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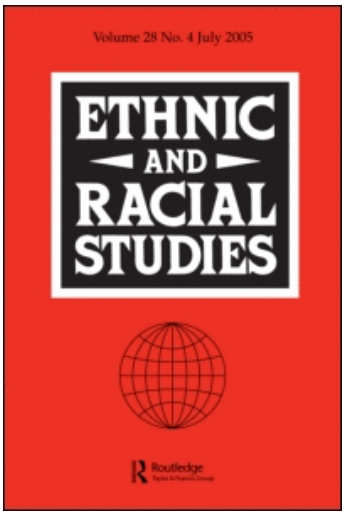

Ethnic and Racial Studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713685087

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First Published:September2008

To cite this Article Wimmer, Andreas(2008)'Elementary strategies of ethnic boundary making',Ethnic and Racial Studies,31:6,1025 — 1055

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/01419870801905612

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870801905612

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Ethnic and Racial Studies Vol. 31 No. 6 September 2008 pp. 1025–1055

Elementary strategies of ethnic boundary making

Andreas Wimmer

Abstract

This article offers a new taxonomy of how actors may change ethnic boundaries. I distinguish between five main strategies: to redraw a boundary by either expanding or limiting the domain of people included in one's own ethnic category; to modify existing boundaries by challenging the hierarchical ordering of ethnic categories, or by changing one's own position within a boundary system, or by emphasizing other, non-ethnic forms of belonging. The taxonomy claims to be exhaustive and accommodates a considerable number of historical and contemporary cases both from the developed and the developing world. It aims at overcoming the fragmentation of the literature along disciplinary and sub-disciplinary lines and prepares the ground for an agency-based comparative model of ethnic boundary making.

Keywords: Ethnic boundaries; blurring; assimilation; nation-building; ethnogenesis; constructivism.

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> The social world is both the product and the stake of inseparably cognitive and political symbolic struggles over knowledge and recognition, in which each pursues not only the imposition of an advantageous representation of himself or herself . . . but also the power to impose as legitimate the principles of construction of social reality most favorable to his or her social being (individual and collective, with, for example, struggles over the boundaries of groups). (Bourdieu 2000, p. 187)

Advancing the comparative boundary-making agenda

Since the 1960s, the study of ethnicity has moved from the margins to the centre of various social science disciplines, most importantly of

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ISSN 0141-9870 print/1466-4356 online
DOI: 10.1080/01419870801905612

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sociology, social anthropology and political science. The growth of the literature, however, has not helped to overcome its fragmentation along disciplinary and sub-disciplinary lines, which represents a formidable obstacle to the formation of an encompassing comparative tradition. To be sure, in some sub-fields such as the comparative political science study of ethnic conflicts, the historical sociology of nationalism or the anthropology of immigrant ethnic groups, strong comparative research programmes have emerged and been sustained over decades. However, there is little communication between these comparative traditions, between those who study the developed world and those concerned with developing societies, those preoccupied with immigration at home and those with domestic minorities abroad, those who study nationalism in the west and those who are interested in ethnic conflict in the south. This article builds on these various comparativist traditions and provides further impetus to integrate them into a more coherent enterprise. I reach out for this ambitious goal with the admittedly primitive tool of a typology of ethnic phenomena that cuts across the divisions between developing and developed, the west and 'the rest', the domestic and the foreign. More specifically, I pursue two related goals.

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In search of universal forms

First, this article is written as an invitation to overcome the disciplinary division of labour by showing – though not 'proving' even in a loose sense of the term – that modes of ethnicity making are indeed finite, even if we consider far-away places and distant times. If this is so, shared mechanisms might govern ethnic group formation processes even if these lead to different outcomes in different places and times. A typology obviously cannot explain these comparatively and this article does *not* aim to explore the conditions under which a certain way of drawing ethnic boundaries becomes more frequent, salient or consequential. This will have to be addressed by future research in this area (cf. Wimmer 2008).

The Simmelean and Lévi-Straussean[1] search for universal forms that motivates this paper stands in opposition to several prominent intellectual projects in the field of comparative ethnicity. Some authors emphasize the differences between various types of ethnicity, most importantly between those based on phenotypical marker's (''race'') and those based on culture and language (Omi and Winant 1994; Cornell and Hartmann 1998; Bonilla-Silva 1999); others see a radical break between the past and the current age of 'post-ethnicity' or 'post-nationalism' (Soysal 1994; Appadurai 1996, ch. 8; Breckenridge *et al.* 2001); many ethnographers and regional experts insist that the ethnic constellations in one country or continent are irreducibly different

from all others (Heisler 1991). This article is not meant to address these various strands of debate in a direct way.[2] But it offers an alternative view to these positions by showing that each of the main strategies of ethnic boundary making can be found among groups defined by 'race' or culture, in epochs far removed from the present age of globalization, and in places scattered over all the continents. At the risk of taxing the reader's patience, I will make the case for the universality of ethnic forms by citing as many examples as possible – without, however, being able to explore them fully or analyse them individually. To demonstrate the universality of ethnic forms obviously does not imply that their frequency remains constant across places and times or that context and epoch do not matter. But a conceptually exhaustive and empirically encompassing taxonomy of ethnic phenomena allows us to understand the specificity of particular epochs, societies or types of ethnicity in a much more precise way. In other words, it unfolds a comparative horizon which puts the contours of individual cases in sharper relief than the usual small-n comparisons possibly can.

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From boundaries to boundary making

Second, this article aims at further advancing the boundary-making approach in the study of ethnicity. The genealogy of this tradition leads from Max Weber to Fredrik Barth and Pierre Bourdieu and ends with a group of contemporary writers who pursue similar analytical strategies.[3] In this tradition, ethnicity is not primarily conceived as a matter of *relations* between pre-defined, fixed groups – such as in the 'race relations' or 'ethnic competition' approach (e.g. Banton 1983) – but rather as a process of *constituting* and *re-configuring* groups by defining the boundaries between them.

Much of the earlier work in this tradition, including Barth's original collection of essays, was comparatively static and focused mostly on the features of the boundaries themselves and the processes of their maintenance. Newer research emphasizes the 'making' of the ethnic boundary either by political movements or through everyday interaction of individuals. This shift of emphasis towards 'boundary making' or 'boundary work' is perhaps the consequence of the general trend away from structural determinism towards theories that emphasize 'agency' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Many have argued that, in order to advance this constructivist tradition in the study of ethnicity, a further exploration of how ethnicity is made and unmade in the everyday interaction between individuals is in place (Barth 1994; Brubaker 2002; Lamont and Molnár 2002).

Different avenues are currently being explored to arrive at such an 'agency-rich' understanding of ethnic boundary making. Some rely on

fine-grained ethnography to study under which circumstances ethnicity does or does not play a role in the everyday interactions in specific social fields, from school to work to local politics (Brubaker *et al.* 2007). Others experiment with evolutionary (Boyd and Richerson 2007) or other game-theoretic approaches (Kroneberg and Wimmer in preparation) to understand how ethnic boundaries emerge from the dynamic interaction between individuals. Yet others use agent-based modelling to grasp how repeated encounters between actors pursuing different goals may lead to the stabilization of ethnic dividing lines (Lustick 2000; Cederman 2004). Others derive inspiration from the pragmatist tradition of social theorizing and attempt a better understanding of how individuals react to and enact ethnic boundaries to save face, preserve their dignity or advance their claims to moral superiority (Lamont 2000). Finally, a neo-Gramscian school underlines the power effects entailed by different ways of dividing a society into ethnic groups and studies under which conditions certain such 'projects' might achieve hegemonic dominance (Omi and Winant 1994; Mallon 1995; Grandin 2000).

In this article, I intend to advance this intellectual agenda further by looking at the different options that actors may pursue to react to existing boundaries, to overcome or reinforce them, to shift them to exclude new groups of individuals or include others, or to promote other, non-ethnic modes of classification and social practice. The research avenues mentioned above may profit from this endeavour in various ways: game theorists need to endow their actors with strategic goals and options for action that have some basis in empirical reality; ethnographers may want to situate what they have observed within the larger panorama of possibilities; pragmatist analysis of boundary work needs to relate one way of making sense of a boundary to how others perceive and strategically relate to this boundary in order to understand the dynamics of stability and change; neo-Gramscians may profit from a more systematic discussion of the range of possible strategies of contestation and re-interpretation of hegemonic systems of ethnic classification.

Existing typologies

The typology offered here classifies *forms* of ethnicity making – rather than *types* of ethnicity or the different ways in which ethnicity relates to economic or political inequality, as was the case in the numerous typologies produced in the early days of ethnicity studies (van den Berghe 1967; Smith 1969; Schermerhorn 1970; Young 1976; Rothschild 1981). A typology based on types of ethnicity, for example, would divide the world into areas where 'race' (the Americas), language (Eastern Europe) or religion (the Middle East and South

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Asia) represents the most prominent form of ethnic differentiation. Similarly, typologies based on social structure distinguish societies in which ethnicity coincides with social class and those where it cross-cuts class divisions (Horowitz 1971), societies with high or low degrees of ethnic institutional pluralism (van den Berghe 1967; Smith 1969), societies where ethnic groups are segregated or integrated (Hunt and Walker 1979), the post-nationalist west and the primordially ethnic rest (Heisler 1991) and so forth.

Several typologies of forms of ethnicity making already exist, however. Is there any justification for adding another one to the literature? How could one establish whether a new typology is in any meaningful sense 'better' than existing ones? There is not much theoretical reflection in the social sciences about the adequate principles for constructing typologies,[4] especially when compared to other fields in which taxonomic and typological reasoning are prominent, such as in evolutionary biology. There seems to be quite a solid consensus, however, on how a good typology should look like (Tiryakian 1968; Marradi 1990, pp. 132ff.; Bailey 1994, ch. 1). First, it should be *comprehensive* and offer an adequate type for all known empirical cases. A good typology also *exhausts* the range of logical possibilities. Furthermore, it is coherent: all types or taxa are created with reference to the same *fundamentum divisionis* and the various *fundamenta* used on different levels of a taxonomy are of the same nature. Finally, a typology should be heuristically fruitful and advance theoretical and empirical reasoning in a particular domain (the *relevance* criterion).

The main deficiency of existing typologies is that they are not exhaustive enough – they do not comprise all logical possibilities of boundary making – and they do not aim at comprehensiveness, but have narrower empirical focuses such as immigrant assimilation in the west or ethnogenesis in the south. I discuss the three main contributions subsequently.

Lamont and Bail describe two strategies that subordinate groups develop to counter racist stigmatization and ethnic exclusion in western societies (Lamont and Bail 2005). 'Universalizing' means emphasizing general human morality as a basis for distinguishing between worthy and unworthy individuals. 'Particularizing' reinterprets the stigmatized category in positive terms. This is certainly an empirically meaningful distinction for the domain at hand, as their own research convincingly shows. If we aim for a more exhaustive typology, we should add other logically possible and empirically observable strategies that subordinate actors pursue, especially attempts at changing their own ethnic status by shifting sides and assimilating into the dominant group. One also wonders if these two strategies should not be considered as specific examples of more

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general types since not only subordinate, but also dominant actors might attempt either emphasizing the particular character of their own group to keep everybody else at arms length or, on the contrary, point to universal moral qualities in order to negate the exclusionary character of existing boundaries.

Zolberg and Woon (1999) distinguished among boundary crossing, blurring and shifting as three possible outcomes of the negotiations between national majorities and immigrant minorities in the west. This distinction is general and abstract enough to encompass strategies pursued by various types of actors and it uses a single *fundamentum divisionis*: the changes in the topography of boundaries that is envisioned. I thus will adopt this threefold structure as it is. However, it is not exhaustive enough because it excludes Lamont's 'particularizing' strategy: some individuals do not aim at the topography of boundaries, but rather at the hierarchical ordering of existing categories. The civil rights movement in the United States, to give an example, aimed at abolishing the hierarchy between black and white, but not the black-white distinction as a whole (as in boundary blurring) or the individual assignment to these categories (crossing) or the definition of who belongs on which side (shifting). Furthermore, blurring, shifting and crossing have to be subdivided into several subcategories. The causes and consequences of shifting boundaries in a more inclusionary direction, for example, are arguably different from those of drawing more exclusionary boundaries.

Based on a large number of cases from the developing world, Donald Horowitz discusses amalgamation and incorporation as subtypes of fusion, as well as division and proliferation as sub-strategies of fission (Horowitz 1975). All of these are, in Zolberg and Woon's terms, sub-categories of the more general strategy of boundary shifting. Horowitz's typology – masterfully developed on the basis of a profound knowledge of a substantial number of cases from across Africa – thus explores one particular domain of ethnic strategies in as precise a way as possible. I will use some of these distinctions in order to construct sub-types of boundary shifting and will thus integrate them into a more exhaustive and comprehensive typology.

These three existing typologies together still do not exhaust the range of possible strategies, however. Various modes of nation-building, which are the focus of an entirely separate literature and different typological exercises (see, e.g., McGarry and O'Leary 1993; Mann 2005 among many others), will have to be taken into account. I disregard, however, the distinctions between 'civic' and 'ethnic' nationalisms and a range of similar typologies prominent in the field of nationalism studies because they are based on differences in cultural content rather than structural form.

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The present typology thus brings these disconnected previous efforts together by incorporating them into a logically consistent and empirically encompassing framework. This allows the integration of examples from both developing and the developed world, from contemporary to historical periods, from national majorities, immigrant communities and domestic ethnic minorities, from racially defined boundaries to those marked by language, culture or religion.[5] Toiling through this vast and diverse empirical literature, I distinguish between strategies that attempt to change the location of existing boundaries ('boundary shifting') by 'expanding' or 'contracting' the domains of the included and those that do not aim at the location of a boundary but try to modify its meaning and implication by challenging the hierarchical ordering of ethnic categories ('normative inversion'), de-emphasizing ethnicity and emphasizing other social divisions ('blurring') or changing one's own position *vis-à-vis* the boundary ('positional moves'). Further subdivisions will be introduced along the way. In the last section I will come back to the question of how far this taxonomy satisfies the requirements of comprehensiveness, exhaustiveness and consistency.

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Expansion

An actor[6] may attempt to shift a boundary to a more inclusive or a more exclusive level than the existing one. These attempts I call strategies of boundary expansion and contraction respectively. Expansion and contraction may be achieved in two ways: first, by fusion, which reduces the number of categories and expands existing boundaries, or by fission, which adds a new one and thus contracts previous boundaries. Second, a more inclusive or exclusive level of categorical distinction may be emphasized without altering the number of categories in place. Such emphasis shift is made possible by the segmentary, nested character of many systems of ethnic categorization, a feature that has received some attention in anthropology[7] and more recently also in sociology.[8]

While I sometimes do distinguish between emphasis shifting in such multi-layered boundary systems and fusion/fission, I do not build the typology systematically on this distinction because in many cases it is unclear whether the old distinction has indeed disappeared (as in fusion) or survives in a less salient and relevant way (as in emphasis shifting).

Nation-building

The politics of nation-building represents perhaps the best-studied strategy of boundary expansion. I distinguish between three variants

of nation-building (cf. also McGarry and O'Leary 1993). In the first variant, state elites redefine an *existing* ethnic group as the nation into which everybody should fuse (hence, the 'incorporation' mode, or $a+b \rightarrow a$), while in a second mode, they create a new national category through the amalgamation of a variety of ethnic groups (the 'amalgamation' mode, or $a+b \rightarrow c$). Emphasizing a higher level of categorical distinction that supersedes existing ethnic distinctions represents a third mode (the 'emphasis shifting' variant).

France is widely regarded as the paradigmatic case for nation-building through incorporation. Not only peasants were turned into Frenchmen by the nationalizing state elites, to paraphrase a famous book title (Weber 1979), but also Aquitainians, Provencales, Occitanians and so forth. The 'national core', into which all others were assumed to assimilate voluntarily, was usually synonymous with the ethnic culture and language of the dominant state-building elites (cf. Williams 1989): the language and culture of the *île de France*, of Tuscany, of the *mittelhochdeutsch* principalities, of Southern Sweden, of English Protestant towns on the east coast of the United States, of the Buganda of Uganda, of the Creoles of independent Peru, the Sunni Arabs of Iraq. The core group can also be defined in racial terms. After the republican revolution, the Brazilian state elites officially endorsed a policy of 'whitening' its population through miscegenation, which they hoped would produce a uniform, light-skinned population in their own image (Skidmore 1993 [1974]).[9]

The second, much rarer variant of nation-building proceeds not by generalizing one particular ethnic group, but through actively encouraging 'mixture' or amalgamation of various ethnic groups into the melting pot of a newly invented national community. Mexico's ideology of *mestizaje*, which was supposed to create, in the words of Mexican philosopher and long-time minister of education José Vasconcelos, a 'cosmic race', is one variant of this strategy (cf. Wimmer 2002, ch. 6). *Mestizaje* turned the eugenic concept of mixture of the previous century on its head. The revolutionary elite no longer hoped that mixture would gradually eliminate the Indian and black populations and thus 'save the nation' from its degenerated parts. Rather, they thought of miscegenation as the fusion of elements of *all* races into a new race that would be culturally, morally and physically superior to white North Americans who were kept 'pure' through forced segregation and whose destiny therefore was biological decay and cultural decline.[10]

A third, more frequent variant of nation-building proceeds by emphasizing a higher layer of ethnic differentiation that corresponds to the population of a state and thus superposes existing ethnic, regional or racial divisions. Classic examples are Switzerland, where the national level of identity was propagated by the winners of the civil war

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of 1848. They managed to shift the emphasis to the more encompassing national category and away from the well-established provincial and communal categories of belonging (Wimmer 2002, ch. 8). Other examples of such supra-ethnic nationalisms are India, where post-independence state elites never attempted to incorporate or amalgamate the various religious, linguistic, regional, tribal and caste communities into a national majority, but rather superposed these multiplicities by emphasizing a more encompassing, national identity.

Sometimes such nation-building projects are not pursued by the state, but rather against state elites and their vision of the rightful ethnic divisions of society (cf. Brubaker 2004, ch. 6). Perhaps the most spectacular example is South Africa, where the apartheid state's division of the black majority into a series of ethnic groups, each assigned to its own statelet, failed to become the exclusive modus of classification and focus of political loyalty (see Anonymous 1989 for an example). The superimposed categories of 'Africans', a racially defined term promoted by one set of political parties, or 'South Africans', the key term for the republican nationalism of the ANC, helped to mobilize the subordinate majority against the apartheid state. Many examples from the colonial period could be mentioned, especially from the British empire, where the policy of indirect rule and the designation, sometimes the creation, of tribes and tribal chiefs has, albeit often only temporarily (e.g. in Zimbabwe, see Sithole 1980), been overcome by powerful independence movements which emphasized the political relevance of a super-positioned national identity.

To be sure, not all attempts at nation-building – whether pursued by anti-state movements or by nationalizing state elites – were successful. In Somalia, the idea of a Somali nation as a community of political destiny has not had much success in overarching and erasing clan and regional identities (Rothchild 1995). The shattered nationalizing projects of Czechoslovakia or Yugoslavia (Sekulic, Massey and Hodson 1994) and Guatemala (Smith 1990) are other examples. In all these cases, the nation-building strategies were not supported by the population at large, who refused to identify with the imagined community of the nation.

Ethnogenesis

The creation of national majorities shifts the boundary towards a more inclusive, but rarely an all-encompassing level. The expanded boundary sets the nation off not only from other such imagined communities, but also from those domestic groups whom state-building elites or nationalist movements perceive as too alien or politically unreliable for incorporation or amalgamation. The making of ethnic minorities often entails a second process of emphasis shifting,

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amalgamation or incorporation: of smaller minority groups into larger categories easier to administer through indirect rule or a modern 'minority' policy. Majority formation and minority making are thus two aspects of the same process (Williams 1989). Over time, these expanded categories may be inscribed into the administrative routines of the state and gradually be adopted by minority individuals themselves. A recent US example of such ethnogenesis is the emergence of the Comanche (Hagan 1976, p. 133) out of a variety of bands of different ethnic origin (a case of amalgamation).

Ethnogenesis seems to be common in other centralizing and modernizing polities as well. An example from a land-based, non-colonial empire is the Ottoman millet system, which emerged during the nineteenth century when the Sublime Port attempted to centralize and modernize its system of administration. Various previously independent local churches and religious communities were incorporated into the four millets of orthodox Christians, Monophysites, Roman Catholics and Jews (Braude and Lewis 1982).[11] These boundaries were later adopted and politicized by nationalist movements in Rumelia and beyond: Orthodox Christians became Serbs, Monophysites Armenians and so on (Karpat 1973).

Another pre-modern example is the caste system in Nepal. The emerging Nepalese kingdom grouped, during the eighteenth century, a wide variety of tribes, ethnic groups and religious and linguistic communities into a unified caste system. Many of the ethnonyms used by the state became common currency. Some of them are now categories of self-description, such as the Limbu, while other terms, for example the 'Tamang', remained largely categorical and limited to dealings with the state (Levine 1987).

Examples of ethnogenesis in colonial states abound as well. The British Raj systematized Indian caste terminology and thus for the first time created a uniform classificatory system (Cohn 1987). In other parts of the world, colonial authorities amalgamated or incorporated various previously independent tribes and other local communities into larger entities, often with the aim of facilitating indirect rule over them by appointing chiefs or other representatives. The Hutu and Tutsi of Rwanda and Burundi are widely cited cases (Laely 1994). In pre-colonial times, Hutu and Tutsi designated the life-styles of clans of peasants and herders rather than ethnic groups. The kings ruled through a patronage system that incorporated both Hutu and Tutsi clans. The Belgian colonial administration systematically privileged individuals with a Tutsi background and thus transformed the life-style categories into ethnic groups.[12] Many attempts by colonial states to create expanded ethnic categories, however, have failed, as examples from across the world show.[13]

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In other contexts, it is dominant majorities rather than state institutions which emphasize a higher-level category for describing minority groups and manage to convince or force minorities to accept it as a category of self-description. Examples are the 'Bohemian Germans' of Czechia, which had emphasized the status lines that divided them and did not perceive themselves as a unified national group. Rather, educated German-speakers saw themselves as members of the cultural elite of the transnational Austrian-Hungarian empire. It is much later that they adopted the minority category of 'Bohemian Germans' through which Czech nationalists had described them for some time (Cohen 1981, p. 30; see also Bahm 1999). In Hawaii, Chinese immigrants came to see themselves as a national group because they were classified by the resident majority as such, while previously they had distinguished among themselves on the basis of regional origin – a differentiation soon to be all but forgotten (Glick 1938). In Papua, town residents classified rural migrants by broader, regional ethnic terms which migrants themselves tended to adopt over time (Levine and Wolfzahn Levine 1979). Comparable processes have been analysed in Mitchell's classic study of rural migrants in a mining town of Rhodesia (Mitchell 1974).[14] Earlier in the twentieth century, immigrants to the US from Italy gradually learned that the appropriate way of describing themselves would be as 'Italians', not 'Napolitani' or 'Tuscanesi' (Alba 1985).

Sometimes ethnogenesis may not be driven primarily by a state apparatus in pursuit of a minority-making strategy nor by dominant majorities, but rather by social movements led by minority political entrepreneurs. This is a process well known from the early stages of nation-state formation in the developing world. Ethno-regional distinctions, situated above the level of the 'tribes' designated by colonial governments, were emphasized (or sometimes invented) by a new class of political entrepreneurs in order to compete more successfully in the emerging national political arena.[15] Examples are the 'montagnards' in the highlands of Vietnam (Tefft 1999) or the Bangala, Mongo and Bakongo in Congo (Young 1965, pp. 242–52).[16]

The phenomenon is not restricted to the developing world, but bears interesting parallels to the attempts by political entrepreneurs to develop pan-ethnic identities among 'Asians' or 'Hispanics' in the US (Padilla 1986; Espiritu 1992; Okamoto 2003). Some observers have attributed the rise of these pan-ethnic movements to the new incentive structures that the expansion of post-war government and especially the 'Great Society' welfare programmes and affirmative action have brought about (Glazer and Moynihan 1975). As these examples suggest, sometimes the strategies of boundary expansion by political entrepreneurs meet those of powerful state agencies – both may coincide in emphasizing a new political boundary at a higher level of

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ethnic segmentation than before. The following section will show, however, that the rank-and-file do not always adopt such pan-ethnic distinctions but may even actively oppose them and promote more closely drawn boundaries of belonging.

Contraction

Contraction means drawing narrower boundaries and thus dis-identifying with the category one is assigned to by outsiders. Contraction may be achieved through fission – splitting the existing category into two – or by shifting emphasis to lower levels of differentiation in multi-tiered systems of ethnic classification. Contraction is an especially attractive strategy for individuals and groups that do not have access to the central political arena and whose radius of action remains confined to immediate social spaces. In many cases, immigrants have insisted on country of origin or even narrower ethnic terms instead of the broader continental or 'racial' categories imposed on them by dominant majorities. Such is the case among many 'Asians' of Chinese origin in California, who dislike being thrown together into the same categorical pot with Japanese and for whom the finer status distinctions between Taiwanese and mainland Chinese (dismissively called FOBs, or fresh-off-the-boats, by the former) are of greater relevance (Kibria 2002).[17] Similarly, individuals of Pakistani origin in London resist being associated with Indians in the 'South-Asian' category, and emphasize lower-level, regional (Punjabi) or religious distinctions among co-nationals (Saifullah Khan 1976). Bhotiyas in Nepal construct localized ethnic identities in order to reject pan-Bhotiyanism (Ramble 1997).

Another example is the ethnic localism of indigenous groups of Mexico. In the rural areas and outside the circles of ethno-nationalist intellectuals and anthropologists, the distinction between *indígena* and *mestizo/ladino*, while occasionally used, is de-emphasized as much as possible, while it is certainly the level of ethnic distinction preferred by the *mestizo* traders and government bureaucrats in the provincial capitals. From the point of view of a peasant let us say in rural Chiapas, the social world is divided between one's own municipality, the centre of the political, social and spiritual world, and the rest. A person is first and foremost a Chamulteco(a), a Zinacanteco(a), and so on – a formidable symbolic weapon against the claims to exclusivity and cultural superiority that the Spanish-speaking *mestizos* routinely make when distinguishing *indios* as 'gentes naturales' from *ladinos* as 'gentes de razón'.[18]

In all of these examples emphasis is shifted to lower levels of *existing* ethnic divisions. However, sometimes boundaries are also contracted by subdividing a group into *new* categories in order to dis-identify

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oneself from the original, encompassing group – a case of fission in Horowitz's terminology. African-American elite clubs and fraternities before the civil rights movement, to give an example, split the 'black' category by distinguishing between lighter- and darker-skinned individuals – and discriminating against the latter (cf. Graham 2000). The stigma of blackness is thus passed down the ladder to those with darker complexions (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1993). Many other examples of categorical fission are known from the anthropological literature (Horowitz 1977).

In the following sections, I turn to strategies that do not aim at changing the topography of boundaries, as those discussed so far do, but rather at modifying their meaning and implication for a person's own life. This includes transforming the normative hierarchy between two ethnic categories (transvaluation), changing one's own position *vis-à-vis* a boundary (crossing and re-positioning) and emphasizing other, non-ethnic bonds of belonging (blurring).

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Transvaluation

Transvaluation strategies try to re-interpret or change the normative principles of stratified ethnic systems – the 'Umwertung der Werte' (transvaluation) which Nietzsche so profoundly detested. I distinguish between normative inversion, which reverses the existing rank order, and equalization, which aims at establishing equality in status and political power. In normative inversion, the symbolic hierarchy is turned on its head, such that the category of the excluded and despised comes to designate a chosen people, morally, intellectually and culturally superior to the dominant group. Examples abound (see Brass 1985).

The most widely known in the western world is probably the black power movement and cultural nationalism among African-Americans in the US. Modelled upon black power, 'red power' managed to convince many persons of Indian descent who had previously hidden their origins, to re-identify with a new, positive image of the 'first nations' (Nagel 1995).[19] Normative inversion often goes hand in hand with the 'reverse stigmatization' of dominant majorities as blood-thirsty oppressors (the 'crackers' of African-American popular parlance; see, e.g., Gwaltney 1993). The result may be a profound disagreement between individuals on opposite sides of the boundary as to its meaning and implications. In such cases, Sandra Wallman wrote, the boundary 'is not a conceptual fence over which neighbors may gossip or quarrel. It becomes instead a Siegfried line across which any but the crudest communications is impossible' (1978, p. 212).

A less radical way to challenge the hierarchical ordering of ethnic categories is to establish moral and political equality – rather than

superiority – with regard to the dominant group. The prime US example is obviously the early civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King which aimed at overcoming the legal, social and symbolic hierarchy between black and white and achieving equal treatment in all domains of life. The civil rights movement inspired various other domestic[20] and foreign ethnic movements, including the various 'movimientos negros' in Latin America (for Brazil, see Telles 2004), the Quebecois in Canada, Catholics in Northern Ireland and indigenous movements across Latin America (Brysk 1995).

In all these and many other cases of transvaluation from across the globe, intellectual and political entrepreneurs do the work of re-defining the meaning of ethnic categories.[21] They see the privilege of authenticity where others perceived the disgrace of minority status; they are proud of the culture of their forefathers instead of being ashamed of how primitive their customs appeared in the eyes of dominant groups; they re-interpreted historical defeat and subjugation into a heroic struggle against injustice and domination (cf. for Mexico Wimmer 1993). They establish a counter-culture shielded from the influence of dominant majorities, and revive 'traditional' festivals and rites (from Newroz to Pow Wow), commemorate heroic acts (the occupation of Alcatraz, Rosa Park) and leaders (Malcolm X, Mullah Mustafa Barzani).

To be sure, not all such transvaluation movements have been successful and not all despised and dominated groups have been fortunate enough to count among their ranks leaders that might be able to successfully develop a discourse of injustice. We only need to remind ourselves of the fate of untouchables in rural India. Despite decades of political mobilization by the various Dayalit movements and parties, which borrowed from the global discourse of ethnic pride to re-interpret 'untouchable' castes as an oppressed 'people', most Dayalit in the villages still accept their position at the bottom of the local hierarchy and buy into the ideology of purity, even if they may not accept all the implications that caste Hindus draw from that notion and even if they have sometimes nurtured hopes of an inversion of the hierarchical order brought about by some mythical figure (Moffat 1979; but see Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998). Other examples are the slave groups of the Sahel belt, e.g. in Mauretania, who regard slavery as a perfectly legitimate institution well into our present days (Kopytoff 1988).

Positional moves: boundary crossing and re-positioning

When transvaluation does not represent a valuable option, moving one's own position within a hierarchical system of ethnic categories might represent an attractive strategy. One can either change one's

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individual ethnic membership or re-position one's entire ethnic category. Like in transvaluation, the boundaries of ethnic categories are not contested. Unlike in transvaluation, even the hierarchy between the groups is accepted, but not one's own position in that system. Status change through boundary crossing or re-positioning thus reproduces the overall hierarchy by reinforcing its empirical significance and normative legitimacy. It shows to those who move and those who stay that there is no 'in-between' and that the social world is indeed structured along hierarchical lines. In the following I discuss the individual and the collective strategies separately.

Individual crossing

Re-classification and assimilation are the main strategies to 'shift sides' and escape the minority stigma. Both can be found in a wide variety of social contexts (see Elwert 1989, pp. 13f.; Baumann 1996, p. 18). In South America, it is common for upwardly mobile persons of 'mixed' ethno-somatic background to be re-classified into the 'lightest' possible skin colour category.[22] In the US, such 'passing' into the white category needs to be secretive and goes hand in hand with a radical change of one's social environment (Lowethal 1971, p. 370). Another example of re-classification are children of 'mixed' ethnic marriages to whom their parents gave the identity of the dominant group in such diverse environments as Finland or Northern Ireland (Finnas and O'Leary 2003; but see Stephan and Stephan 1989). In apartheid South Africa, individuals could petition the government to change their racial designation officially (Lelyveld 1985), a procedure also known from the US (Davis 1991). An interesting pre-modern example is the acquisition of the official legal status of 'Spaniards' by Indian nobles in early colonial Mexico. They thus avoided being treated as 'indios' and facing the corresponding legal handicaps (Wimmer 1995, ch. 5). In contrast to re-classification, assimilation depends on the behaviour of the person who intends to cross a boundary.

'Identificational assimilation' among immigrants (Gordon 1964) has recently been re-interpreted as a case of boundary crossing (Alba and Nee 1997; Zolberg and Woon 1999). Assimilation is common not only among immigrants, but also among domestic minorities such as Jews in pre-war Europe (through conversion, see Vago 1981), caste-less groups in India in the 1930s (through mass conversion to Islam and Christianity, see Mujahid 1989), Chinese in pre-colonial Java (Hoadley 1988), Ngoni migrant labourers that became Ndebele (Ranger 1970), *indígenas* that identify as *ladinos* or *mestizos* in Guatemala and Mexico (Colby and van den Berghe 1969, ch. 6).[23]

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Massive crossing may affect the boundary itself, since it may render the depleted category and thus the boundary itself obsolete. A contemporary example is the Mayas of Belize who have crossed into the category of 'Spaniards', a process likely to be repeated by more recent Mopan immigrants from neighbouring Guatemala (Gregory 1976). We could also point to the near-disappearance of the French language and identity in Alberta (Bouchard 1994).[24] The history of ethnic groups that have disappeared from the landscape of identities through assimilation remains to be written. As in many other examples of 'sampling on the dependent variable', scholars usually look at minorities that have successfully maintained ethnic distinctiveness over centuries and not at those who have not (a notable exception is Laitin 1995a).

Boundary erosion through assimilation and re-classification may, however, also provoke a counter-reaction by members of the disappearing group who attempt to 'seal' the boundary. An example is the Bkonjo Life History Research Society of the 1950s, which opposed the mass assimilation of Bkonjo into the Batoro category in Western Uganda (Horowitz 1977, pp. 10ff.) – similarly to Basque nationalists who use violence as a strategic means to reverse the linguistic and identity shifts towards Spanish that had taken place in previous decades (Laitin 1995b). Even when a boundary has disappeared through massive assimilatory shifts, it may later be re-discovered and filled with new meaning. Examples are the re-invention of a Cajun identity in Louisiana (Dormon 1984) or the rediscovery of Swiss ethnicity among fourth-generation emigrants to Argentina in the wake of the celebration of Switzerland's 700th anniversary of independence (Karlen 1998).

Whether or not a boundary can be crossed obviously depends on those on the other side as well, who may accept or reject newcomers (compare the case study by Belote and Belote 1984). Minority making will make boundary crossing more difficult and dominant groups may police their boundary against trespassers. Nation-building through incorporation, on the other hand, facilitates and even encourages identity shifts by members of the subordinated groups. The massive decrease in the number of ethnic groups over the past centuries is the consequence of such a convergence of strategies within the framework of nationalizing states.

Collective repositioning

The second strategy of crossing aims at the relative position of the entire ethnic category that one is assigned to. Perhaps the best example is what anthropologists of India have called 'caste climbing'. By adopting the lifestyle of the upper castes and strategically demanding

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certain *jajmani* services from members of other castes (a central feature of local caste systems), a group may acquire a better standing in the ritual hierarchy (Bailey 1969, pp. 95–100).[25] Examples from US history are the Chinese of Mississippi who managed, although originally classified as 'coloured', to cross the colour line (Loewen 1971), as did the Jews (Saks 1994), Italians (Guglielmo 2003) and Irish (Ignatiev 1995) before them who were originally also seen and treated as non-whites.[26] Another well-known example is the peasant Fur groups which became Baggara, i.e. 'Arab' sheep herders (Haaland 1969)[27] – one of the reasons why the description of the current conflict in Darfur as opposing racially defined 'Arabs' and 'Africans' may appeal to the common sense of the western public, but does not conform to realities on the ground (cf. de Waal 2005). In north-western Nepal, entire villages may shift from one ethnic (and caste) category to another, depending on which economic niche they occupy (Levine 1987, pp. 81–5).

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Blurring

Boundary blurring reduces the importance of ethnicity as a principle of categorization and social organization. Other, non-ethnic principles are promoted and thus the legitimacy of ethnic, national or ethno-somatic boundaries undermined. Blurred boundaries are less relevant for the everyday conduct of life, less exclusionary and less institutionalized, as Richard Alba (2005) has shown, contrasting the experience of immigrants in the United States with those in Germany. Blurring boundaries should be distinguished from mere *non*-ethnic social practices in order to avoid interpreting too much of the social world through the lenses of ethnicity or race. If a Protestant woman marries a Catholic man in Northern Ireland or a black woman an Asian man in the US, they may simply do so because they love each other and not necessarily because they want to overcome ethno-religious divisions or racist stereotypes. Even if we restrict the notion of blurring to those cases where it conforms to the intention of actors, the domain of empirical examples remains vast.

The most common strategy seems to emphasize local community. A quite explicit example is provided by Ulf Hannerz' description of Sophiatown in the 1950s, a township outside Johannesburg where Africans, Jews and immigrants had formed what they perceived as a cosmopolitan culture drawing upon American jazz, British fashion and continental literary styles. They saw this urban lifestyle, at least in part, as a counter-culture against the emerging apartheid regime (Hannerz 1994). Another example is the multi-ethnic city of Makassar in Indonesia (Antweiler 2001), where a high degree of intermarriage, low levels of residential segregation and a long history of coexistence

have made trans-ethnic social class and regional identities more salient than the ethnic differences that figure so prominently in the political landscape of other parts of the archipelago. Other examples include small industrial towns in the United States before the Second World War (Alter 1996), multi-ethnic coalitions in New York's contemporary neighbourhoods (Sanjek 1998) or the multi-ethnic cliques of adolescents in Britain (Rampton 1995). Multi-ethnic localism is also a feature of housing co-operatives, where the boundaries between 'us', the established and decent ones, and 'them', the troublemakers and outsiders, is drawn based on the observance of community rules such as regarding trash disposal, the use of communal washers and dryers and the like, thus blurring existing ethnic and racial divisions. This type of 'insider-outsider' boundary can be found in London's council housing (Wallman 1978; Back 1996), in Zurich's housing co-operatives (Karrer 2002) and in the working-class neighbourhoods of Cologne (Kissler and Eckert 1990).

Another strategy to de-emphasize ethnic, racial or national boundaries is to create a global, rather than a local, community of belonging. General human qualities and the 'family of mankind' are often evoked, so it seems, by the most excluded and stigmatized groups. Michele Lamont has shown how working-class African-Americans as well as Maghrebinian and African immigrants in France use the universal language of religion to deny the legitimacy of ethno-racial hierarchies and to position themselves at the centre of the social and moral universe (Lamont 2000; Lamont, Morning and Mooney 2002).

Similarly, immigrants and refugees from former Yugoslavia, especially from Kosovo, who represent the universally despised and discriminated-against group in many countries on the European continent, emphasize universal moral qualities shared by all individuals independent of ethnic or national background (Karrer 2002, ch. 12).[28] Such a 'de-ethnicized' view on the social world was also shared by members of the despised Muslim caste groups in Hyderabad (Ali 2002). Sometimes however, universalizing religious discourse is also used by dominant groups to blur boundaries. From the 1990s onwards, several evangelical churches in the US have started to re-conceive racism as a sin and made sometimes substantial efforts to create multi-racial church communities and to have church members develop friendship ties across the black-white divide (Emerson and Woo 2006).

Aiming in between the universal and the local, boundary blurring may be pursued by emphasizing civilizing commonalities, often by drawing upon the cultural heritage and political unity of empires long gone. The bureaucratic elite of the European Union often evokes the past unity of Christian empires such as that under Carl the Great to overcome the fragmentation of the continent into a multiplicity of national communities. Various Islamic reform movements have

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sought, since the nineteenth century, to restore the unity and global power that the *ummah* enjoyed under the Caliphs (Lapidus 2001). On the less grand level of everyday identity politics, we may cite a recent study of British Pakistanis, in whose daily life identity as members of the *ummah* is much more important than the category 'Pakistanis' assigned to them by the state (Jacobson 1997). Another example is the continental *latinidad* – a legacy of the Spanish empire – evoked by salsa singers such as Celia Cruz, Oscar de León and others. Their songs call for the cultural unity and trans-continental brotherhood of all Latinos.[29]

Summary and discussion

The typology outlined in the previous sections can now be summarized in Figure 1, which lists the main types and sub-types that were introduced along the way. All the major types (situated on levels 1, 2 and 3 of taxonomic differentiation) have been illustrated with cases from both the developing and the developed world, from contemporary and historical periods, from modern and traditional contexts, for 'racial' and other types of ethnic groups, for domestic and immigrant minorities. The two exceptions are nation-building, which is confined to modern contexts, and normative inversion, for which I could not find a pre-modern example. Overall, this supports the claim that there is indeed a finite number of strategies of making and unmaking ethnic boundaries used by humans across the globe in a wide variety of social and historical contexts. This insight prepares the ground for future work in this area and provides an impetus for developing comparative models of ethnic group formation that are not limited to either immigrant or domestic ethnic minorities, nation-building or minority formation, ethnicity in the developing world or the developed west, 'race' or ethnicity, and so forth.

Besides incorporating as many empirically known examples as possible, a good typology should also be consistent and exhaustive, as discussed previously: types should be distinguished from each other on the basis of uniform principles, they should be irreducible to each other and they should exhaust the range of logical possibilities. I will briefly discuss how the typology fares in such a quality test.

Regarding consistency, all the types and sub-types are based on the way in which a strategy relates to an existing boundary. In other words, they all refer to the *formal properties* of a boundary strategy.[30] It also seems quite obvious that none of the strategies could be subsumed under any other, even if certain types might overlap with each other. Localism and contraction, for example, are distinguished on the basis of whether or not the lower-level category is defined in ethnic terms (contraction) or not (trans-ethnic localism). Empirically,

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Figure 1. *A taxonomy of boundary-making strategies*

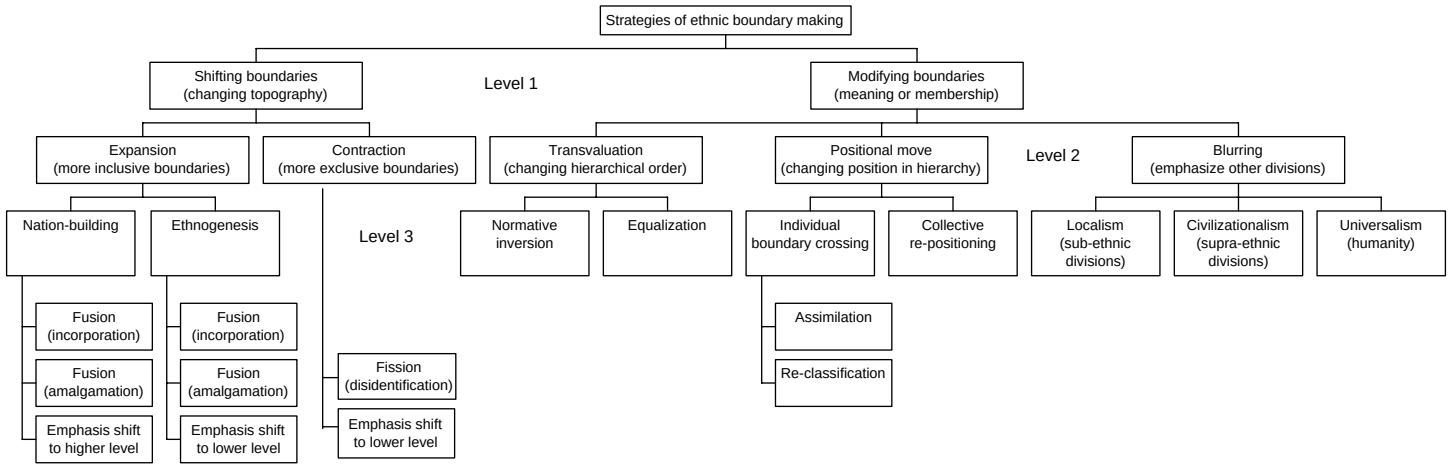
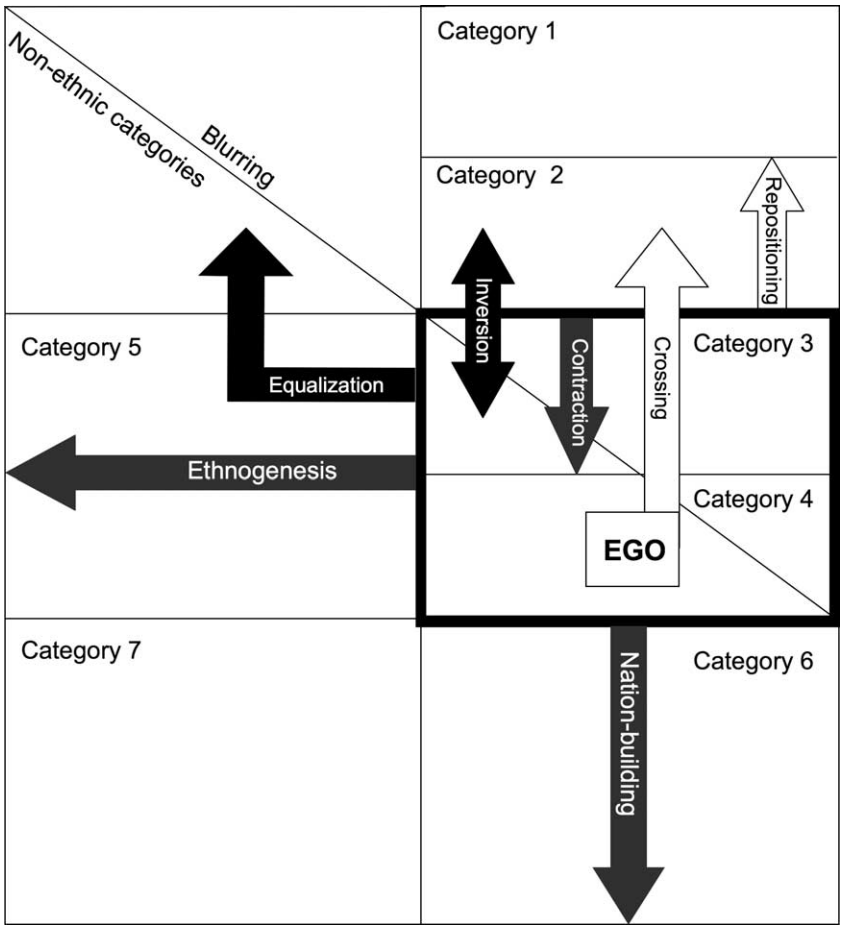


Figure 2. *Elementary strategies of boundary making*



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the difference might be minor. It is also obvious that the heuristic marginal utility of further distinctions diminishes fast as one proceeds to lower levels in the taxonomy.

Figure 2 illustrates that the main types of boundary strategy (i.e. those situated on level 3) cover all logical possibilities in all possible boundary systems: in those comprising two categories or more, in ranked systems as well as in non-ranked systems, from the point of view of an actor from a dominant or a subordinate group. Let me elaborate briefly on how to 'read' this graph, which is admittedly rather complex. We assume the point of view of ego, who is assigned to the category drawn with a thick black line and which comprises the sub-categories 3 and 4. Boundary contraction means that ego dis-identifies with category 3 and makes category 4 her main focus of

identity, as when an 'indio' emphasizes her 'Zinacanteco' identity. Ethnogenesis will make individuals in categories 5 her co-ethnics (as when various local bands become 'Comanches'), while a strategy of nation-building would embrace members of the subordinate category 6 (and perhaps 7), making 'Mexicans' out of 'indios'. Repositioning would move her ethnic group one tier up in a multi-tiered ladder, such that it would come to lie between categories 1 and 2: the Chinese in Mississippi, for example, managed to cross the caste line by distancing themselves from blacks. Individual boundary crossing moves ego into category 2, as when immigrants assimilate into national mainstreams. Normative inversion switches the hierarchical positions of ego's category and category 2 (as in 'black power'), while equalization puts ego's category on the same hierarchical level as categories 1 and 2 (as was the aim of the civil rights movement). The various strategies of blurring produce non-ethnic classifications that cross-cut the grid of ethnic categories. All will therefore result in trans-ethnic modes of classification, and ego will identify with and/or be identified with a local community (such as Sophiatown), a civilization (such as the Islamic *umma*) or humanity. As far as I can see, there is no other possible strategy of boundary change that ego could pursue.

It will be the task of future work to go beyond the taxonomical exercise of this paper and to develop an agency-based model of ethnic boundary making. This model should be able to explain under which circumstances which actors choose which strategy; how effectively they can pursue this strategy; and what the outcome of the interaction between various actors pursuing different strategic plans will be. This is a task, however, that goes well beyond the ambition of this paper (cf. Wimmer 2008).

Notes

1. The title of this article is inspired by Claude Lévi-Strauss' 'Les structures élémentaires de la parenté'. Another formalist project is pursued by Fiske (1992).
2. For a critique of the post-ethnic cosmopolitanism literature, see Calhoun (2002) and Favell (2005). A powerful critique of the notion that 'race' and ethnicity are the outcome of entirely different social processes is offered by Loveman (1997).
3. See Wallman (1986), Loveman (1997), Wacquant (1997), Zolberg and Woon (1999), Lamont (2000), Tilly (2004) and Alba (2005).
4. An excellent recent contribution is Elman (2005).
5. For such an encompassing view of ethnicity, see Weber (1978, pp. 385–87) and many others who follow in his footsteps. For the reasons discussed in Horowitz (1971), this view is less accepted in the United States than elsewhere.
6. For the purposes of this typology, distinguishing between individual and corporate actors (such as social movements, institutions, corporate communities and the like) is not necessary. All the strategies that I review can be pursued by either type of actor, with the exception of individual border crossing which by definition is decided upon by individuals, even if the consequences might affect the entire group, as we will see further below.

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7. Moerman (1965), Keyes (1976), Galaty (1982) and Jenkins (1997).
8. Okamura (1981), Burgess (1983), Waters (1990, pp. 52–8), Okamoto (2003) and Brubaker (2004, ch. 2).
9. Similarly, the definition of who is white was expanded in Puerto Rico after the First World War in such a way that children of 'mixed' marriages were now incorporated into the group of 'whites' (Loveman and Muniz 2006).
10. Creole nationalism in the Caribbean (Patterson 1975) or Brazil's 'racial democracy', canonized by sociologist Gilberto Freire, are other examples of nation-building through a strategy of amalgamation (Skidmore 1993 [1974]).
11. For a summary of recent debates on the millet question, see Grillo (1998, pp. 86–93).
12. In Rhodesia, missionaries amalgamated local Shona units into six language groups each subsequently endowed with bibles and schools and administered in separate provinces by the white settler state – the Koreko, Zezuru, Manyika, Ndau, Karanga and Kalanga that later appear as important categories in the political arena of independent Zimbabwe (Posner 2005).
13. Cohen (1978, pp. 396f.), Lanoue (1992) and Macmillan (1989).
14. Many more African examples are discussed in Horowitz (1975).
15. See the 'ethnic blocks' described by Geertz (1963), Horowitz (1975), Hannan (1979) and Chai (1996).
16. See also work on the Yoruba (Peel 1989), the Tsonga (Harries 1989), the 'Northerners' of Uganda (Kasfir 1976, pp. 98ff.), the Ibo of Nigeria and the Luba-Kasai of Zaire (Chai 1996) or the Fang of Gabon and Cameroon (Fernandez 1966).
17. Compare also first-generation middle-class immigrants to the United States from the Caribbean, who dis-identify with the category 'black' and emphasize country-of-origin identities (Waters 1999).
18. See Friedlander (1975), Colby and van den Berghe (1969, pp.179f.), Iwanska (1971, pp. 99ff.), Köhler (1990, p. 62) and so on. An exception seems to be the Nahuas described by Sandstrom (1991, pp. 68f.), who group all indigenous groups into the category of *masehualmej*, a term denoting commoners in the Aztec empire.
19. Compare Hoddie (2002) on Australia's aborigines.
20. In the wake of the civil rights movement, Japanese Americans shrugged off the stigma associated with Pearl Harbor and reinterpreted their story as one of redressing the injustice of dispossession and internment (Takezawa 1995).
21. For a case of 'frame transformation' in social movement literature terminology, see Snow *et al*. (1986).
22. For Colombia, see Wade (1995); for Ecuador, Belote and Belote (1984); for Brazil, Harris (1964).
23. See also Reina (1966, p. 31), Friedlander (1975) and Deverre (1980), O'Connor (1989, ch. 7). For crossing into the 'blanco' category in Ecuador, see Belote and Belote (1984).
24. A contrasting example is described by Driedger (1979).
25. See also Kertzer (1988, pp. 112–13) and Srinivas (1952, pp. 24–31).
26. The Mexican American middle class, by contrast, has sought to be accepted as 'white' but has generally not been successful in having their entire group reclassified (Oboler 1997). Later on, some segments of the educated elite shifted to a civil rights discourse, emphasizing the racial exclusion that they have been subjected to, and pursued a strategy of equalization rather than crossing (Skerry 1995).
27. In Eastern Rwanda, Hutu clans were re-classified as Tutsi if they became powerful enough to represent a challenge to the chieftain (Lemarchand 1966).
28. Similarly, on adolescents of Turkish origin in the Netherlands, see Milikowski (2000).
29. Compare Pacini Hernández (2003); the commercial aspects of Latino pan-ethnicity are emphasized by Dávila (2001).
30. A borderline case is the distinction between nation-building and ethno-genesis. It refers to different relationships to the modern state rather than to existing boundaries. Still, both sub-types refer to the formal characteristics of this relationship, rather than its content, as

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would be the case if one were to follow mainstream literature and distinguish, for example, between ethnic and civil nationalisms.

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