

Boundary, Inter-ethnic Relations and Differentiation in Contexts of Impending Ethnicity

Workshop theme

Interethnic relations in the spheres of education, work and health

Organizers

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Summary

This workshop aims to bring under reconsideration the concept of frontier (as well as a cluster of related concepts such as differentiation, identification, accusation, competition, distinction, etc.) focusing on contexts of interaction that we shall designate as impending or enforced ethnicity arenas.

Abstract

We have known since the seminal work of Fredrik Barth that the «ethnic ascription» which «classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, (...) provides an organizational vessel that may be given varying amounts and forms of content in different socio-cultural systems» as well as at different historical moments. The process of boundary construction that shapes the group so as to distinguish it from others becomes one of the crucial focuses of investigation from this point of view provided that the idioms that these identity frontiers engaged tend to be altered. This perspective is wholly compatible with the production of discursive strategies of strategic essentialism. Moreover, it is also congruent with alternative ways of conceptualising ethnic difference and distinction which emphasise explicitly the historically-contextualised transformation of the «ethnic imagined communities». All contact, transfers and exchanges across those borders would not, however, alter the maintenance of the boundary.

This workshop aims to bring under reconsideration the concept of frontier as well as a cluster of related concepts such as differentiation, identification, accusation, competition, distinction, identity superiority, etc. Grounding such reflection in research of inter-ethnic relations in migratory contexts, we mean to focus on contexts of interaction that we shall designate as impending or enforced ethnicity arenas. Among these are included the public school, the multi-ethnic neighbourhood, the street, the (mixed) family, the sports world, the pluri-ethnic mosque or church, the detention centre or even the care giving situations that entails health assistance.

To what extent do inter-ethnic sociabilities interfere with the usage of categories and ethnic idioms as bases for identity, narrative and relation when they are advanced in contexts of close spatial and social proximity, of status similarities and biographical experience, of common problems and projects; when they are motivated by the same religious affiliation or by the condition of being either imprisoned or ill; or even when they stem from conjugal and micro-familiar ties? The literature does not offer us a straightforward answer. Which situations tend to render the ethnic boundary invisible, unused, or even refused? Which situations promote the mobilization of ethnicity as a key resource to intensify the density and positive dimensions of inter-ethnic relations, and which strategies are manipulated in these endeavours to cross and/or maintain the boundaries? To what extent do meta- or supra-ethnic idioms and strategies dispose of frontiers and its potential to organize interactions, representations and distinctions?