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Elite Strategies, Local Networks

This chapter outlines analytic frameworks for studying the clash of development strategies and local social networks. I start by laying out definitions of ethnic groups and how individual action and group solidarity interact. Next, I consider how individual and group dynamics shape material culture and the built environment. Finally, I describe the influences of development plans on regional scales and spatial models for understanding economic structures and commodity chains. The theory framework described here provides a powerful, flexible way to analyze a great variety of cultural systems. I articulate a similar approach to interpreting complex religious and cultural expressions among European and African diaspora populations in a related study published previously (Fennell 2007).

Social Group Affiliations and Ethnicities

People subscribe to and participate in multiple social groups and internalize the shared meaning systems and rules for behavior associated with those groups. For example, an individual living in Virginia in the early 1800s might perceive herself as being a member of an American nationality, a specific religious denomination, a family with a particular ethnic heritage, and a cooperative group of neighboring farmers supplying one another with labor and resources as needed during the year (e.g., Eriksen 1993:153, 156–158; Wilkie 2000:5–6). It is useful to consider the multiple social networks in which individuals participated and how those groups influenced one another. We can examine each of these groups as the equivalent of a separate cultural unit with its own shared meaning system and norms of conduct. The term ethnicity has often been used as the equivalent of such a group. In this perspective, an ethnicity is not based simply on common, biological descent, and is rather a cultural sodality.

Social groups are not static in character but are dynamic, socially constructed networks of relationships and identities (Banks 1996; Cohen 2000; De Vos 1975; Eriksen 1993; Fennell 2007; Friedman 1989, 1994). We can examine the degrees of solidity, permeability, or dissipation of specific social group identities and their boundaries over time. Members of each group employ material expressions to signal group identities. Those material expressions are part of the ways in which those identities persist or dissipate across time (e.g., Barth 1998a:16, 2000:27–35; Franklin and Fesler 1999:2–4; Hegmon 1992:527–528; Sider 1986:94).

Theories of social group interaction developed as methods for making sense of the social complexity observed firsthand by anthropologists. For example, Edmund Leach conducted an in-depth ethnographic study of the Shan and Kachin peoples of highland Burma in 1954. His observations were shaped by the dynamic, situational character with which social identities were made manifest in group interactions (Leach 1972:279–292). Leach (1972:286–287) found that individuals were often participants in multiple overlapping social groups sharing the same geographic space and regularly interacting with one another. Thus, “the question of whether a particular community is” best characterized as part of the Shan or Kachin group was answered by examining “the attitudes and ideas of particular individuals at a particular time” (Leach 1972:286). Individuals were often members of multiple groups in different circumstances. The social, economic, and political prominence of each group shifted over time. Some groups were more active and prominent in particular time periods and settings, and were later diminished in visibility while other social groups took their place on center stage (Leach 1972:291).

A decade after Leach’s work, Fredrik Barth struggled to understand the contours of ethnic group identities in the Afghanistan region. Group identities again proved to shift between periods of stability and fluidity. Members of each ethnic group did not define themselves by a long, unchanging list of beliefs and practices. Instead they selected “only certain cultural traits” and made those the “unambiguous criteria for ascription” to their group (Barth 1998b:119). At times, individuals would cease identifying with a particular ethnic group. They would do so if they no longer lived a lifestyle that met key criteria of the group’s identity and sense of solidarity. Such departures from one group identity would particularly occur where there was “an alternative identity within reach” (Barth

1998b:133). In such circumstances, Barth (1998b:133) observed “a flow of personnel from one identity to another.”

The attributes of a particular social group identity may not change internally in some settings and time periods. This would often be the case if many persons could simply choose a different identity to which they would subscribe (Barth 1998b:133–134, 2000:28–35). In other instances, tensions existed within a group, no alternative networks were accessible, and diverging from controversial criteria was not very costly to the group’s coherence. In these instances the “basic contents or characteristics of the identity” could be modified over time by group members (Barth 1998b:134).

External impacts can also solidify social group identities. Edward Spicer (1971) examined the observable characteristics of a variety of ethnic groups as “persistent cultural systems.” He found that each group experienced and resisted repeated efforts by state organizations to assimilate them through religious, political, and economic means. Each group developed “well-defined symbols of identity” to differentiate it from other groups. Those other groups could consist of other ethnic groups or a nationalist movement. Such “conditions of opposition” proved integral to the stability and fluidity of ethnic identities (Spicer 1971:797–798). Thus, ethnic group identities have often proved very resilient, even in the face of nationalist campaigns of assimilation (Friedman 1989:254–256; Kelly and Kelly 1980:134–135; Pollard 1994:79–80).

The dynamic character of ethnic group compositions identified by Leach, Barth, and Spicer has been further revealed in more recent studies. Archaeologist Terry Weik (2014) recently surveyed the expansive literature of ethnic groups over the past several decades. He observed that “Theorists of social identity, ethnicity, and ethnogenesis have demonstrated how simplistic, homogenous notions of collectivity are confounded by a number of factors: migrations, state formation, modes of communication, motives of representation, shared cultural expressions, intragroup diversity, exploitation, shifting identities, and subjectivities” (Weik 2014:293–294). Other analysts of ethnic groups’ coalescences and dissolutions find comparable complexities (e.g., Card 2013; Fennell 2007; Voss 2008, 2015).

These internal and external engines of group definitions played out in the upper Potomac and northern Shenandoah region of Virginia in the time period I examine in this study. A number of social networks

coalesced during the eighteenth century as members of immigrant groups used their shared experiences, knowledge, and cultural backgrounds to form social enclaves. The cohesiveness of these social groups was enhanced by their treatment as distinctive networks by Anglo-American residents of this region. Those Anglo-Americans often viewed other newly arriving European immigrants as parochial and insular in character (Griffin 2001:4; Henretta 1978:4; Wiencek 2003:60). However, those ethnic group identities began to dissipate in the early nineteenth century. These changes occurred as members of the immigrant groups focused their time and attention on engaging in new networks and group identities, and dissipating their investment in the past immigrant heritage of their families.

Interdependence of Structure and Agency

An initial set of questions arises in investigations of such group dynamics. What is the general relationship between an individual, a social group of which she is a member, and the shared meaning system to which the members of the group subscribe? For example, should I assume that individuals are pervasively conditioned by the cultural traditions to which they subscribe? Can a cultural system be viewed as somehow existing separate from the individuals who subscribe to it? Does that cultural system thoroughly dictate the conduct of those individuals? In the alternative, should I assume that individuals play active roles as social agents in determining their own expressive conduct and in constructing the shared meaning systems in which they operate? Similarly, should I view a cultural system as existing only as it is conceptualized and acted out by individuals, and therefore as susceptible to modification and change by those actors?

These questions have played a central role in debates within the social sciences for centuries (Dobres and Robb 2000:4; Rorty 1979:3–9; Shanks and Tilley 1992:123). I will not burden you here with a long account of the many debates and arguments that have focused upon these issues of structure and agency. Instead, I set out the basic precepts of this study. I outline here a general theoretical framework I employ for analyzing individuals' "perceptions of ethnicity and associated modes of interaction" and the social and economic contexts in which they play out (Jones 1997:87).