ETHNICITY IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD: BORDERS, BOUNDARIES, AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES[1]

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Sumário

Num mundo globalizado, os tradicionais limites e fronteiras étnicos e nacionais estão a perder a sua relevância para o estudo da diversidade cultural. Um número crescente de antropólogos e de sociólogos apontam para a separação entre território e cultura. Outros perguntam-se se a compressão do tempo e do espaço, que acompanhou a globalização, criou, mesmo nas regiões mais remotas, uma consciência e algum grau de experiência mediada do mundo global. Isto pode estar a resultar não só na formação de um novo nível de cultura mundial, mas também na diminuição de repertórios culturais. Enquanto a importância do espaço e das fronteiras físicas diminui na comunicação quotidiana, também se está a tornar possível construir e manter laços étnicos sob novas formas. Por exemplo, as fronteiras entre a nação de origem e o país de emigração tornou-se difusa no caso das diásporas étnicas. Isto levanta a questão de saber em que medida as comunidades virtuais podem constituir uma alternativa a unidades sociais limitadas, tais como as comunidades étnicas. Este artigo debate estas questões no estudo antropológico e sociológico da etnicidade.

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Abstract

In a globalizing world, traditional ethnic and national boundaries and borders are becoming less relevant to the study of cultural variation. A growing number of anthropologists and sociologists point to the delinking of territory and culture. Others raise the issue of whether the compression of time and space that has accompanied globalization has fostered, even in the remotest areas, an awareness and some degree of mediated experience of the world at large. This might be resulting not only in the formation of a layer of world culture but also in the shrinking of cultural repertoires. As the importance of physical space and boundaries declines in everyday communication, it is also becoming possible to construct and maintain ethnic ties in new ways. For example, the boundaries between the mother nation and the country of immigration have become blurred in the case of ethnic diasporas. This raises the issue of to what extent virtual communities might constitute an alternative to bounded social units such as ethnic communities. This article discusses these issues in the anthropological and sociological study of ethnicity.

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, anthropologists and sociologists, arguing from different perspectives and vantage points, maintain that globalization processes are bringing about profound cultural change at both the global and local levels. Hannerz (1990: 237; 1992; 1996) has argued that *"a world culture is created through the increasing interconnectedness of varied local cultures, as well as through the development of cultures without a clear anchorage in any one territory"*. More recently, Brumann (1998: 499) has maintained that there is *"a pool of global knowledge that is increasingly tapped by people everywhere and constitutes a layer of world culture"*; this layer of global culture includes a wide range of knowledge about politics, media, and sports and there is a widespread awareness that this knowledge is globally distributed. The example given by Hobsbawm (1998: 5) is that of world soccer which he sees as one of many indicators of the emergence in the 20th century of what he calls *"a world mass culture"*.

The compression of time and space that has accompanied globalization has fostered even in the remotest communities an awareness and at least some

degree of experience of the world at large. A major factor in the development of what Brumann (1998: 497 and 499) calls a *"layer of world culture"* and the extension of *"frames of reference and activity"* is media penetration and media access. The main forms of global media penetration in traditional communities are still radio and television. Television viewing in the Brazilian Amazon is reported by Reis (1998: 306) to have resulted in *"new conceptualizations of space and time, in the modification of work patterns; in a new wave of consumerism, in a general shift in expectations towards life and towards the community, and in the displacement of private and public activities"*. In Canada, Driedger and Redekop (1998: 62) report that younger Mennonites, who are more exposed to the media, have an increased involvement in *"the global village, with a decline in local village identity"*. Almost everywhere, the content of media programming is such as to expand awareness beyond traditional cultural boundaries and provide external referents. This process is likely to continue as media in all their forms continue to pervade the fabric of social life.

Boundaries, Borders, and Globalization

Wider technological change has rendered cultural boundaries much more penetrable. Moreover, the speed with which boundaries change and adapt may well be accelerating throughout the world. Hannerz (1990; 1992; 1996) and more recently Friedman (1998: 242-245) posit a connection between global transformation and the emergence of new cosmopolitan elites who share a *"relatively coherent identity"* linked to hybridity, border-crossing, and multiculturalism.

Friedman (1998; 1999) also argues that periods of globalization in world history go hand in hand with a decline in hegemony and that this is accompanied by a general process of regional economic decline, increasing stratification, socio-cultural fragmentation and increasing *"ethnification"*. In the center, as hegemony declines, there is increasing fragmentation of identities and there is the emergence of *"cultural politics"* among groups of all kinds – indigenous, regional, immigrant, and national groups, for example. In contrast, others such as Hobsbawm (1998: 7) view the rise of identity groups as a reaction to *"the sheer advance of globality"*.

Globalization processes are rendering cultural boundaries and national borders more permeable and are extending frames of awareness and

experience well beyond traditional boundaries. To the extent that this results in the growth of global consciousness, the salience of ethnic and national identities may be diminished. This is not to imply that identities based on territory and space are now obsolete and destined for the trash can of history. As Brumann (1998: 497) points out *"many people are more aware of what is culturally distinct about themselves than formerly"*. Nonetheless, the creation of an expanding and increasingly accessible layer of global culture combined with a widespread expansion of awareness beyond increasingly permeable cultural boundaries are contributing to the shrinking of cultural repertoires. There has been a decrease in many distinct cultural elements such as diversity in clothing forms and materials, to point to one readily observable example (Brumann,1998: 497-499). Nettle and Romaine (2000) make much of the decline in language diversity – a very high proportion of indigenous languages, they argue can be considered to be endangered and many may become extinct in this century. Though this process has been underway for several hundred years, they argue that this decline has accelerated with globalization which has involved the displacement of indigenous peoples, the erosion of cultural differences, and the rise of English as a world language.

The shrinking of cultural repertoires and the emptying out of the cultural stuff of ethnicity from ethnic categories undermines the basis of ethnicity in the primordial sense. It is perhaps because of this that Hobsbawm (1992: 5) can point to the ease with which identities can be changed and to the rapid emergence of some ethnicities *"which had no political or even existential existence until yesterday"*. But ethnicity in its primordial sense has also been undermined by the long term but quickening move from a phenomenal world characterized largely by relatively stable and face-to-face primary relationships linked mostly to kinship structures, to one in which there is a diminishing circle of primary relationships which have also become less permanent and less associated with kinship (cf. Triandis, 1995). This combined with a widening spectrum of potential relationships and group attachments along with growing individualism tends to weaken identification with any one group, whether based on ethnicity or nationality. It is in this context that the relationship between ethnic and virtual communities must be understood.

ETHNIC AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

The homogenizing processes that were the mainstays of the nation state are weakening – *"disintegrating"* according to Friedman (1999: 6). The relationship between national boundaries and ethnic boundaries had previously been closely related in recent history. Both nations and ethnic groups were interpreted as *"bounded"* and *"institutionally complete"* with separate institutions which defined their identities. Foci such as churches, national media and clubs, and patriotic associations, cemented identities into units in which communities mirrored the nation. Ethnic community was almost never defined separately from *"mother country."*

With the end of colonial rule and large-scale migration from former colonies, the redefined focus of immigration-related studies became communication with former homelands – from letter writing and telephone calls to books, schools and cultural productions. The effects of spatial separation became less apparent as electronic communication reduced geographic barriers. Fax, e-mail, and electronic conferencing, together with the multinational scope of organizations, reduced the importance of physical space and boundaries in everyday communication.

The implications of this transformation alter the conceptualization of *"imagined identities,"* which Anderson (1991), using the increased importance of textual reality, suggests is the basis of ethnic and national community. Printed media, in this conceptualization, initially provided the symbolic bridge for the creation of imagined identities as national identities, which bridge geographic barriers. This *"imagined"* interdependence had been closely linked with the politics of ethnic diversity. It is only in recent years that attention has been directed to transnational influences independent of prior conceptions of community boundaries.

Boundary change between *"mother country"* and country of immigration is well illustrated in a study of Israeli immigrants in Toronto (Cohen and Gold: 1996; 1997). A narrowing of the symbolic gap between homeland and nation of emigration was found to be occurring. For many Israelis in Toronto, as with other immigrants, in everyday life, the boundary between mother country and country of immigration can become less differentiated. This facilitates the formation of ethnic identities which had previously been discouraged by exclusionist homeland geopolitical policies (such as that long practised by Israel, which attached shame and stigma to emigration). This transnational

community is of particular significance to our discussion because it is characterized primarily by symbolic links which have more recently been reinforced by virtual linkages. It is important to emphasize that many ethnic populations share similar symbolic linkages. These can be channeled into virtual networks in which ethnic populations, like the Israeli minority, become immersed in a broad network of contacts primarily through e-mail.

As Poster (1998: 205) has observed:

> the Internet, far from dissolving ethnicity, enables all Jews, wherever they are on the planet, to connect with one another. The Internet here is a neutral instrument of community, connecting preestablished ethnic identities.

Among the difficulties confronting *"the would-be CyberJew"* (Poster, 1998: 206) are those of ascertaining whether participants in electronic communities are Jewish and whether participation constitutes ethnic membership.

Where transnational links erode notions of boundary, distinctive cultural units, such as virtual communities, can be shaped by situational criteria independent of boundaries. Some have concluded that the many-stranded ties which once characterized neighbourhoods are replaced, in cyberspace, by multiple and far more extensive networks of weak ties. Moreover, many virtual places are not referred to as communities but rather as *"websites"*, which are managed by individuals rather than groups. In addition, the website which is focused on a cultural identity may not be physically contiguous with the geographical focus of a homeland or with boundaries on a map. Despite these differences, virtual communities often combine aspects of ethnic groups with an alternative type of social space within which virtuality and ethnicity are fused.

Even when they are virtual, ethnic and cultural communications are in constant relationship to everyday events. Coalitions form over interpretations of history and over specific issues: these are nurtured and are constantly reinforced by everyday contacts in multiple contexts. Turkle (1995) emphasizes that interactions in cyberspace merge cyber and everyday realities to create an indistinguishable field of contact. This merging is vitally important to the understanding of contemporary ethnic communities many of which rely on virtual contacts, often generated by a website (cf. Boczkowski, 1999). The move to widely dispersed communication among those who

formerly related with each other primarily through face-to-face contacts or through written, video and musical materials, is an alternative way of sharing identity. Communities in cyberspace, in comparison with conventional ethnic communities, are generally based entirely on textual communication which does not generally incorporate graphically based materials or voice and music (though this is changing, particularly with high-bandwith use of the Internet). These websites are informally organized and typically do not have a distinct body of literature to legitimate their status as do most ethnic and national communities. Rheingold (cited in Baym, 1998: 36) has described virtual communities as:

> social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on ... public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships.

There is in practice, no permanent formation of coalitions or supporters of Orthodox belief concerning how things should be. The threads of a virtual textual narrative are subject to constant reinterpretation (cf. Smith and Kollock, 1999).

Thinking about computer mediated communities has generated a separate literature focusing on social relationships in cyberspace. The *"loose ties"* and multiplicity of *"weak"* relationships in an unbounded context become the *"strength"* of virtual organization. As regards communities of *"virtual disability"*, Gold (in press a) has found that these ethnic-like communities share *a* similar identification, an apparent group cohesiveness, a common *"language"* of difference, and a shared identification of *"outsiders"* and stigmatization by them. However, in these communities virtual boundaries tend to reflect national boundaries because these are the boundaries of health care systems and because much of the narrative is constructed about access to health care. Partially because of this, virtual communities such as one based in Canada for persons with MS, includes communications almost exclusively from Canadians (Gold, in press b). This raises questions concerning the types of group situations and interests most conducive to the formation of virtual communities. Elkins (1997) argues that what virtual communities have to offer might be particularly attractive to dispersed as opposed to concentrated ethnic groups; the technological infrastructure of virtual community offers dispersed groups the opportunity to greatly increase the density of their interactions, to strengthen their efforts at persistence, and even facilitate their governance.

Also important is the degree to which the technologies of virtual community are accessible to a given group and on its willingness toutilize these technologies for purposes of ethnic affiliation. As Elkins (1997: 147) points out:

> It is difficult to envision a virtual Amish community or one made up of other sects which eschew all modern equipment. Further, one must assume that the individuals feel a need for an ethnic support group. If individuals endeavour to leave the group, to assimilate, to "pass" as members of another society, they have no incentive to constitute a virtual ethnic community.

On the other hand, in a globalizing world of multiple identities and varied loyalties, virtual ethnic communities may allow other outcomes in ethnic identity formation. Many people may be able to maintain the range and depth of affiliation that they desire not only with one ethnic group but also, and this simultaneously, with other ethno-national groupings with which they wish to affiliate (and this without compromising links to other identity groups). In other words, virtual communities offer the means to maximize group affiliations and individual choices, particularly where it is not possible to combine these in one place or space.

Conclusion

Virtual ethnic communities might not be poised to replace or even provide complete and viable alternatives to traditional ethnicities, but they may become increasingly important in allowing more and more people to maintain a range and depth of ethnic affiliation compatible with a social world in which boundaries have become more permeable and in which the range of possible personal and group identities have expanded and complexified. To the extent that a layer of world culture is in the process of emerging, that cultural repertoires are shrinking, and that cultural change in many countries is in the direction of growing individualism (cf. Inglehart and Baker, 2000), participation in virtual ethnic communities is facilitated. While there may, in such a context, be more room on the global stage for what Beck (2000:21) refers to as *"actors, identities, social spaces, situations and processes"*, there is also the potential for ancestral links to be nurtured or strengthened in new ways. Portes (1999: 472) argues that transnational activities, of which virtual communities constitute one dimension, can provide second-generation

immigrants with *"a point of reference to establish their distinct identities and a sense of self-worth"* and also with *"cultural anchors with which to face difficult external challenges"*.

More broadly, virtual communities, to the extent that they comprise systems of communication and information based on ties of mutual trust and common interests have the potential to transform themselves into powerful economic, and even political realities. This is particularly the case with regard to large groups such as East Indians (Rao, 1998), and Latinos (Portes, 1996), whose virtual communities may become powerful economic marketplaces, and even, in the case of such groups as the Chinese (Zhang and Xiaoming, 1999), a political force to be reckoned with both in the home country and in host countries around the world. Portes (1996) has usefully called attention to the way in which *"transnational communities"* have resulted in an increase in the intensity of commercial exchanges, the development of new modes of transacting, and a growing entrepreneurship leading to the proliferation of small and medium-size enterprises requiring travel and interaction across boundaries and borders on a sustained basis; he has also pointed to way in which transnational ethnic activities can affect political processes. Immigrant groups with the most economic resources and human capital are better able to take advantage of the economic and political opportunities provided by the technological infrastructure associated with globalization. It is this technological infrastructure which has accelerated and intensified the development of transnational communities of all kinds, and these communities are at an advantage in an environment of global free trade in the sovereignty of national states has become more muted if not more limited. A future dilemma may well be that of reconciling transnational ethnic allegiances and activities with traditional conceptions of citizenship and the state.

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