

Panethnicity

Reading: Yen Le Espiritu, “Ethnicity and Panethnicity,” in *Asian American Panethnicity*, Temple University Press, 1992.

Questions:

1. What is an ethnicity?
2. Are African-Americans, Latina/o Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, European-Americans ethnicities? Panethnicities? Races?
 - a. What is at stake in the answer to this question? What hangs on it?
 - b. Are there other panethnicities in the US, not included in this list?
3. What distinguishes an ethnicity, panethnicity, race?
 - a. What is a culture?
 - b. What distinguishes ethnicities, panethnicities and races from other socio-cultural and identity groups, e.g., families, neighborhoods, the LGBT community, genders, etc.
4. Espiritu’s Chapter was written in 1992. Are her arguments still sound?

I. The Concept of Panethnic Group

...*panethnic group* is used here to refer to a politico-cultural collectivity made up of peoples of several, hitherto distinct, tribal or national origins. (2)

...for certain purposes, panethnic organization takes precedence over tribal or national affiliation. (3)

What does Espiritu mean by a “political-cultural collectivity”? (Is this definition complete/adequate?)

II. Ethnicity

Two standard accounts:

Primordialist/“communities of culture.” “Primordialists focus and culture and tradition to explain the emergence and retention of ethnicity.” “...participation within the confines of one’s ethnic group is valuable in and of itself.” (4)

Instrumentalist/“communities of interest.” “...instrumentalists treat ethnicity as a strategic tool or resource.” (4) “The most extreme variant of the instrumentalist approach takes whatever attributes are associated with particular ethnic groups to be primarily situational, generated and sustained by members’ interests. Thus membership in one group is only for the sake of obtaining comparative advantage vis à vis membership in another.” (5)

Problems with both:

- i) Treat ethnicity as largely voluntary. (5)
- ii) Treat ethnicity as defined by national origin. (5)
- iii) Ignores “the emergent quality of culture: culture not only is inherited but can also be created and re-created to unite group members.” (8)

How so?

“Focusing on sentimentality and rational interests, primordialists and instrumentalists posit that ethnicity endures because individuals derive psychological or material support from their ethnic affiliations.” (5) Moreover, on these accounts, ethnicities will “vanish into the acculturated mainstream,” once their psychological or material needs change. (6)

Espiritu maintains that ethnic identities, instead, are primarily ascriptive: “An imposed category ignores subgroup boundaries, lumping together diverse peoples in a single, expanded “ethnic” framework. Individuals so categorized may have nothing in common except that which the categorizer uses to distinguish them.” (6) However, “Racial lumping necessarily leads to protective panethnicity.” (7) “Thus, group formation is not only circumstantially determined, but takes place as an interaction between assignment and assertion.” (7)

This is a theory not only of what panethnicities are, but how they are formed and maintained.

III. Ethnicity, Culture and Politics

...objective cultural differences need to be distinguished from the socially constructed boundaries that ultimately define ethnic groups...Cultural differences are merely *potential* identity markers for the members of those groups. When this potential is taken up and mobilized, a cultural group – a group of people who share an identifiable set of meanings, symbols, values, and norms – is transformed into an ethnic group, one with a conscious group identity. (9)

...panethnic unity is forged primarily through the symbolic reinterpretation of a group’s common history, particularly when this history involves racial subjugation. (9)

On Espiritu’s view, the pressures to form panethnic groups are both economic and political. (Examples?) However, “while panethnic groups may be circumstantially constructed, they are not simply circumstantially sustained...Once established, the panethnic group – as a result of increasing interaction and communication among its members – can produce and transform panethnic culture and consciousness. (11-12)

Espiritu distinguishes “two dimensions of groupness: the conceptual and the organizational. The conceptual refers to individual behavior and attitude – the ways group members view themselves; the organizational refers to political structures – the ways groups are organized as collective actors. The boundaries of these two dimensions usually but do not necessarily coincide. (15)

Do these two dimensions correspond to the distinction between group and group “identity” that we’ve been using?

On Espiritu’s view, is panethnicity/ethnicity voluntary? Is the conceptual dimension? Is the organizational dimension? How is her view more or less voluntary than the primordialist or instrumentalist?

Are Asian Americans a panethnic group? How are they different, as a group, from Latinos or other panethnic groups?

Espiritu, Yen Le. “Ethnicity and Panethnicity.” Chapter 1 in *Asian-American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*. Temple University Press, 1994. © Temple University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.236 / 24.636 Topics in Social Theory and Practice: Race and Racism
Fall 2014

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.