

Herder's Heritage and the Boundary-Making Approach: Studying Ethnicity in Immigrant Societies*

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Major paradigms in immigration research, including assimilation theory, multiculturalism, and ethnic studies, take it for granted that dividing society into ethnic groups is analytically and empirically meaningful because each of these groups is characterized by a specific culture, dense networks of solidarity, and shared identity. Three major revisions of this perspective have been proposed in the comparative ethnicity literature over the past decades, leading to a renewed concern with the emergence and transformation of ethnic boundaries. In immigration research, "assimilation" and "integration" have been reconceived as potentially reversible, power-driven processes of boundary shifting. After a synthetic summary of the major theoretical propositions of this emerging paradigm, I offer suggestions on how to bring it to fruition in future empirical research. First, major mechanisms and factors influencing the dynamics of ethnic boundary-making are specified, emphasizing the need to disentangle them from other dynamics unrelated to ethnicity. I then discuss a series of promising research designs, most based on nonethnic units of observation and analysis, that allow for a better understanding of these mechanisms and factors.

This article aims to advance the conversation between students of comparative ethnicity and scholars of immigration.¹ This conversation has given rise to a new concern with ethnic boundary-making in immigrant societies. Instead of treating ethnicity as an unproblematic *explanans*—providing self-evident units of analysis and self-explanatory variables—the boundary-making paradigm takes ethnicity as an *explanandum*, as a variable outcome of specific processes to be analytically uncovered and empirically specified. The ethnic boundary-making perspective has particular advantages for the study of immigrant societies, as a number of authors have suggested recently.

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¹The argument offered here draws on Wimmer (1996, from which the title is adapted) and Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002). For other critiques regarding the (ab)use of the concept of ethnicity, see Bowen (1996) and Brubaker (2004:Ch. 1) for conflict research, Brubaker (2004:Ch. 2) for studies on collective identity, and Steinberg (1981) for immigration studies.

This article brings together these various works and offers an integrated account of the main theoretical propositions that underlie them. First, immigrant ethnicity is conceived as the outcome of an interaction that spans the boundary between majority and minority, thus involving actors from both sides and creating both immigrant minorities *and* national majorities in the process. Second, immigrant incorporation is defined as a shifting of the boundaries of belonging, which has to overcome existing forms of social closure along ethnic lines. In this process, immigrants strategically try to adopt cultural markers that signify full membership and distance themselves from stigmatized others through boundary work.

After elaborating these basic theoretical propositions associated with the boundary-making approach to immigrant ethnicity, I offer concrete research avenues that will help to identify both the causal mechanisms of ethnic boundary-making and the main factors that affect its varying outcomes. Taking labor market integration and segregation as an example, I argue that to understand the making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries on labor markets, researchers should focus their attention on the interplay of institutional rules (e.g., welfare state regulations, diploma recognition, etc.), resource distribution (of educational and economic capital), and networks of hiring and credit, which may or may not form along ethnic lines. In order to avoid an ethnic reading of immigrant incorporation processes where it is empirically inadequate, special attention is paid to the problem of how to disentangle ethnic boundary-making from other, nonethnic processes such as the general workings of class reproduction.

The concluding section focuses on the research designs most appropriate for uncovering these various mechanisms and processes—a kind of menu from which I hope scholars will choose in conducting future research. I recommend nonethnic units of observation, which make it possible to see whether ethnic groups and boundaries emerge, and how they are subsequently transformed or dissolved—rather than assuming their relevance and continuity by taking ethnic groups as units of observation and analysis. Reviewing a series of recent and ongoing research projects, I discuss the potential of analyzing spatial entities (such as urban neighborhoods), social classes, individuals, or institutional domains (such as schools or workplaces). Researchers who find it meaningful to study the fate of members of a specific immigrant background are offered suggestions on how to avoid some of the pitfalls that have characterized studies of immigrant ethnicity in the past.

These pitfalls and theoretical deficiencies are subjected to a systematic critique in the next section. I show that some of the major paradigms of immigration research, including various strands of assimilation theory, multiculturalism, and ethnic studies, all concur in taking ethnic groups as self-evident units of observation and analysis, assuming that this is the most meaningful way of dividing society into groups of individuals. To varying degrees, they also take it for granted that each ethnic group is endowed with a specific culture, communitarian solidarity, and shared identity. This concept of ethnicity as self-evident units of observation and self-explanatory variables derives, as will be shown, from the writings of the anti-enlightenment, *Storm and Stress* philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder.

Three decades of comparative research have shown that these Herderian assumptions are problematic because they hold only for a subset of ethnic groups and thus cannot be seen as general features of ethnicity per se. In many instances, members of ethnic categories might not share the same culture, might not form a “community” held together by densely woven social networks, and might disagree about the

relevance of different ethnic categories and thus not hold a common identity. Examining the dynamics of ethnic boundary-making helps to avoid the Herderian ontology of the social world and to arrive at a more adequate understanding of ethnicity's role in processes of immigrant adaptation.

HOW NOT TO THINK ABOUT ETHNICITY

In the eyes of 18th-century philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, the social world was populated by distinct peoples, 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 (Herder 1968:207, 227), as was common in French and British writings of the time, Herder insisted that each people represented one distinctive manifestation of a shared human capacity for cultivation (or *Bildung*) (e.g. 1968:226; but see Berg 1990 for Herder's ambiguities regarding the equality of peoples).

Herder's account of world history, conveyed in his sprawling and encyclopedic *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, tells of the emergence and disappearance of different peoples, their cultural flourishing and decline, their migrations and adaptations to local habitat, and their mutual displacement, conquest, and subjugation. Each of these peoples was defined by three characteristics. First, each forms a community held together by close ties among its members (cf. 1968:407), or, in the words of the founder of romantic political theory Adam Müller, a "Volksgemeinschaft." Secondly, each people has a consciousness of itself, an identity based on a sense of shared destiny and historical continuity (1968:325). And finally, each people is endowed with its own culture and language that define a unique worldview, the "Genius eines Volkes" in Herderian language (cf. 1968:234).

In brief, according to Herder's social ontology, the world is made up of peoples each distinguished by a unique culture (1), held together by communitarian solidarity (2), and bound by shared identity (3). They thus form the self-evident units of observation and analysis (4) for any historical or social inquiry—the most meaningful way of subdividing the population of humans. In this ontology, ethnic groups and cultures are anything but static—we find ample discussion of the cultural bloom and decline of this or that people, of ethnogenesis and "ethnoexitus" in Herder's work. Nor did Herder assume that all individuals were equally and uniformly attached to their ethnic communities or that this attachment had some natural, biological basis. In other words, Herder is ill suited to play the role of a straw man bearing intellectual responsibility for the "naturalization," "essentialization," and "ahistoricism" that self-declared "constructivists" deplore among their "primordialist" opponents. The problems with Herderian ontology lie elsewhere, as we will see further below.

Herder's Heritage

But I should first discuss Herder's heritage, which has left its mark not only on his direct descendants in folklore studies and cultural anthropology (Berg 1990; Wimmer 1996), but also on sociology and history. While the rise and global spread of the nation-state has changed the terminology that we use today, differentiating Herder's "peoples" into "nations" if statehood was achieved and "ethnic groups" if it was not, much of his social ontology has survived. This also holds true for empirical research on immigration, as this section will show, though obviously not equally for all national research traditions, theoretical approaches, or methodological camps.

Dividing up the French nation into distinct ethnic peoples, for example, has until recently been anathema to mainstream research there (cf. Meillassoux 1980; Le Bras 1998). Scholars working in the tradition of rational choice theory (cf. Esser 1980) or classical Marxism (Castles and Kosack 1973; Steinberg 1981) are certainly much less inclined to accept Herderian ontology than those influenced by the philosophy of multiculturalism. Quantitative, variable-based research that takes individuals as units of analysis avoids many of the pitfalls of community studies, and so forth. In the following review, I will limit the discussion—for better or for worse—to North American intellectual currents, which are a source of inspiration to many discussions in other national contexts, and to three sets of approaches: various strands of assimilation theory, multiculturalism, and ethnic studies. As we will see, these paradigms rely on Herderian ontology to different degrees and emphasize different elements of the Herderian trinity of ethnic community, culture, and identity. They all concur, however, in taking ethnic groups as self-evident units of analysis and observation, assuming that dividing an immigrant society along ethnic lines—rather than class, religion, and so forth—is the most adequate way of advancing empirical understanding of immigrant incorporation.

Herder's ontology is most visible in classic assimilation theory, which studied how different ethnic communities moved along a one-way road into "the mainstream"—eventually assimilating into the white, Protestant, Anglophone-American people. Assimilation into this "mainstream" entailed the dissolution of ethnic communities through intermarriage and spatial dispersion, the dilution of immigrant cultures through processes of acculturation, and the gradual diminution of ethnic identities until all that remained was what has been famously called "symbolic ethnicity" (Gans 1979). In what amounts to the intellectually most powerful and precise account of assimilation theory, Gordon stated that the disappearance of ethnic culture ("acculturation") would lead to the dissolution first of ethnic community and solidarity ("structural assimilation") and finally of separate ethnic identities (Gordon 1964). By taking ethnic groups as units of analysis, by assuming that they were characterized by distinct cultures, closed social networks, and shared identities, and by juxtaposing them to an undifferentiated national mainstream—the "people" into which these other "peoples" would eventually dissolve—Gordon obviously thought within a Herderian framework (cf. the sympathetic critique of Alba and Nee 1997:830f.).

Contemporary versions of the assimilation paradigm have revised many of Gordon's assumptions (cf. Brubaker 2004:Ch. 5), including, most importantly, that all roads should and will lead to the mainstream and that social acceptance depends mainly on previous cultural assimilation. In Richard Alba and Victor Nee's reformulation of Gordon's theory, an individual-level assimilation process is more clearly distinguished from ethnic-group-level processes (Alba and Nee 1997:835), and upward social mobility as a "socioeconomic dimension of assimilation" replaces the preoccupation with culture and communitarian closure characteristic of Gordon's writings. This adds considerable complexity and explanatory power to the intellectual enterprise.

Still, we find remnants of Herder's ontology in how individual-level processes are conceived: as differentiating assimilation paths of different ethnic communities—rather than children of peasants vs. professionals, refugees vs. labor migrants, and so forth. Thus, in superbly crafted research on spatial dispersion (Alba and Logan 1993) and home ownership (Alba and Logan 1992), individual-level statistical models of assimilation are calculated separately for each ethnic minority group, without

showing that this subsampling strategy best fits the data. Differences in the magnitude of individual-level variables are then meant to indicate group-level processes such as ethnic discrimination (Alba and Logan 1993:1394). In another paper on intermarriage rates between ethnic groups (Alba and Golden 1986), no individual-level controls are introduced, thus assuming, for example, that a woman of Polish ancestry who marries a man of Polish ancestry does so because of ethnic homophily—rather than shared locality, occupation, or other opportunity structure effects.

“Segmented assimilation theory” (Portes and Zhou 1993) envisions two outcomes in addition to the standard assimilation path described by Gordon. In the enclave mode of immigrant incorporation, exemplified by the Cuban community in Miami, ethnic groups may persist over time and allow individuals to achieve upward social mobility within an ethnic enclave economy without having to develop social ties with mainstreamers, without having to acculturate to the mainstream, and without eventually identifying with the national majority. When immigrants follow the “downward assimilation” path, such as Haitians in Miami or Mexican immigrants in Central California, they develop social ties with, identify with, and acculturate to the black segment of American society or with downtrodden and impoverished communities of earlier immigrant waves, rather than the “white mainstream.”

Which of these modes of incorporation will prevail depends on government reception of a community, the discrimination it encounters, and “most important,” the degree of internal solidarity it can muster (1993:85-87). As this short characterization makes clear, the basic analytical scheme of “old” assimilation theory is again maintained: despite occasional attention to within-group variation (1993:88f., 92), ethnic groups conceived as Herderian wholes move along the three possible paths of assimilation, choosing a pathway depending on degrees of solidarity (1993:88f., 92; Portes and Rumbaut 2001) or the specific character of ethnic cultures (Zhou 1997).² It is always assumed, in other words, rather than empirically demonstrated, that cultural difference and networks of solidarity cluster along ethnic lines.

Assimilation theory’s nemesis, multiculturalism or “retentionism” in Herbert Gans’s (1997) terms, leads back to full-blown Herderianism. In contrast to the various strands of neoassimilation theory discussed above, in which ethnic cultures rarely assume center-stage of the explanatory endeavor,³ multiculturalism assumes that each ethnic group is endowed with a unique universe of norms and cultural preferences and that these cultures remain largely unaffected by upward social mobility or spatial dispersion. Thus, such perduring ethnic cultures and communities need to be recognized publicly in order to allow minority individuals to live their lives in accordance with group-specific ideas about the good life and thus enjoy one of the basic human rights that a liberal, democratic state should guarantee.

Will Kymlicka’s most recent book is an example of superb scholarship from this multiculturalist tradition (Kymlicka 2007). The book offers a careful analysis of the specific historical conditions under which liberal multiculturalism emerged as a major political paradigm in northwestern Europe and North America. Somewhat surprisingly, however, its author ends up advocating the propagation of liberal multiculturalism across the rest of the globe, regardless of whether these conditions have been met. I have shown elsewhere (Wimmer 2008b) that this contradiction emerges because the analysis is bound by a Herderian ontology: Kymlicka’s world is made of

²For a more differentiated analysis along the same lines, see especially Portes (1995).

³But see Hoffmann-Nowotny (1992), Zhou (1997) and the critiques of Steinberg (1981) and Castles (1994).

state-bound societies composed of ethnic groups, each of which is endowed with its own culture and naturally inclined to in-group solidarity. Majority groups dominate minorities and thus violate their basic cultural and political rights. Such violation of minority rights produces conflict while, conversely, the granting of such rights reduces conflicts. Seen from this point of view, globalizing multicultural policies are indeed the order of the day despite all the difficulties that this project encounters because the enabling conditions identified in the first chapters of the book are rarely met. To put this in more polemical terms, the Herderian ontology shields Will Kymlicka's normative positions from the insights of his own comparative empirical analysis.⁴

A similarly straightforward Herderianism dominates much of ethnic studies at American universities and beyond. Without assuming the givenness and unambiguity of ethnic identity, of the integrity and coherence of ethnic cultures, and of the solidarity of ethnic communities, the very principle of constituting "Asian American Studies," "Native-American Studies," "Chicano Studies," and "African-American Studies" as separate social science disciplines each focused on a clearly identifiable object of analysis would be questionable. The various ethnic studies departments thus continue what could be called an emancipatory, left-Herderian tradition developed by the history and folklore departments of recently founded nation-states in 19th-century Europe, which documented their people's struggle against the oppression by ethnic others and their eventual liberation from the yoke of foreign rule.⁵

Ethnic studies insist that social closure and discrimination along ethnic lines are permanent features of immigrant societies—in contrast to the classic assimilation paradigm that conceives of such closure as a temporary stage on the road to the mainstream. Let me illustrate the (left-)Herderian nature of this paradigm by discussing briefly an article by one of its most renowned proponents.

Bonilla-Silva argues that high levels of immigration from the global South and the new, less overt forms of racism that have emerged in the wake of the civil rights movement are changing the biracial social structure that had long characterized American society. In order to maintain "white supremacy" in the face of this threefold challenge, whites "(1) create an intermediate racial group to buffer racial conflict, (2) allow some newcomers into the white racial strata, and (3) incorporate most immigrants into the collective black strata" (Bonilla-Silva 2004:934). The units that are sorted into these three new racial categories are individual ethnic communities, such as Japanese, Brazilians, Vietnamese, and Hmong. To support this claim empirically, Bonilla-Silva uses survey data on individual income, which he aggregates by ethnic group and then ranks according to their average (2004:935)—a ranking that is supposed to be entirely and exclusively determined by the degrees of racism suffered at the hands of the white majority. This kind of analysis thus presupposes in axiomatic fashion—rather than empirically showing—that the social world is made up of ethnic communities and the relations of opposition and discrimination between them (for a more detailed critique, see Loveman 1997).⁶

⁴Many authors have criticized multiculturalism along similar lines; see, e.g., Waldron (1995) and Sen (1999).

⁵More recently, the oppressing people has become the object of a separate discipline termed "white studies" (cf. Winddance, Twine, and Gallagher 2008). On the nationalist foundations of ethnic studies, see Espiritu (1999:511) and Telles and Ortiz (2008:Ch. 4). For a textbook portraying U.S. society as a collection of distinct peoples all oppressed by the dominant white majority, see Aguirre and Turner (2007).

⁶U.S.-style ethnic studies have had, for better or for worse, considerable impact on the research scene in Europe, especially in Great Britain (as Banton 2003 recalls), though the division of society into ethnic and racial groups is remarkably different (Irish and Jewish intellectuals claimed the status of "racialized" minorities as well, and the Muslim identity discourse is much more developed than in the United States).

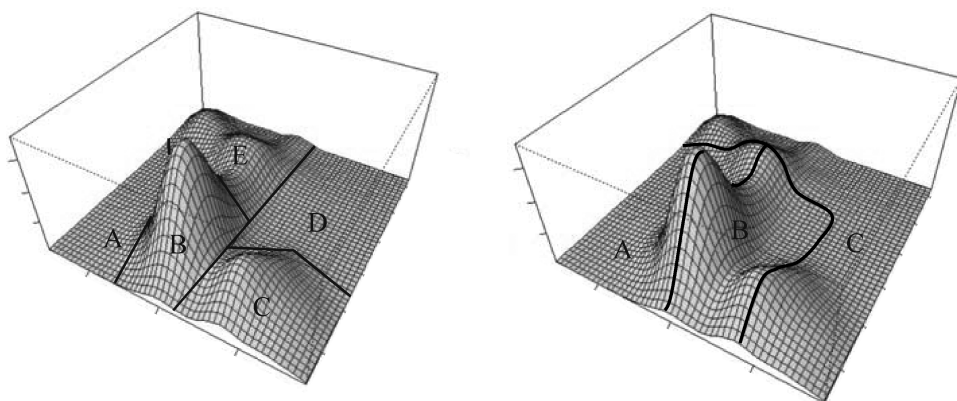


Figure 1. A Herderian and a Barthian world.

Three Moves Beyond Herderian Approach

The comparative literature on ethnicity offers at least three insights that suggest the problematic nature of taking ethnic groups as self-evident units of observation endowed with a unique culture, shared identity, and communitarian solidarity. None of these insights is entirely unknown to practitioners of immigration research. However, their combined significance for the study of immigrant ethnicity has not been sufficiently recognized by immigration scholars in their empirical research practice. It therefore seems warranted to elaborate these three points more fully in the hope that doing so will help establish a more sustained conversation between the two fields.⁷

The Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth was first to question Herder's assumption that ethnic groups are necessarily characterized by a shared culture (Barth 1969; but see Boas 1928). The two graphs in Figure 1 help to illustrate Barth's approach. The left graph represents the Herderian view, according to which ethnic groups reflect the landscape of cultural difference. This landscape is here rendered in three-dimensional space, perhaps representing similarities and differences in terms of language (the x-axis), degrees of religiosity (the y-axis), and gender relations (the z-axis), such that individuals with the most similar practices are situated close to one other. Ethnic groups in a Herderian social world map faithfully on this landscape of cultural similarity and difference.

However, Barth and his fellow authors showed in a widely cited collection of ethnographic essays that in many cases across the world this is actually not the case (see the graph to the right). Rather, ethnic distinctions result from marking and maintaining a boundary irrespective of the cultural differences observed by an outside anthropologist. 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 boundary between A and B was inscribed onto a landscape of continuous cultural transitions. Conformingly, the definition of ethnicity changed: it no longer was synonymous with objectively defined cultures, but rather referred to the subjective ways that actors established

⁷For previous attempts to connect immigration scholarship to the comparative ethnicity literature, see Nagel (1994), who relies heavily on Barth, as well as Alba and Nee (1997:837–841), who discuss Shibutani and Kwan's book on comparative ethnic stratification. These attempts have unfortunately not given birth to a sustained conversation between these two research traditions.

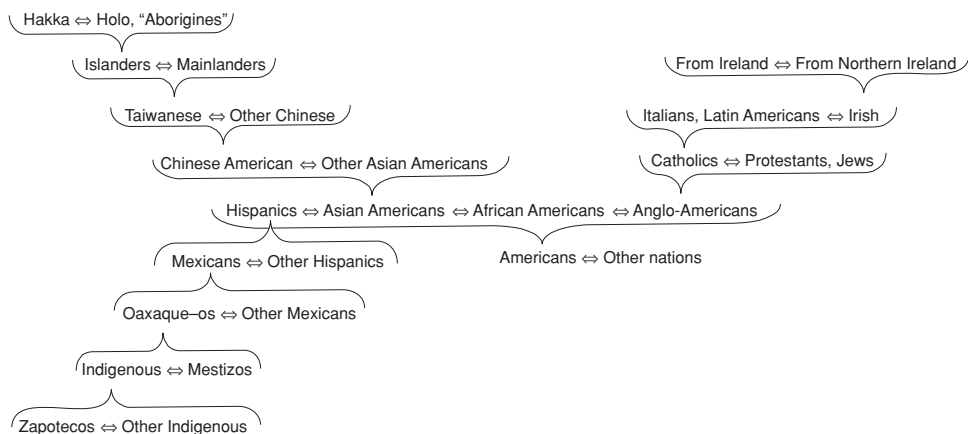


Figure 2. A Moermanian view on “race” and ethnicity in the United States.

group boundaries by pointing to specific markers that distinguished them from ethnic others.

Another branch of anthropological thinking, starting from Moerman (1965) and leading to the so-called situationalist school (Nagata 1974; Okamura 1981), demonstrated that ethnic identities may be of a relational nature and produce a hierarchy of nested segments, rather than distinct groups with clear-cut, mutually exclusive collective identities.⁸ Let me illustrate this point with a U.S. example. The standard, racialized scheme that much of mainstream social science routinely reproduces in its research practice (Martin and Yeung 2003) conceives of four “races” as the main building blocks of American society: whites, African Americans, Asians, and Hispanics. Seen through Moermanian lenses, however, a different picture emerges. Figure 2 (inspired by Jenkins 1994:41) represents the range of possible categories with which an “Asian,” “white,” and “Hispanic” person might be associated, either through identification or classification by others.

The “Asian” person hails from Taiwan and would perhaps highlight her identity as a Hakka speaker (one of the Taiwanese dialects) when visiting a household of Holo speakers. Both Hakkas and Holos might be grouped together as “islanders” when meeting a Mandarin speaker from a family who came to Taiwan after 1948. All of them, however, might distance themselves from the “fresh off the boat” immigrants from mainland China (Kibria 2002). Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese perhaps would be treated as and see themselves as Asian when encountering an African American. The same contextual differentiation operates for a person of Irish origin (compare Waters 1990:52–58) and for a Zapoteco from the central valley of Oaxaca (cf. in general Kearney 1996), as Figure 2 illustrates.

This nested character of systems of ethnic classification leads to a twofold revision of Herder’s ontology. First, not all ethnic categories correspond to social groups held together by dense networks of solidarity—the leitmotif of Brubaker’s (2004) aptly titled book, *Ethnicity Without Groups*. Some higher level categories—such as the pan-ethnic categories of “Asians” or “Hispanics,” to give two examples—might be

⁸See also Keyes (1976), Cohen (1978), Burgess (1983), Okamura (1981), Nagel (1994:155f.), Jenkins (1997:41), Okamoto (2003), and Brubaker (2004:Ch. 2).

relevant for politics (Padilla 1986; Nagel 1994; Espiritu 1992), but not for the conduct of everyday life (Kibria 2002), such as finding a job, a house, or a spouse. Put in Weberian terms, the degree of social closure along ethnic lines varies across contexts.

Second, because categories situated on different levels of differentiation are not mutually exclusive, it is not always clear whether lower-level categories are responsible for higher-level effects. When we find, for example, that the social networks of Hispanics are mainly composed of other Hispanics, we don't know whether this is an artifact of Mexican, Guatemaltecan, and Honduran homophily, or of Oaxaqueños befriending Oaxaqueños, or of Zapotecos preferring to relate to other Zapotecos, or even homophily on the level of villages or interrelated families (compare Kao and Joyner 2004; Gerhard, Nauck, and Kohlmann 1999).

A third and related point that comparative research has brought to light (especially Richard Jenkins 1997) is that individuals might disagree about which are the most relevant and meaningful ethnic categories. For example, one might self-identify primarily as Taiwanese American, while mainstream Anglos tend to lump all individuals of East Asian descent into the category "Asian" (cf. Kibria 2002). More generally speaking, ethnic categories might be contested rather than universally agreed upon. Such contestation is part of a broader politico-symbolic struggle over power and prestige, the legitimacy of certain forms of exclusion over others, and the merits of discriminating for or against certain types of people (for elaborations of this Bourdieusian theme, see Brubaker 2004:Ch. 1; Loveman 1997; Wacquant 1997; Wimmer 1995).

Against Radical Constructivism

In summary, the comparative literature on ethnicity alerts us to the possibility that members of an ethnic group might not share a specific culture (even if they mark the boundary with certain cultural diacritica), might not privilege each other in their everyday networking practice and thus not form a "community," and might not agree on the relevance of ethnic categories and thus not carry a common identity. To be sure, 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* widely agreed upon and the focus of unquestioned identification by their members.⁹ In other words, a Herderian world might very well be the outcome of the classificatory struggles between actors and become stabilized and institutionalized over time. Recent systematic reviews of the comparative literature have revealed considerable variation in degrees of communitarian solidarity (or social closure), cultural distinctiveness, and homogeneity across ethnic groups (Wimmer 2008c).

Historical research shows that the same holds true for within-case variation over time: culturally "thin" (Barthian), segmentally differentiated (Moermanian), and contested (Bourdieusian) systems of ethnic classification may transform into culturally thick, undifferentiated, and largely agreed upon systems *à la* Herder, and the other way around. Compare the shift to a Herderian world brought about by the

⁹African Americans in the United States provide an example of an ethnosomatic category that corresponds to a bounded community (as dozens of studies of friendship networks and the rarity of exogamous marriages); for other, non-European examples, see Wimmer (2008).

institutionalization of the "one drop" rule to determine who belonged to a clear-cut and undifferentiated "black" category in the U.S. South, a shift that erased the various "mixed" categories that previously had existed (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 subcategory 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 forced assimilation and finally became part of the culturally "thick," undifferentiated Herderian nation of Germans (Klessman 1978), while a century later, Cold War partition and reunification led to the segmental differentiation of that nation into the quasi-ethnic categories of "Ossis" and "Wessis" (Glaeser 1999).

Given this variation across cases and over time, it is problematic to take it for granted that a division of immigrant societies into ethnic groups captures one of its fundamental structural features, or to assume communitarian closure, cultural distinctiveness, or shared identity without actually showing empirically that the groups in question display these features. It is equally problematic, however, to identify fluidity, situational variability, and strategic malleability as the very nature of the ethnic phenomenon *as such*, as in radical versions of the constructivist paradigm (e.g., Nagel 1994) that treat ethnicity as a mere "imagined community," as a cognitive scheme of little consequence to the life chances of individuals, or as one individual "identity choice" among many others. An adequate theoretical framework should be able to account for the emergence of a variety of ethnic forms, including both those favored by Herderian theories and their radical constructivist opposites.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT ETHNICITY: THE GROUP FORMATION PARADIGM

Over the past decade or so, several new approaches have appeared in the social sciences that are fully compatible with the insights gained by anthropologists and comparative sociologists that I have now summarized. They derive from the most varied traditions of thought and have little in common except their shared anti-Herderian qualities, as the following brief overview will illustrate. In the field of normative-intellectual debates, major exponents of cultural studies (Gilroy 2000; Bhabha 2007) recently have proposed going beyond the "essentializing" discourse of multiculturalism and strive for what could be called a neohumanist, universalist mode of philosophical reflection and social analysis. Other, more empirically and ethnographically oriented projects, some deriving from the "new ethnicities" tradition initiated by Stuart Hall ([1989] 1996), some inspired by the writings of Pierre Bourdieu, seek to understand how actors situated in a historically constituted field develop various narratives about who they are, who belongs, and who does not (Back 1996; Anthias 2006; Brubaker et al. 2007).

A more macro-sociological development is the "Ethnisierungsansatz" in German sociology, which often derives inspiration from general systems theorist Niklas Luhman. "Ethnicisation" is understood as a self-reinforcing process of defining, shaping, and reacting upon social reality in its ethnic dimension, thus creating "minority problems" in the domains of education, law enforcement, unemployment, etc. (Bukow 1992; Bommers 1999; Radtke 2003; see also Rath 1991). In another context, Steve Vertovec (2007) has recently observed the emerging "super-diversity" of immigrant backgrounds, socioeconomic positioning, and trajectories of adaptation that makes a neat aggregation into separate ethnic communities impossible. Glick Schiller

et al. (2006) have urged us to go “beyond the ethnic lens” and focus instead on interactional patterns, including cross-ethnic networks and institutional arrangements that develop depending on where a locality is positioned in the global capitalist order.

This is not the moment to discuss the commonalities and differences between these various post-Herderian approaches. Rather, I would like to introduce and dedicate the rest of this article to another emerging tradition of thought, one that, among this family of approaches, distinguishes itself from the rest in terms of theoretical sophistication, analytical precision, and empirical grounding. It emerged from Barth’s concern with ethnic boundaries and conformingly has been labeled the ethnic boundary-making paradigm or, alternatively, the ethnic group formation perspective. It can be characterized by four rather well-known axiomatic assumptions that derive from the various research strands summarized above and are meant to replace the Herderian ontology. I summarize them here as concisely as possible, without any claim to originality or innovation.

First, ethnic groups are seen as the result of a potentially reversible social process of boundary-making rather than as self-evident units of observation and analysis (the *constructivist principle*, as stated by Nagel 1994; Jenkins 1997:Ch. 1; Brubaker 2004:Ch. 1). Secondly, actors mark ethnic boundaries with cultural diacritica they perceive as relevant, such as language or skin color, and the like. These markers are not equivalent to the sum of “objective” cultural differences that an outside observer may find (the *subjectivist principle*, as developed in the Weberian/Barthian tradition). Third, ethnic groups do not emerge spontaneously from the social cohesion between individuals that share culture and origin, but from acts of social distancing and closure vis-à-vis members of *other* categories (the *interactionist principle*; cf. the elaboration of this Weberian theme by Tilly 1998:Ch. 3). Finally, the boundary perspective draws our attention to processes of group *making* and everyday boundary work (the *processualist principle*), and puts less emphasis on the geometry of group *relations*, as, for example, in the U.S. and British “race relations” approach (Niemonen 1997).

The boundary-making approach has recently gained some ground in migration research. Richard Alba (2005), Christopher Bail (2008), Rainer Bauböck (1998), Joane Nagel (1994), Dina Okamoto (2006), Roger Waldinger (2003b, 2007), Andreas Wimmer (2002), and Ari Zolberg and Woon (1999) have used the boundary-making language to review central issues of the field. While there are many differences in theoretical orientation among these authors, and some quite substantial and explicit disagreement between them, their analyses nevertheless proceed along similar lines. While it is too early to offer a review of the substantive empirical results that this research has produced, we can highlight its main theoretical propositions, the way that it defines the *problématique* of immigration research, and how these propositions and *problématiques* differ from the four paradigms previously discussed. This is the task I set for the remainder of this section. The subsequent two sections then go beyond this exercise at theoretical integration and synthesis by offering some suggestion as to how this research tradition could develop further by focusing on both mechanisms of boundary formation and those research designs most suited to study them.

Making Immigrants and Nationals

The boundary-making approach problematizes the distinction on which the field of immigration research is based: that between immigrant minorities and national

majorities. It does so in three ways. First, the boundary-making approach implies that ethnicity does not emerge because "minorities" maintain a separate identity, culture, and community from national "majorities," as Herderian theories imply. Rather, both minorities *and* majorities are made by defining the boundaries between them. The German "nation" or the "mainstream" of American immigration research is therefore as much the consequences of such boundary-making processes as are "ethnic minorities" (cf. Williams 1989; Verdery 1994; Wimmer 2002; Favell 2007).

Second, a comparative perspective forces itself on the observer because it becomes obvious that the boundary between immigrants and nationals displays varying properties, as illustrated by the varying definitions of "immigrants" in national statistics (cf. Favell 2003) and the corresponding obstacles to finding comparable data for cross-national research (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik 2003). Third- and fourth-generation immigrants count as "ethnic minorities" in the eyes of Dutch government, as long as they are not "fully integrated"; they disappear from the screen of official statistics and thus also largely from social science analysis in France; and in the United States, they are sorted into categories depending on the color of their skin, as will be their children and grandchildren. Recent survey research has shown substantial variation in the nature (and distinctness) of boundaries drawn against immigrants in various European countries (Bail 2008)—a variation not necessarily in tune with that of official statistical categories, to be sure, because government agencies and individual citizens might disagree as to which ethnic categories should be considered relevant and meaningful.

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. These definitions may also change over time because nation-building is an ongoing process full of revisions and reversals, as is illustrated by the recent introduction of dual nationality laws in many countries, the abandonment of white preference policies in U.S., Canadian, and Australian immigration law, or the recent shift to a partial *ius sanguinis* in Germany (cf. the rather optimistic assessment of such changes by Joppke 2005). From a boundary-making perspective, therefore, the division between nationals and immigrants, including social science research on how the division is (or should be) overcome through "assimilation" (in the United States), "integration" (in Europe), or "absorption" (in Israel) is a crucial element of nation-building and needs to be studied rather than taken for granted if we are to adequately understand the dynamics of immigrant incorporation (Favell 2003; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002).

This leads us to the third way of problematizing the immigrant-national distinction. While migration appears from a demographic perspective as a straightforward issue (individuals "moving" across country borders), the boundary-making approach reveals the political character of this process. "Immigration" only emerges as a distinct object of social science analysis and a political problem to be "managed" once a state apparatus assigns individuals passports and thus membership in national communities (Torpey 1999), polices the territorial boundaries, and has the administrative capacity to distinguish between desirable and undesirable immigrants (Wimmer 1998). Assimilation theory, both old and new, as well as multiculturalism, do not ask about this political 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. the critique by 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: Boundary Shifting, Distancing, and Selective Cultural Adoption

Once the distinction between nationals and immigrants is treated as the product of a historically specific process of nation building, a new perspective on the old questions of immigrant “assimilation” and “integration” arises. Ari Zolberg and Woon (1999) as well as Richard Alba and Nee (2003) were the first to redefine assimilation as a process of boundary shifting: groups that were formerly defined as aliens or “immigrant minorities” are now treated as full members of the nation. This again is a contested process—the result of a power-driven political struggle (Waldinger 2003b)—rather than the quasi-natural outcome of decreasing cultural difference and social distance.

Following the interactionist principle previously discussed, boundary shifting depends on acceptance by the majority population, as this majority has a privileged relationship to the state and, thus, the power to police the borders of the nation. Boundary shifting therefore needs to overcome existing modes of social closure that have denied membership status to outsiders and reinforced the boundaries between majorities and minorities. Assimilation theory assumes that such acceptance is dependent on degrees of cultural assimilation and social interaction, of “them” becoming and behaving like “us.” It thus tends to overlook the social closure that defines who is “us” and who is “them” in the first place. The left-Herderian approach, by contrast, *overstates* the degree and ubiquity of such closure by assuming that discrimination is necessarily and universally the defining feature of ethnic relations. The boundary-making perspective allows us to overcome both of these limitations by examining the processes of social 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 reviewing some well-known aspects of U.S. immigration history, as well as some less well-known features of Europe’s immigration scene today. Boundary shifting in the 19th- and 20th-century United States proceeded along different lines, depending on whether immigrants were treated as potential members of a nation defined, up to World War I, as consisting of white, Protestant peoples of European descent standing in opposition to descendants of African slaves (cf. Kaufmann 2004). While British, Scandinavian, and German immigrants thus 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, so as to prove themselves worthy of acceptance into the national 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 nonblack ethnic group admitted to white schools and neighborhoods (Loewen 1971). They did so by severing existing ties with black clients and by expelling from the community those Chinese who had married blacks. In other words, they reproduced 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 struggle to distance

themselves from the African-American community in order to prove their worth in the eyes of the majority and thereby avoid association with the stigma of blackness (Waters 1999; Woldemikael 1989).

In contemporary continental Europe, 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 their inability to "fit in" established working-class neighborhoods. Such discourses are meant to maintain the hard-won capital of "normalcy," achieved at the end of a long and painful process of boundary crossing, by avoiding being identified with these "unacceptable" foreigners (Wimmer 2004; similarly for London Wallman 1978; Back 1996).

In these struggles over the boundaries of acceptance and rejection, culture does indeed play a role, but not necessarily the one foreseen in classical assimilation theory, multiculturalism, or ethnic studies. Immigrants who struggle to gain the acceptance necessary for crossing the boundary into "the mainstream" may aim at selectively acquiring those traits that signal full membership. What these diacritica are varies from context to context (cf. Zolberg and Woon 1999; Alba 2005). In the United States, sticking to one's religion and ethnicity is an accepted feature of becoming national, while proving one's distance from the commands of God and the loyalty of one's co-ethnics is necessary 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). 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, it is much less tolerated in France or Denmark. The variation, again, is explained by different forms and trajectories of nation-building that pinpoint 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 the role that cultural markers play in signaling group membership.

By contrast, classic assimilation theory (and some strands of neo-assimilationism) takes the cultural homogeneity of "the nation" for granted, even if this culture is nowadays thought of as the syncretistic product of previous waves of assimilation (cf. Alba and Nee 1997). It assumes this national majority's point of view in order to observe how individuals from "other nations," endowed with different cultures, are gradually absorbed into "the mainstream" through a process of becoming similar (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"). Thus, the power-driven, contested, and strategically selective nature of processes of cultural adoption vanishes from sight.

Ethnic studies, on the other hand, often emphasize that the dominated, racialized "peoples" develop a "culture of resistance" against the dominating, racializing "people." This emphasis overlooks that the dominated sometimes strategically and successfully adopt cultural boundary markers in order to disidentify with other minorities or their own ethnic category and gain acceptance by the "majority," as the examples of the Mississippi Chinese or guest-worker immigrants in Europe illustrate.

In conclusion, we can gain considerable analytical leverage if we conceive of immigrant incorporation as the outcome of a struggle over the boundaries of inclusion

in which all members of a society are involved, including institutional actors such as civil society organizations, various state agencies, and so on. By focusing on these struggles, the ethnic group formation paradigm helps to avoid the Herderian ontology, in which ethnic communities appear as the given building blocks of society, rather than as the outcome of specific social processes in need of comparative explanation.

MECHANISMS AND FACTORS: TOWARD AN EXPLANATORY ACCOUNT

But *how* are we to explain the varying outcomes of these struggles? What are the mechanisms of boundary formation and dissolution? To the best of my knowledge, there is no theory or model that gives a satisfactory answer to these questions. In what follows, I would like to go beyond the synthesis of general theoretical propositions and research *problématiques* outlined in the previous section and further advance the boundary approach by identifying mechanisms and factors that might help develop a genuinely causal and comparative account. I will do so by relying on an institutionalist, field theoretic model of ethnic boundary-making that I have recently proposed (Wimmer 2008c).

This approach suggests looking at three elements that structure the struggle over boundaries, influencing the outcomes of these struggles 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, to make their strategies of social closure consequential for others, and to gain recognition of and for their identity. Networks of political alliances are a third important element because we expect ethnic boundaries to follow the contours of social networks. I now will illustrate this field-theoretic approach by showing how these three factors influence the dynamics of boundary-making in urban labor markets.

Institutions

The boundary-making consequences of labor market regimes recently have received considerable attention (e.g., Kogan 2006). It has become clear that the boundaries against immigrant labor are weaker 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 nonnational others (Freeman 1986). From an ethnic group formation perspective, this is because the class solidarity underlying welfare states depends on a nationalist compact that induces high degrees of social closure along national lines (Wimmer 1998). 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.

At the same time, welfare states allow immigrants to say no to jobs they are forced to take in “liberal” societies, which follow a “sink-or-swim” policy regarding immigrant economic integration. This difference both explains 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. These rules produce a rather dramatic boundary between home born and foreign born, as well as between members of OECD countries, who tend to recognize one another's diploma 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 affects immigrants' earnings (Friedberg 2000; Bratsberg and Ragan 2002) and determines which labor market segments are 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 (cf. Spencer 1973), but rather a prime mechanism of social closure through which nationals maintain their birthright of being treated preferentially on the territory of "their" country—even at quite dramatic costs for the economy as a whole, as economists have argued (Spencer 1973).

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 of experimental field studies is that the degree of labor market discrimination against equally qualified immigrants 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 appropriate here. As many of the more methodologically sophisticated immigration scholars have pointed out, we should resist automatically attributing unequal representation in different segments and hierarchical levels of a labor market to institutionalized processes of ethnic discrimination and closure (see the critique by Miles 1989:54ff.). 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 an *intentional* preference of co-ethnics over others.

In Germany's labor market, to give an example, children of Turkish immigrants are heavily overrepresented 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, into tracks leading to apprenticeships or other on-the-job training programs early in their school career (Crul and Vermeulen 2003; Kristen and Granato 2007). Such institutional sorting effects are obviously not *ethnic* in nature.¹⁰

The same can be said of the mechanisms that lead Turkish adolescents into the less demanding and rewarding on-the-job training programs and Germans into the more prestigious full apprenticeship tracks—claims to having discovered an institutionalized ethnic sorting policy notwithstanding (Faist 1993). The main mechanism seems again to be sorting based on types of schools attended in the highly differentiated German school system (Faist 1993:313). This is not to deny that ethnic discrimination and closure *do* exist in the school-to-work transition or in hiring decisions in general (for direct evidence based on real-life experiments in Germany, see Goldberg et al. 1996). How *much* they do, however, is a matter to be empirically

¹⁰Most coefficients for ethnic background variables in regressions on the achievement of a gymnasium degree have a *positive* sign once parental education and occupation are controlled for, as demonstrated by Kristen and Granato (2007).

investigated through methods capable of observing discrimination directly (Goldberg et al. 1996), rather than simply being “read” off distributional outcomes, as is done in the ethnic studies tradition, or off the significance of ethnic background variables once individual-level variables are taken into account, as in much research on the “ethnic penalty” in the labor market (e.g., Heath 2007; Silberman and Fournier 2006; Berthoud 2000).

Resource Distribution and Inequality

The second step of analysis would examine the consequences of immigrants’ differential endowment with economic, political, and cultural resources (cf. Nee and Sanders 2001). A few researchers have analyzed the effects of such resource distributions from a boundary-making perspective. It seems that immigrants with lower educational capital and less economic resources are particularly likely to end up in ethnically defined niches in the labor market, while better skilled immigrants are much less dependent on such niches (see the case study of Swiss immigrants in California by Samson 2000). Furthermore, migrants who 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, are particularly disadvantaged in the labor markets, especially when it comes to translating skills into occupation (Heath 2007). For these migrants, the likelihood of remaining trapped in ethnically defined labor market niches is especially high.

Despite these advances, it is striking how little is known 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 affect migrants’ position in the distribution of various capitals, as argued and demonstrated in research on Germany by Kalter et al. (2007). Unfortunately, I am not aware of any study that has taken the class background of migrants in their country of *origin* (as opposed to the country of settlement) and thus the social background of second-generation individuals into account. However, only a deeper understanding of how the general mechanisms of intergenerational 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.

Perhaps this argument should be illustrated with an empirical example. 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 a strategy of ethnic 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? Even some of the methodologically most sophisticated and analytically careful research into the “ethnic penalty” in the labor market assumes, perhaps following the authors’ Herderian instincts, that ethnic variation means ethnic causation ignoring the potential role of class background (see again Heath 2007; Silberman and Fournier 2006; Berthoud 2000).

In general, research on immigrants in the labor market often jumps to Herderian conclusions when discovering significant results for ethnic background variables—instead of looking for unobserved individual-level characteristics that might be unequally distributed across ethnic categories (such as language facility and networks; see Kalter 2006), for variation in contexts and timing of settlement that may covary with ethnic background, or for the selection effects of different channels of migration (cf. Portes 1995). Even when some of these individual-level characteristics are taken into account, the discussion sometimes remains transfixed on group-level ethnic differences. A good example is Berthoud's otherwise sophisticated research on ethnic employment penalties in Britain. Although ethnic background accounts for a mere 1.7 percent of the variation in employment status (Berthoud 2000:406), the entire article is organized around a comparison of the labor market experiences of white, Indian, Caribbean, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi men.

Networks

Besides institutional frameworks and resource distribution, I suggest to 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 labor market access (Lin 1999) and especially in the process of ethnic niche formation. Network hiring characterizes many for low skilled labor and explains why resource-poor immigrants are more likely to end up in such ethnically defined niches (Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Network hiring is widespread among 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 also know that weak network ties, which are often multiethnic in nature, are important for better skilled immigrants (Samson 2000; Bagchi 2001) employed in other segments of the labor market, as a long line of research in the wake of Granovetter's canonical article has shown (Granovetter 1973).

Despite these general insights, the precise conditions under which networks coalesce along ethnic lines and produce ethnic niches still remain somewhat of a mystery. As with processes of institutional sorting and the effects of resource endowments, one needs to carefully distinguish ethnic from other boundary-making mechanisms. Ethnically homogenous networks might be the consequence of family or village solidarity, rather than social closure along ethnic lines (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 individuals of the same ethnic background cluster in similar jobs or sectors of the economy, we should not jump to the conclusion that ethnic-group-level mechanisms are responsible for this pattern.

The final analytical step would consist in drawing these three lines of inquiry together and determining how the interplay between institutional rules, resource distribution, and networking strategies determine the specific trajectories of immigrant individuals in labor markets over time. An analysis that proceeds along these lines would probably discover much more individual-level and within-group variation than a Herderian approach that focuses on how “Mexican,” “Turkish,” or “Swiss”

immigrants fare in the labor market or on which niche is occupied by which of these “groups.” Some Mexican families in the United States, endowed with low educational capital, embedded in home-town networks, and affected by weak welfare state institutions 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 the firm limits imposed by the quality of schools they can afford and the discrimination they face when seeking other than the least-qualified jobs. Other immigrants, endowed with another mix of resources, focused on weaving pan-ethnic networks, and affected by other institutional rules such as affirmative action hiring, might experience an easy transition into the professional middle class. Still others might specialize in the ethnic business sector and draw upon a large network of clients from within the Mexican community (see the heterogeneous outcomes reported in Telles and Ortiz 2008).

These different trajectories are obviously not randomly distributed over individuals, but need to be explained as the combined effects of field rules and their changes over time; the individual’s initial endowment of economic and cultural capital and subsequent changes in the volume and composition of those forms of capital; 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 may the way that other individuals from other backgrounds perceive and interact with these individuals. Whether these multiple positions and forms of interaction coalesce into a clearly distinguishable ethnic segment of the labor market and the degree to which individuals of the same background land in such ethnic niches are thus open, empirical questions that a multi-level research design is best able to answer (cf. Nohl et al. 2006).

DE-ETHNICIZING RESEARCH DESIGNS

As the previous section has made clear, the perspective advocated here calls for certain types of methodologies that make it easier to observe a variety of outcomes of ethnic boundary-making processes and that allow one to consider other, nonethnic mechanisms that might have aggregate consequences for the distribution of outcomes over ethnic groups. It is necessary, in other words, to de-ethnicize research designs by taking nonethnic units of observation to see *both* the emergence of ethnic closure and its absence or dissolution. In the following, I discuss the most important alternative units of observation that have been used in past research: localities, individuals, social classes, and institutional settings. In the concluding paragraphs, I will discuss analytical strategies that make it possible to use ethnic groups as units of observation without importing Herderian assumptions into the analysis.

Localities

Choosing territorial units, such as neighborhoods, cities, or regions, provides an opportunity to avoid “the ethnic lens” when observing which forms of categorization are most relevant for everyday forms of group formation (Glick Schiller et al. 2006). A first example of such research is the study of a neighborhood in Cologne by Kissler and Eckert (1990). The authors wanted to understand how this locality is perceived by established residents, by new immigrants, and by members of the alternative scene. Using the configuration analysis developed by Norbert Elias, they showed

that the nonethnic distinction between “established” and “outsiders” is the most pertinent social categorization and organization for neighborhood residents. Studies of immigrant neighborhoods in Switzerland (Wimmer 2004) and of working-class housing cooperatives in southern London (Back 1996; Wallman 1978) yield similar results. Les Back has coined the term “neighborhood nationalism” to describe these trans-ethnic, localist modes of classification and social networking.

Gerd Baumann's work on another neighborhood in London, however, documents a different outcome. He asked 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 (Baumann 1996). Studies in other neighborhoods have revealed yet other configurations.¹¹ The obvious task ahead is to develop a systematic comparative explanation of differences and similarities in the social and categorical boundaries that structure these neighborhood settings.

Individuals

A second possible approach is to choose individuals of varying backgrounds as units of analysis, without prearranging them into ethnic groups. This is often done in quantitative research in economics and sociology, where ethnic background is added to the regression equation as a dummy variable. While this overcomes many of the problems of the ethnic community studies design, the interpretation of findings is often haunted, as discussed above, by Herderian assumptions: researchers frequently interpret a significant ethnicity background as evidence for ethnic discrimination, the specificities of ethnic culture, or the strength of ethnic solidarity. Following the principles of “mechanismic” explanation (the term is from Bunge 1997), however, finding significant results for ethnic dummies should represent the *beginning*—not the end—of the explanatory endeavor, because there might be several mechanisms through which ethnic background affects individual outcomes, all of which might be causally independent of ethnic solidarity, ethnic culture, and the like.

A particular immigration history can lead individuals to enter a host country's labor market at a point in time when certain opportunities are within reach, while others are not. Members of certain ethnic categories might come disproportionately from rural or urban backgrounds. Previous labor market experiences might differ systematically by country of origin and influence perceptions of job opportunities and application strategies (think of former Communist countries with life-long guarantee of employment). Migration channels produce selection effects (compare refugees resettled through UNHCR vs. guest workers recruited through agents vs. illegal immigrants crossing the border with the help of *coyotes*), and so on (see the “context of incorporation” discussed by Portes and Rumbault 1990).

Ideally, one would therefore combine quantitative with qualitative research to determine if any of these mechanisms are responsible for an ethnic background effect, or whether it is indeed related to ethnic networks, culture, or discrimination.¹² One would then return to the quantitative stage and add observable variables that capture the hypothesized “nonethnic” mechanisms in a more direct way (e.g., year of immigration or immigration from a country that is predominantly rural or urban,

¹¹Cf. Sanjek (1998) on a Queens neighborhood; Back (1996) on Southgate in London.

¹²For an example of such research, see Pigué and Wimmer (2000).

had a Communist past etc.), thereby eliminating, reducing, or elucidating the effect of ethnic background variables while at the same time avoiding the attribution of outcomes to ethnic-group-level mechanisms when, in fact, substantively different processes are at work.

Class

Third, one may take social classes as units of analysis and examine how ethnic boundaries are perceived, talked about, and enacted in the neighborhoods and workplaces occupied by individuals of similar socioeconomic standing. 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 their 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 miss that the dynamics of boundary-making vary dramatically depending on which end of the class structure one examines—rather than depending on the racial background of individuals. To put this in more general terms, qualitative studies of ethnic group-making need a research design that allows for some variation in the features of ethnic boundaries observed in order to gain analytical traction and to avoid Herderian common sense.

Institutional Fields

Another mode of de-ethnicizing research designs is to study institutional environments in which nonethnic (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 the conditions under which classifications and networks actually do (or do not) align with ethnic divides. Much of this literature has an explicit anti-ethnic bias and studies the conditions under which integrated, trans-ethnic relationships stabilize in churches (e.g., Emerson and Woo 2006), 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 networks and modes of categorization. Studying organizational fields thus allows specifying the institutional conditions under which ethnicity emerges as a major principle of social organization without already *assuming* that this is the case in the way units of observation are chosen.

Studying Ethnic Groups Revisited

All this criticism of taking ethnic groups as self-evident units of observation and analysis does not mean that students of immigration should not focus on individuals

from a particular country of origin. When studying "Turks," "Swiss," or "Mexicans," however, one should be careful to avoid the Herderian fallacy of assuming communitarian closure, cultural difference, and shared identity. The study has to ask, rather than assume, whether there is indeed community organization, ethnic closure in networking practices, a shared identity, etc. In the course of such analysis, I recommend sensitivity to three potential problems.

First, one needs to carefully determine whether or not an observed pattern is indeed "ethnic" or whether other, lower (or higher) levels of social organization are responsible for the outcome, most importantly village communities or families. 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 that avoids the "measurement validity" problem of taking familialism for ethnic solidarity has been conducted by Nauck and Kohlmann. They found that the support networks of Turkish immigrants in Germany are about as familial as those of German nonmigrants (Nauck and Kohlmann 1999). Interpreting the mono-ethnic character of their networks as a sign of ethnic closure would therefore grossly misrepresent reality: Turkish immigrants trust other Turkish immigrants with whom they do not relate through family ties no more than they trust 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, do not belong to ethnic clubs and associations, do not consider their country-of-origin background meaningful, do not frequent ethnic cafés and shops, do not marry a co-ethnic, do not work in jobs that have an ethnic connotation, and do not live in ethnic neighborhoods (cf. the critique by Morawska 1994; Conzen 1996). In order to avoid sampling on the dependent variable and thereby eliminating variance in the observed outcome, one should avoid snowball sampling (e.g., asking "Mexicans" to name "fellow Mexicans"). One should also avoid studying a neighborhood with a clear ethnic connotation because one then eliminates from the analytical picture those Mexicans who have never lived in "the barrio."

Third, careful attention should be given to the *variety* of boundary-making strategies that one finds among individuals sharing the same background. Attention to this variety is essential if one is to avoid privileging those strategies that emphasize ethnic closure and cultural difference, thus again eliminating observed variance in the outcome of interest. Several well-designed studies show in detail how research that takes a particular immigrant group as a starting point might be conducted without reifying that group and its boundedness (e.g., Waters 1999; Wessendorf 2007; Glick Schiller et al. 2006).

Perhaps the best possible research design is a genuine panel study that pursues immigrants originating from the same country (or village or region) over several decades, ideally across generations. Edward Telles's and Vilma Ortiz's Mexican-American project represents such a study design (Telles and Ortiz 2008). They have traced almost all Mexican Americans who were surveyed in the 1950s and interviewed a very large number of their children and grandchildren as well. Their data show that individuals from the same ethnic background pursue a variety of ethnic boundary-making strategies, from crossing the boundary into the "mainstream" to reversing the moral hierarchy between majority and minority, from blurring ethnic boundaries by emphasizing other, cross-cutting cleavages to enlarging boundaries by emphasizing the relevance of a "pan-ethnic," Hispanic category (see the

typology in Wimmer 2008a). Rather than trying to describe the fate of “the Mexican community,” the task then becomes to make sense of such individual variation in boundary-making strategies and its consequences both for individual life chances and for the emergence and transformation of various forms of social closure.

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