction between nationals and immigrants and treating it as the product of a reversible and historically specific process of nation-building also opens up a new perspective on the old questions of immigrant “assimilation” and “integration”. Zolberg and Woon (1999) and Alba and Nee (2003) were the first to re-define assimilation as a process of boundary shifting: groups that were formerly treated as aliens or “immigrant minorities” are now treated as full members of the nation. This again represents a genuinely political process, rather than the quasi-natural outcome of decreasing cultural difference and social distance as assimilation theory has it. Following the interactionist axiom discussed

above, boundary shifting also depends on the acceptance by the majority population with a privileged relationship to the state and the power to police the borders of the nation. Boundary shifting thus needs to overcome existing modes of social closure which denied membership status to outsiders and reinforced the boundaries between majorities and minorities. Classic assimilation (and some strands of neo-assimilationism) takes it for granted that such acceptance is entirely dependent on degrees of cultural assimilation and social interaction, of “them” becoming and behaving like “us”. The boundary-making perspective allows us to overcome this Herderian paradigm and to look at the processes of closure and opening that determine where the boundaries of belonging are drawn in the social landscape. Let me briefly illustrate the fruitfulness of this approach by taking the United States immigration history as an example.

Boundary shifting proceeded along different lines, depending on whether or not immigrants were treated as potential members of a nation defined, up to the First World War, in racialized terms as consisting of white, protestant peoples of European descent standing in opposition to descendents of African slaves (cf. Kaufman 2004). While British, Scandinavian and German immigrants thus indeed were accepted and crossed the boundary into the mainstream contingent on cultural assimilation and social association alone, Southern European Catholics, Irish Catholics, and Eastern European Jews had to do more boundary work to achieve the same. They were originally classified and treated as not-quite “white” enough to be dignified with full membership status. Italians (Orsi 1992), Jews (Saks 1994), and Irish (Ignatiev 1995) thus struggled to dissociate themselves from African Americans, refrain from intermarriage and intermingling in shared neighborhoods, and thus prove worthy of being accepted as “white” mainstream.

Similar processes can be observed in later periods. Loewen provides a fascinating account of how Chinese immigrants in the Mississippi delta, who were originally assigned to, and treated as members of the “colored” caste, managed to cross the boundary and become an acceptable non-black ethnic group admitted to white schools and neighborhoods (Loewen 1971). They did so by severing their ties with black clients and expelling Chinese who had intermarried with blacks from their community. In other words, they recreated the racial lines of closure that are constitutive of the American definition of the nation. Similarly, contemporary middle-class immigrants from the Caribbean and their children are struggling to distance themselves from the African American community in order to prove their worth in the eyes of the majority (Waters 1999; Woldemikael 1989).

Similarly in continental Europe, old established immigrants from the guest-worker period dissociate themselves, sometimes even more vehemently than autochthons, from the recently arrived refugees from former Yugoslavia and Turkey, by emphasizing exactly those features of these groups that must appear as scandalous from the majority's point of view: their "laziness", their religiosity, their lack of decency and capacity to "fit in" the tightly organized world of working class co-operatives and neighborhoods. Guest-worker immigrants are struggling hard not to lose the hard won capital of "normalcy", achieved at the end of a long and painful process of boundary crossing, by being associated with these "unacceptable" foreigners (Wimmer 2004; similarly for London Wallman 1978; and for Cologne Kissler and Eckert 1990).

In these struggles over the boundaries of acceptance and rejection culture does indeed play a role, but not necessarily the role foreseen in classical assimilation theory or in multi-culturalism. Immigrants who struggle to become accepted and cross the boundary into "the mainstream" may aim at selectively acquiring those traits that signal full membership. Which these traits are vary from context to context. Proving one's worth through "hard work", i.e. accepting the jobs that members of the majority have long abandoned, is probably a very widespread strategy that we find in many contexts (cf. Waldinger 2003b). In the United States, sticking to one's religion and ethnicity is an accepted, if not even a required feature of becoming national, while proving one's distance from the commands of Gods and the loyalty of co-ethnics is required in many European societies. The requirements of "language assimilation" also vary, even if the general rule is that the better one speaks the "national" language the easier it is to be accepted (Esser 2006). But while speaking with thick accents and bad grammar is acceptable for many jobs in the United States, as long as the language spoken is meant to be English, is it much less so in France. The variation, again, is explained by different forms and trajectories of nation-building which pinpoints certain cultural features as boundary markers rather than others (Zolberg and Woon 1999). The ethnic group formation perspective thus highlights the selective and varying nature of cultural adoption and emphasizes its role in processes of boundary making.

Classic assimilation theory (and some strands of neo-assimilationism), by contrast, perceives such processes through Herderian lenses. It takes the cultural homogeneity, social closedness, and identitarian unity of "the nation" for granted and looks, from the point of view of this nation, how individuals from "other nations", which are endowed with different cultures, stick together in their own communities, and identify with their home countries,

are gradually absorbed, through a process of becoming similar, into “the mainstream” (Wimmer 1996; Waldinger 2003a). Those who do not become similar remain “unassimilated” and coalesce in ethnic enclaves or descend into the urban underclass (“segmented assimilation”). The power-driven, contested and conflictual nature of the process of “assimilation” thus vanishes from sight. We therefore gain in analytical leverage if we conceive assimilation as a process of boundary shifting which results from the strategic interaction between individual and collective actors, including organizations and individuals belonging to the “national” majority. The focus of analysis thus shifts away from immigrants, their background and behaviors towards the negotiations between immigrants and nationals as well as the various corporate actors, including state agencies, that have a stake in the outcome of these struggles over the boundaries of belonging (cf. Kastoryano 2002).

Ethnic boundaries in institutional fields: A labor market example

How are we to comparatively explain the varying outcomes of these struggles? What are the factors or configurations of conditions that explain why the boundaries shift here while they harden there? Why are certain immigrants included in the national “we” here, but remain excluded there? To the best of my knowledge, there is no theory or model that gives a satisfactory answer to these questions. In what follows, I can only hint at one particular approach which I believe has the potential to develop into such a comparative model, namely an institutionalist, field theoretic approach which lends itself to the study of ethnic group formation (cf. Wimmer Forthcoming-b).

I suggest looking at three elements that structure the struggles over boundaries and influence its outcomes in systematic ways. First, institutional rules (in the broad, neo-institutionalist sense of the term) provide incentives to pursue certain types of boundary-making strategies rather than others. Secondly, the distribution of power between various participants in these struggles influences their capacity to shape the outcome, to have their mode of categorization respected if not accepted, make their strategies of social closure consequential for others, and have their identity be recognized as relevant and worthy of recognition. Networks of political alliances are a third important element to understand the dynamics of ethnic boundary making in various social fields because we expect these boundaries to follow the contours of the political networks. Let me illustrate how such a field-theoretic approach would operate by showing how these three factors influence the dynamics of boundary making in labor markets.

Rather than assuming the ethnic segmentation of labor markets in immigrant societies and looking at which segment has which ethnic character, as in the ethnic niche tradition of research (Waldinger 1994), we have to observe the job trajectories of immigrants both into, but also outside of such niches, compare it to other individuals with other ethnic backgrounds but otherwise similar characteristics, and then determine how far ethnic boundaries channel their opportunities and choices—without taking it for granted and therefore find such effects for all places, all groups, and all times (cf. Rath 2001). The combination of the three factors discussed above determines whether ethnic boundaries with powerful channeling effects do emerge and stabilize.

The starting point would be an analysis of institutional rules. The boundary-making consequences of labor market regimes have received quite some attention recently (e.g. Kogan 2006). It has become clear that there are fewer boundaries against immigrant labor in liberal welfare states with “flexible” labor markets and therefore a stronger demand for unskilled labor, confirming that strong welfare state institutions produce less permeable boundaries against non-national others (Wimmer 1998). The reason being, from an ethnic group formation perspective, that the high degrees of class solidarity and redistribution in welfare states depend on a strong nationalist compact and thus produce high degrees of social closure along national lines. The welfare state tends to come at the price of shutting the doors to outsiders who have not contributed to the making of the social contract and who thus should not be allowed to enjoy its fruits.

Welfare states, on the other hand, allow immigrants to say no to jobs they are forced to take in “liberal” societies that follow the “sink-or-swim” policy regarding immigrant economic survival. This would explain why we find less immigrant entrepreneurship in such societies and generates the hypothesis that immigrants rely less on ethnic networks when finding a job or employing others than they would in “liberal” labor markets (Kloosterman 2000). Ethnic networks and welfare state services might well be substitutes (as argued by Congleton 1995).

Another important feature of labor market regimes are the rules for accepting foreign credentials, which produce a rather dramatic boundary between home-born and foreign-born, and between members of OECD countries, who tend to recognize each others diplomas and professional credentials at least partly, and the rest of the world. The selective recognition of educational titles and job experiences is a major mechanism that impacts on immigrant earnings (Friedberg 2000; Bratsberg and Ragan 2002) as well as the

labor market segments open to them. From a boundary-making perspective, this is not so much a consequence of an information cost problem that employers face when evaluating foreign credentials, as economists would have it, but rather a prime mechanism of social closure through which nationals maintain their birth-right of being treated preferentially on the territory of “their” country—even at quite dramatic costs for the economy as a whole

There is also some research on how rules and regulations regarding hiring practices influence the relative openness or closure of particular labor market segments. The somewhat surprising result is that the degree of labor market discrimination against equally qualified immigrants, as it has been uncovered by experimental field studies, seems not to be influenced by country-specific anti-discrimination laws and regulations (Taran *et al.* 2004).

A side note on the issue of institutional discrimination might be in place here. We should resist to automatically interpret unequal representation in different segments and hierarchical levels of a labor market as a consequence of ethnic discrimination and closure on the institutional level. According to the subjectivist principle central to the boundary-making approach, it is only meaningful to speak of ethnic (as opposed to other types of) boundaries when they result from intentional discrimination against ethnic others. In Germany’s labor market, to give an example, children of Turkish immigrants are heavily over-represented in the apprenticeship system and dramatically underrepresented in the institutions of higher education. This distributional pattern, however, results from sorting all children of working-class parentage, independent of their ethnic or national background or their citizenship status, onto tracks leading into apprenticeships or other on-the-job training programs early in their school career (Crul and Vermeulen 2003). Such institutional sorting effects are not ethnic in nature—and therefore should be analyzed as a separate processes influencing the labor market trajectories of immigrants and non-immigrants alike, independently of genuine processes of ethnic boundary formation and closure. This is obviously not to deny that ethnic discrimination and closure do exist, in some places more than in others, and that they therefore are important elements in explaining labor market outcomes. How much they do, however, is a matter to be empirically investigated rather than simply “read of” the distributional patterns.

In the second step of analysis, one would look at the consequence of the different endowment of immigrants with economic, political and cultural resources (cf. Nee and Sanders 2001). Few researchers have analyzed the effects of such resource distributions from boundary-making perspective, however. It seems that immigrants with lower

educational capital and less economic resources are particularly likely to end up in ethnically defined niches on the labor market, while better skilled immigrants are much less dependent on such niches and immigrants with some economic capital may choose between ethnic or mainstream business opportunities (see the case study of this author's immigrant community by Samson 2000). Furthermore, it seems that migrants that have been negatively selected on the basis of their lack of education and professional skills, such as those recruited through the various guest-worker programs in Europe or the bracero program in the United States and its contemporary substitute: the toleration of illegal immigration from Mexico, are particularly disadvantaged on the labor markets, especially when it comes to translating skills into occupation (Heath 2007). The likelihood of them remaining trapped in ethnically defined labor market niches seems to be especially high.

Despite these advances, it is striking how little we know about how resource distributions influence processes of ethnic boundary-making in labor markets. As in the analysis of labor market regimes, we would again have to understand how other mechanisms that are not related to the making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries influence the labor market trajectories of individuals. In other words, we would first need to understand how general processes of class reproduction and mobility impact on migrants' position in the distribution of various capitals.

I am not aware of any study which would take the class background of migrants in their country of origin (as opposed to the country of settlement) and thus the social origin of second-generation individuals into account, mainly because the stratification systems of country of origin and destination are deemed to be incompatible. Only a deeper understanding of how the general mechanisms of class reproduction affect migrants will allow us to tell whether the concentration of certain immigrant groups in certain professions, labor market segments, or occupational strata are the effects of class reproduction or the outcome of boundary-making processes.

Are Mexican Americans in the United States and Portuguese in France remaining in skilled working class positions, as has been argued (Waldinger and Perlmann 1997; Tribalat 1995), because they pursue an ethnic strategy of niche development and defense, or because they are sorted into these positions together with other individuals of a largely rural and peasant background by the mechanisms of class reproduction? In other words: are we observing individual level mechanisms of class reproduction or group level processes of ethnic niche building? Even the methodologically most sophisticated and analytically careful

authors researching into the “ethnic penalty” on the labor market readily assume, following Herderian instincts, that what we do observe has to do with ethnicity, rather than class (e.g. Heath 2007; Silberman and Fournier 2006).

In general, research on immigrants in the labor market quickly jumps to “groupist”, Herderian assumptions when interpreting significant results for ethnic background variables (for a striking example see Bonilla-Silva 2004)—instead of looking for unmeasured individual level characteristics (e.g. rural-urban background) that might be unequally distributed across ethnic categories, for variation in contexts and timing of settlement, or for the selection effects of different channels of migration (e.g. refugees vs. professional migrants) when interpreting such effects.

Besides institutional frameworks and the resource distribution, we should look at how networks influence the formation of ethnic boundaries in labor markets. We know quite a bit about the role of networks in structuring of labor market access (Lin 1999) and especially in the process of ethnic niche formation. Network hiring characterizes many low-skilled labor markets and explains why resource poor immigrants are more likely to end up in such ethnically defined segments (Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Network hiring seems to be a feature especially of companies that rely on labor-intensive production methods, where credentials and skills are less important than reliability and easy integration into existing teams, and in labor markets where undocumented workers abound. On the other hand, we know that weak network ties are also important for other segments of the labor market, as a long line of research in the wake of Granovetter’s seminal article has shown (Granovetter 1973), and for better skilled immigrants (Samson 2000; Bagchi 2001).

Under which conditions such networks might coalesce along ethnic lines and produce clear-cut boundaries and what consequences such “emergence” effects have for the overall structure of labor markets still remains a mystery. As with processes of institutional sorting and the effects of capital endowments, one needs to carefully distinguish ethnic from other boundary making processes. Ethnically homogenous networks might be the consequence of family or village solidarity, rather than ethnic boundary making (cf. Nauck and Kohlmann 1999). The accumulation of such family ties does not automatically lead—in an emergence effect of sort—to ethnic solidarity and community. Family network hiring may therefore lead to the formation of a niche that only an outside observer wearing Herderian glasses could then identify as that occupied by an “ethnic group”—in analogy to species occupying certain ecological niches. In other words, even where we can observe clustering of individuals of the

same ethnic background, we should not jump to the conclusion that ethnic group level mechanisms are responsible for such clustering.

The final analytical step would consist in drawing these three lines of inquiry together and determine how the interplay between institutional rules, resource distribution, and networking strategies determine the specific trajectories of immigrant individuals in the labor markets over time. An analysis that proceeds along these lines would probably discover much more variation than the usual Herderian approach that focuses on how “Mexicans”, “Chinese” or “Swiss” immigrants fare on the labor market or on which niche is occupied by which of these “groups”. One might discover what exactly the mechanisms are that channel certain individuals into certain positions on the job market rather than others, how institutional rules, resource endowment and network structures determine which individuals experience which trajectory through the field. While some Mexican families might indeed pursue a strategy of proletarian reproduction, seeking stable low-skilled jobs that pay well over two or more generations, others might struggle to advance in the educational system only to discover that there are limits as to where they can get given the quality of schools they are able to afford and the discrimination they face when seeking other than the least-qualified jobs. Still others might experience an easy transition into the professional middle class, while yet others specialize in the ethnic business and draw upon a large network of clients from within a particular community (cf. Telles and Ortiz Forthcoming). These different trajectories are not, to repeat the point, randomly distributed over individuals, but would have to be explained as the combined effects of field rules and their changes over time, the individual’s endowment with economic and cultural capital as well as the subsequent changes in its volume and composition, and the variable position of an individual in an evolving network of social relationships through which information about jobs and access to certain types of professions is mediated.

Depending on the labor market trajectory, the meaning of the ethnic background may change quite dramatically, as will the way that other individuals with other backgrounds perceive and interact with these individuals. Whether or not these multiple positions and forms of interaction coalesce into a clearly distinguishable ethnic segment of the labor market and how many individuals with the same background are indeed ending up in such ethnic niches is thus an open, empirical question that a multi-level research design as the one outlined here and applied by some (e.g. Nohl *et al.* 2006) is best able to answer. Standard research, by contrast, often seems to jump on an ethnic group explanation wherever the

opportunity arises. In research designs that take ethnic groups as units of observation (e.g. “The Chinese of Los Angeles”), only those individuals that indeed form part of ethnic networks, enclaves or niches are included in the surveys and interviewed, while everybody else disappears from the picture. In research designs that take individuals as units of observation, ethnic background variables are often interpreted as consequences of group level effects. Most researchers who analyze regressions on the determinants of unemployment, for example, interpret country of origin variables either as the consequence of ethnic discrimination or, if the sign of the coefficient is positive, of a group's “social cohesion” or ethnic culture (usually some equivalent to a Protestant work ethic) (cf. Portes and MacLeod 1996).

De-ethnicizing research designs

As the previous section has made clear, the ethnic group formation perspective calls for certain types of methodologies which make it easier to observe different outcomes of the process of ethnic group formation. It is necessary, in other words, to de-ethnicize research designs to see both the emergence of ethnic groups and their absence. In the Herderian tradition, a researcher usually chooses one or several “ethnic groups” as her units of observation and then determines in how far this group has been able to maintain its culture, cohesion, and identity—the preoccupation of the proponents of multiculturalism and transnationalism—or has occupied certain positions in a segmented labor market, as in the ethnic niche tradition, or traveled down one or the other path of assimilation.

Such study designs risks to misrepresent the actual processes of group formation on the ground, which may well follow different principles than those of ethnic community building, as the following example illustrates. Research in Swiss immigrant neighborhoods revealed that notions of community and belonging were defined in cross-ethnic terms. Long-established residents, both autochthons and migrants of the guest-worker period and their children, primarily distinguish between insiders and outsiders, between normal and abnormal, decent and indecent “kinds of people”. Ethnic categories play a subordinate role in this categorical universe. Based on the perception of “typical” members of ethnic categories, they are assigned to either side of the boundary between insiders and outsiders. Ethnicity or race, however, does not represent the main principle for constructing the boundary and both insiders and outsiders are ethnically (and “racially”) heterogeneous groups. Network

analysis reveals that the main interactional cleavage indeed separates old-established neighborhood residents from newly arrived immigrants.

Were one to trace the destiny of “Tamils”, “Italians” and “Turks” in Switzerland, as in a standard research design, one would not have been able to describe these trans-ethnic modes of social organization and categorization. The choice of units of observation is thus of crucial importance. The ethnic group formation perspective calls for non-ethnic units of observation which make it possible to see whether and which ethnic groups and boundaries emerge, are subsequently transformed or dissolve—rather than to assume their existence, relevance, and continuity by binding the observational apparatus to such groups and communities. In the following, I discuss the most important alternative units of observation: territories, individuals, social classes, institutional settings, and event chains.

Choosing territorial units, such as neighborhoods, cities, regions, etc. provides an opportunity to observe which levels and forms of categorization are the most relevant for everyday forms of group formation (see the theory of locality developed by Glick Schiller et al. 2006). A first example is the study of a neighborhood of Cologne by Kissler and Eckert (1990). The authors wanted to understand how this field is perceived from the perspective of the old-established, of new immigrants, and of members of the alternative scene. Using the configuration analysis developed by Norbert Elias, they reached a similar conclusion as our study of Swiss neighborhoods: that the non-ethnic distinction between ‘established’ and ‘outsiders’ is the most pertinent social categorization for neighborhood residents. Gerd Baumann’s (1996) fine work on a neighborhood in London, however, documents a different outcome. He looks at how young people of Caribbean and South Asian background perceive and categorize their neighborhood. To his own surprise, ethnic categories derived from official multicultural discourse (‘Afro-Caribbean’, ‘Muslim’, ‘British’, etc.) play a much greater role than he had originally assumed. In Wallman’s study of working-class housing co-operatives in South London, however, similar results as those in Cologne and Switzerland were obtained (Wallman 1978). Other studies in other neighborhoods could be cited that document yet other possible outcomes of the group formation process (cf. Sanjek 1998). It is only by choosing neighborhoods as units of observation that the varying outcomes of ethnic group formation processes are put into relief.

A second possible approach is to choose individuals of varying backgrounds as units of analysis, without pre-arranging them into groups. This is often done in quantitative research in economics and sociology, where ethnic background is added as a dummy variable

into the regression equation. While this overcomes many of the problems of the standard community studies design, the interpretation of findings is often haunted, as discussed above, by Herderian assumptions. More often than not, researchers interpret the ethnicity factors as evidence for either discrimination or the specificities of ethnic cultures and communities. From an ethnic group formation perspective, however, finding significant results for ethnic dummies represents the beginning, not the end of the search for explanation.

Various processes that are not part of an ethnic community and culture can produce significant results for background variables: a particular immigration history leads individuals to enter a labor market at a certain point in time when certain opportunities were within reach, while others were not; members of certain ethnic categories might be disproportionately from rural or urban backgrounds; previous labor market experiences might differ systematically (e.g. in former Communist countries with life-long guaranteed employment), migration channels produce selection effects (compare e.g. refugees resettled through UNHCR vs. guest-workers recruited through agents vs. illegal immigrants crossing the border with the help of coyotes), and so on. Ideally, one would therefore combine quantitative with qualitative research to find out which of these processes are responsible for the ethnic effect (for an example of such research, see Piguet and Wimmer 2000).

Once qualitative research points into the direction of such hidden individual level characteristics, which might or might not be the case, one would go back to the quantitative stage and try to add new variables (e.g. year of immigration) or proxy variables (e.g. immigration from a country that is predominantly rural or urban, had a Communist past or not) that capture the individual level effect in a direct way, thus eliminating or reducing the effect of ethnicity.

Third, one may take social class as units of analysis and focus on how in the neighborhoods and workplaces occupied by individuals of similar socio-economic standing ethnic boundaries are perceived, talked about, and enacted in everyday interactions. This is the research strategy that Michèle Lamont has pursued in several interrelated projects. One book reveals that among the middle classes of an American small town ethnicity and race are considered far less important markers of difference than individual achievement and personality (Lamont 1992)—similar views as those found among successful black professionals (Lamont and Fleming 2005). In the working classes, by contrast, the black-white divide is of considerable importance for individuals' sense of their own place in society, their moral worth and personal integrity (Lamont 2000). An ethnic (or racial) community

approach would have overlooked such important differences in the role that racial boundaries play in American society. Focusing exclusively on the African American experience or, as in “white” studies, on the boundary making processes among “mainstream Anglos” would lose from sight that the dynamics of boundary making varies dramatically depending on which end of the overall class structure one focuses upon.

There is no reason, however, why a study design should not start by taking individuals from a particular country (or countries) of origin as the unit of observation. When studying “Turks”, “Swiss”, or “Asians”, however, one should be careful to avoid the Herderian fallacy of assuming communitarian closure, cultural difference, and strong identities. The study has to ask, rather than take for granted, whether there is indeed community organization, ethnic closure in networking practices, a shared outlook on the host society etc. In the course of such analysis, three pitfalls are to be avoided.

First, one needs to carefully determine whether or not an observed pattern is indeed “ethnic” or whether other, lower levels of social organization are responsible for the pattern, most importantly village and family forms of solidarity. Given that most villages and families are mono-ethnic, the observers should beware of interpreting village or family networks as evidence of ethnic homophily. A well conceived, careful study along these lines has been conducted by Nauck. He found that the support networks of Turkish immigrants in Germany are about as familistic as those of German non-migrants (Nauck and Kohlmann 1999). Interpreting the mono-ethnic character their networks as a sign of ethnic closure would therefore grossly misrepresent reality: Turkish migrants do not trust other Turkish immigrants with whom they do not relate through family ties any more than they would do German families.

Secondly, a study design that takes ethnic groups as units of analysis should pay careful attention to those individuals who are “lost to the group”, i.e. who do not maintain ties with co-ethnics and are not members of ethnic clubs and associations, do not consider their country-of-origin background meaningful, do not frequent ethnic cafés and shops, marry somebody from a different background, work in jobs that have no ethnic connotation, and do not live in ethnic neighborhoods etc. In order to avoid sampling on the dependent variable, one should avoid snow-ball sampling asking “Mexicans” to name “fellow Mexicans”; one should also avoid studying a neighborhood with a clear ethnic connotation because one then loses those Mexicans who have never lived in “the barrio” from the analytical picture.

Third, careful attention should be given to the variety of strategies of ethnic boundary making one finds among individuals sharing the same background in order to make sure that one does not end up privileging those strategies that emphasize communitarian closure and cultural difference. Several well designed studies have recently been conducted that show in detail how research that takes a particular immigrant group as a starting point might be designed without ending up reifying that group and its boundedness (Wessendorf Forthcoming; Glick Schiller et al. 2006). Perhaps the best possible research design is a genuine panel study that pursues immigrants from the same country (or village, or region) of origin over several decades, ideally across generations. Edward Telles' and Vilma Ortiz' Mexican American project (Telles and Ortiz Forthcoming) represents the ideal case of such a study design. They have traced almost all Mexican Americans that were surveyed in the 1950s to the 1990s and interviewed a very large number of their children and grandchildren as well. This and other comparable research shows that individuals pursue a variety of different strategies of ethnic boundary making (see the typology in Wimmer Forthcoming-a), leading to different modes of incorporation.

Another mode of de-ethnicizing the study of ethnicity in immigration societies is to study institutional environments in which non-ethnic (or trans-ethnic) interactions are frequent. One then observes how networks form in such interactional fields, how actors interpret and categorize this environment using various principles of social classification, and under which conditions classifications and networks actually do (or do not) align along ethnic divides. Much of this literature has an explicit anti-ethnic bias and studies the conditions for trans-ethnic relationships to stabilize in such diverse institutional environments as churches (e.g. Jenkins 2003), schools (e.g. Kao and Joyner 2006), workplaces (e.g. Ely and Thomas 2001), and neighborhoods (Nyden et al. 1997). However, such a bias is not a necessary corollary of the methodology. Research in specific institutional settings can bring to light the salience and importance of ethnic groups as well as those of trans-ethnic ties and modes of categorization. Studying organizational fields thus allows specifying the institutional conditions under which ethnicity emerges as a principle of social organization without already assuming that this is the case, as does most mainstream research on immigrant ethnicity.

Finally, one could imagine research designs that build upon the "social drama" tradition in anthropological research that flourished during the forties and fifties of the past century (Gluckman 1940; Turner 1957; cf. Burawoy 1998). Max Gluckman, for example,

observed a one-day ceremony to open a new bridge in South Africa's Zululand which brought together the white administration, Zulu rulers and chiefs as well as various segments of Zulu society. The various speeches and rituals allow the observer to see how various principles of classification, including the racialized distinction between white rulers and African subjects, come into play and are negotiated between actors who pursue a variety of classificatory strategies. I am not aware of any study of immigrant ethnicity that would pursue this line of analysis and take an event, or rather a chain of events, as its unit of observation. It seems to provide yet another promising movement to shed off the Herderian blinders that have for so long restricted our understanding of ethnicity in immigrant societies.

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