

# Ethnicity Past and Present

## A Transnational Virtual COVID-19

### Interview with Ulf Hannerz

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The beginnings of the interview date back to 2019, the year when we commemorated the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Barth 1969). We used this event as a springboard for looking back at the rich professional trajectory of Professor Ulf Hannerz, in which ethnicity and other forms of collective identities play one of the key roles. The interview was started after a lecture by Professor Hannerz, ‘Fifty Years of Diversity Watching’, given at the Department of Ethnology of Charles University in Prague in September 2019, and it was finalised during the COVID-19 pandemic online via e-mailing the questions and answers back and forth between Stockholm and Prague.

**In 2019, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Barth 1969). In 1970, you – as one of very few – reviewed the book (Hannerz 1970). When did you get to know this book? What was your reaction to it?**

I knew of it before it was published, since I visited Bergen for a Nordic anthropology conference in 1967 (these were biennial events in that period). And then I got the review copy from a local sociology journal. I was quite impressed by the book, especially Fredrik Barth’s introduction. And I thought it was important to bring to the sociologists’ attention that a book like this could be produced by Scandinavian anthropologists – I did not think they normally took much notice of anthropology in those days.

***Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* became a famous book with tremendous impact and influence. Usually its positive contribution is mentioned. But what do you think were the main weaknesses of the book? What did the authors fail to address, what did they omit?**

I still cannot think of any real weaknesses. But apart from a couple of chapters on rural Norway, the ethnographic chapters all dealt with



somewhat traditional, “exotic” anthropological fields – in Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, Mexico. Nothing on North American or European cities, where certainly ethnicity was important, and has only become more so. Of course, that is where much of my own interest and experience have focused.

***Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* has been translated into almost ten other languages; however, Swedish is not amongst them. Nor has the Introduction been translated into Swedish yet. Why? Isn't there a relationship between 'the shaping of national anthropologies' (Gerholm and Hannerz 1982) and the translation of important mainstream books to local languages?**

Very little anthropological writing aimed at an academic audience has been translated into Swedish. Anthropologists in Sweden expect to read scholarly texts mostly in English, and when they write for an academic audience they do so mostly in English. I have written about questions of language and translation in the global anthropological community in a chapter of my book *Anthropology's World* (2010). The problem here may be that there is not enough anthropology for a wider audience, outside the discipline or outside academia, in the national language. I think the need for such public anthropology is now a challenge for anthropologists, especially in smaller countries.

***Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* is a result of a symposium held in Bergen in 1967, in which eleven Scandinavian anthropologists took part: Klaus Ferdinand (Denmark), Karl Gustav Izikowitz, Karl Eric Knutsson, Peter Kandre (Sweden), Axel Sommerfelt, Harald Eidheim, Helge Kleivan, Henning Siverts, Jan-Petter Blom, Gunnar Haaland and Fredrik Barth (Norway). What lies behind the fact that one of the most influential books on ethnicity, if not the most influential one at all, has been written by Scandinavian authors? Was it a mere coincidence, or was there something more to it?**

I think the main factor is the presence of Fredrik Barth. He was the founder of a new department, in a young university, in a ‘second city’. And he wanted to put that department, and Scandinavian anthropology, on the map. So he was an entrepreneur, but also a profoundly important scholar, and enough of his Scandinavian colleagues understood that. So they were happy to co-operate.

**Did the reception of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* in Sweden differ from its reception in other countries?**

Probably not, apart from the fact that, since there were two prominent Swedish contributors, Swedish anthropologists probably became aware of it more quickly. Izikowitz was the professor in Gothenburg, about to retire. Knutsson had recently received his doctorate (under Izikowitz), and became the first university-based professor of social anthropology at Stockholm University in 1970 – he was my predecessor in the chair there. But he did not remain so long, as he went on to important positions in research and administration and at the United Nations. And so he did not publish very much.

**What do you consider the most important milestones in the conceptualisation of ethnicity after the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*?**

I am sure I would forget too much if I try to remember what actually struck me as new and important texts at different times over the years. But I would like to make a general point: we should beware of staying too narrowly within the particular intellectual horizons of a single discipline. In anthropology, 1969 was indeed an important year, with *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* and that monograph by Abner Cohen on the Hausa in Ibadan which some years later inspired another edited, conference-based volume, *Urban Ethnicity* (Cohen 1974). But that same year, there was another edited volume, Leo Kuper and M. G. Smith's *Pluralism in Africa*, with a strong anthropological input but a bit more interdisciplinary, and reviving the concept of 'plural societies', originating in Southeast Asian plantation societies in the colonial era but later made to travel. There is certainly some overlap between that concept and ethnicity. The concept was important for some time, but perhaps it faded out at the time when 'multiculturalism' became a more popular term.

The 1970s saw the growth of the field of 'cultural studies', mostly in Anglophone academic life, pioneered by Stuart Hall, of Jamaican origin, at the University of Birmingham. I met Hall a couple of times at conferences. From those circles came also Paul Gilroy, debuting with *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* in 1987 and still very active. Just before that, in 1986, there was *Beyond Ethnicity* by Werner Sollors, a German-born literature professor at Harvard University. And before that again, another Harvard professor, the sociologist Orlando

Patterson, also of Caribbean origin, had published his attack on *Ethnic Chauvinism* (1977). Much of the vitality of the field surrounding studies of ethnicity over these last fifty years I believe has come out of the encounters between related concepts and varying perspectives in the border areas between disciplines.

**In your article about the concept of ‘soul’ from 1968, the term ‘ethnicity’ is absent. In your first book, *Soulside*, published a year later (Hannerz 1969), the adjective ‘ethnic’ only appears on a few pages. But very soon after this, you published two influential and till today quoted and referenced studies – based also on American data – where ethnicity is (already) the main subject of your interest (Hannerz 1974, 1976); moreover, the volume where you published the first of these pieces, *Urban Ethnicity*, soon became a landmark in ethnicity studies. What lay behind this shift?**

Both *Soulside* and that article, ‘The Rhetoric of Soul’, were written before *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* appeared, so the concept of ethnicity was not so prominent yet either in anthropology or in public discourse. Then my turn to it in my contribution to *Urban Ethnicity* was somewhat coincidental. In 1970, I had met Clyde Mitchell, the British social anthropologist, at an urban anthropology conference in the United States (he had just spent a year there), and he then evidently suggested to Abner Cohen that I should be invited to Cohen’s forthcoming conference – in London in 1971. When that invitation came through, I had been noticing that not least some British Africanists had been making comparisons, not always so careful, with American situations, so I read up on these, historically and comparatively, to demonstrate that there was more complexity involved. I certainly referred to Barth then, as did many of the British contributors to the book. The 1976 piece was a critical afterword to one of the many edited volumes resulting from the World Anthropology Conference in Chicago in 1973, and it draws centrally on Barth to point to a need for more comparative studies complementary to those based on local field research.

**When you came back from the United States to Europe, did you feel any difference between the conceptualisation of ethnicity in the academia here and there?**

I think it is important to have a sense of the changing realities and understandings on the ground in the 1960s and 1970s in the United

States and in Western Europe. First of all, in the American situation, the central concept had been ‘race’ rather than ‘ethnicity’, and focusing on the situation of Black Americans. Until the 1960s, the focus had been on civil rights, which had been largely an assimilationist struggle. Black Americans were understood to be like other Americans, and should have the same rights as everybody else. But in the 1960s, there was a shift especially among some Black Americans in the large Northern cities to more emphasis on a distinctive identity. In different ways, notions of ‘soul’, ‘Black Power’ and even ‘Afrocentrism’ signified this shift. And then I think this raised the awareness of other American ethnic groups as well of their varied identities – the old assimilationist assumption of ‘the melting pot’ was increasingly questioned.

As a next reaction, there were commentators who pointed out that ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ must not be conflated, that the long-term treatment of Black Americans (on the basis of skin colour, but with the historical base in plantation slavery) had been quite different from that of European immigrants and their descendants. The growing influx of Latin Americans and East and South Asians also made a difference. I should point out that all this was visible in academic as well as in public debates – it was a period when what we now call ‘public anthropology’ was quite strong. As I have recently suggested, retrospectively (Hannerz 2019a), things could be fairly complicated – the situation of Black Americans involved *both* race and ethnicity, and the 1960s ‘soul’ concept should be understood in that context.

In Western Europe, meanwhile, the old imperial powers may have had immigrants from their colonies rather earlier, but much of the immigration I believe began on a larger scale only in the 1960s and 1970s. It involved mostly labour migrations from Mediterranean countries – Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey – to more industrially expansive countries further north, with some component of political exiles. As these were migrants with their countries of origin not so far away, they often maintained some contacts there, going back for vacation visits and the like. So migrancy was probably often a stronger theme than in the United States. Language differences also tended to matter more. Governments tended to see these migrations as a fact of life, adopting policies to handle their consequences. The natives may have been ambivalent about their new neighbours and work mates, but tended to get used to the greater diversity in their habitats, in what I see as a kind of everyday cosmopolitanism. One should be aware that they had decades to develop such stances – Eastern and

Central Europe, on the other side of the Iron Curtain, were not so much part of this historical process, and I think this is an important background factor in understanding the averse attitudes to refugees and immigration in countries like Hungary and Poland. Then clearly the mid-2015 flow of refugees from Syria and elsewhere, and what has been involved in settling them, have complicated the situation in Western Europe as well. Of course, so have a number of Islamist terrorist attacks.

In those Western and Northern European countries which received the greater numbers of immigrants, I believe academics tended to take a quite favourable view of the new situations. They tried to explain the cultures of the newcomers and the resulting intercultural encounters, and to propose viable policies. In a way, certainly, they felt this offered them valuable opportunities to show that their expertise could be useful. ‘Ethnicity’ was one term in the mixed academic-public discourse, but there was certainly some terminological diversity and confusion, between that, ‘cultural diversity’, ‘multiculturalism’ and whatever.

**Some authors, like Karen Blu, for example, ask if concepts of ethnicity and ethnic groups are generalisable and relevant in cross-cultural contexts (Blu 1980: 201, 219). Her answer is negative, and she asserts that ‘ideally [its usage] should be restricted to describing and analysing what it does best, namely, an important form of social differentiation in the United States’ (1980: 227). What do you think about these claims to the restriction of the concept of ethnicity to a single society? How would you answer the question, if ethnicity can become a concept for intercultural comparison?**

I really cannot agree with Blu – it seems to me that the central role that the book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* has had in the development of scholarship, without a single chapter on ethnicity in the United States, shows that the concept has a very wide usefulness.

**You are known as a promoter of concepts like creolisation (Hannerz 1987), cosmopolitanism (Hannerz 1990, 2004), globalisation (Hannerz 1992), and transnationalism (Hannerz 1996); you also write about hybridity (Hannerz 1997) and so-called ‘global cultural flow’ (Hannerz 1996: 137). In the world characterised by these traits, is the classic notion of ethnicity still an appropriate conceptual tool?**

It was really my field studies in a Nigerian town in the 1970s and 1980s that took me to a long-term focus on broadly transnational matters, where all those concepts come in. (I should say that I was not so keen on the notion of ‘hybridity’ – I favoured ‘creolisation’, which referred to many of the same phenomena.) Overall, I was concerned with an updated understanding of ‘culture’. When I was a student in the United States in the early 1960s, I had come across a small book by the psychological anthropologist Anthony Wallace (1961), where he argued that the conventional understanding of culture as a replication of uniformity should be complemented with a view of the organisation of diversity. That has really been a continued overarching theme in much of my work from the 1980s onwards.

I think if Fredrik Barth had paid more attention to Wallace, and some later work on ‘distributional’ analyses of culture, he might have overcome some of his doubts about the culture concept. But then psychological anthropology never really crossed over the Atlantic to Europe successfully. As far as ethnicity is concerned, with its particular reference to collective ascriptive identities, it certainly continues to have its special place within this entire set of concepts. I think the growing importance of the diaspora concept is in large part a matter of more ethnic groups becoming transnationally distributed. That, of course, may imply that ‘ethnicity’ as a classic concept also gets updated.

**The title of your keynote lecture at the African Studies Workshop ‘Ethnicity, Inc. Revisited’ at Harvard University in 2015 was ‘Ethnicity as It Once Was, and as It Is’. So, tell us: what did ethnicity used to be like and what is it like today? What has changed and which fundamental shifts have occurred?**

My 2015 Harvard lecture did not really offer a general answer to these questions – it drew on some particular historical ethnography relating to my Nigerian research. In the days of British colonialism, especially in the early twentieth century, the colonial administration practised ‘indirect rule’ through ‘native authorities’, which were often tribal chiefs, when such could be identified (or even invented). So this was a way of maintaining and even strengthening ethnicity as a basis of low-cost government. But that could cause problems for a long time afterwards, as politicised ethnicity clashed with newly introduced, universalist principles of democracy. Nigeria has remained an example of this.

To get back briefly to your general question: I think ethnicity has many enduring characteristics. Its intrinsic quality as a form of organisation managed from within groups I think may not necessarily change so much, but then new characteristics may emerge when states and markets appropriate ethnic distinctions for their own purposes. The transnationalisation in the form of diasporas, of course, is one aspect of change, although there are indeed some very old diasporas.

**You pointed out that terms like ‘ethnicity’ or ‘ethnic group’ are used by both scholars and actors themselves. What does it mean for us as researchers?**

Briefly: that we should be clear and accessible in the way we use them, and try to be usefully critical in reaching out when we see misunderstandings and undesirable usages among other actors and observers.

**What, in the sphere of ethnic relations worldwide, has surprised you most in the recent time?**

I have been around quite a long time, so it is difficult to really surprise me these days. But then certainly two events in 2016 were rather unexpected: the Brexit vote in Great Britain and the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States. Both certainly had ethnic aspects, as what has been termed ‘populism’ tends to involve a reaction by stagnant or declining segments of what had been ethnic majorities. In the latter case, I had read some books which to a degree prepared me, such as J. D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016). In the British case, I was aware of no comparable writings. Afterwards, certainly, there has been no shortage of commentary. But what dismayed me was that there were hardly any local studies by professional anthropologists to provide relevant background and reach a wider audience. Again, it seemed to me that some decades earlier, in the 1960s–1970s debate over Black American politics, economy and culture, anthropologists had done rather better.

**Which ethnic phenomena do you think are neglected and would deserve researchers’ attention?**

I cannot say that they have been neglected, but I still think that cases where the existence of some large group is seriously threatened deserve much attention. There have certainly been other such cases in



twentieth-century history; more recently, there have been the Yazidi in the Middle East, the Uighur in China, the Rohingya in Myanmar, perhaps the Hazara in Afghanistan. The threats have been of different kinds, but they involve groups practising another religion than that of the majority in their lands (whether that majority controls the government or operates through some militant movement). The threat may amount to a genocide, or it may be more a matter of ethnocide in the sense of leaving people alive but taking their identity away from them. Or it may be a matter of chasing them away from their habitat, and thus destroying their way of life. In all such instances, researchers can usefully build an understanding of what happens, also giving a wider public more knowledge of it.

Obviously, in these cases the analytical distinction between religion and ethnicity tends to be blurred. Often in local or national contexts adherents of one minority religion tend to be treated by majority outsiders rather like an ethnic group, even as they are aware of internal differences themselves – perhaps in such situations a notion like ‘superethnicity’ can be somewhat useful.

Then we have these messy situations where some practice of a minority group, ethnic, religious or both, is criticised by members of the majority population, and perhaps by some insiders as well, on grounds of human rights, or gender rights or age rights. A typical example has been that of Muslim women wearing veils. The matter has become more confused by the fact that the term ‘veil’ has been used for anything from a headscarf to a *niqab*. But who should decide on the right to wear one kind of headgear or other: all group members? The parents? The child or teenager herself? Or a boyfriend or husband? Or the school? For what reasons? I think it may often help to get some close-up ethnography sorting out such views, and misunderstandings and conflicts. There is an illuminating example in John Bowen’s *Why the French Don’t Like Headscarves* (2007).

The so-called ‘honor killings’ are a related phenomenon, where it is easier to take a stand. Fredrik Barth’s wife and colleague Unni Wikan has done a study of one well-known Swedish case, *In Honor of Fadime* (2008), which stands out as an example of what an anthropologist can do here.

One phenomenon that has recently drawn considerable attention and debate in Sweden has been the widespread presence of Roma beggars, mostly seasonal migrants from Romania and Bulgaria, standing or sitting outside grocery shops and the like. There has been some reasonably good news-media reporting on this, but at least I have not come across any substantial research (preferably transnationally

multi-sited) on the organisation of the migration flow and its background/bases in the respective countries involved.

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**Ulf Hannerz** (born 1942 in Malmö) is Professor Emeritus of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University. He has taught at several American, European and Australian universities, and is a former EASA President. He is also a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His research has been especially in the field of urban anthropology (*Soulside* 1969; *Exploring the City* 1980), transnational cultural processes and globalisation (*Cultural Complexity* 1992; *Transnational Connections* 1996; *Anthropology's World* 2010; *Writing Future Worlds* 2016), with field studies in West Africa, the Caribbean (*Caymanian Politics* 1974), and the United States. A study of the work of news media foreign correspondents drew on field studies in Jerusalem, Johannesburg and Tokyo (*Foreign News* 2004).

He has been the anthropology editor for the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (2001). In 2000, together with Kjell Goldmann and Charles Westin, he co-edited a volume, *Nationalism and Internationalism in the Post-Cold War Era*, examining critically the post-Cold War political landscape. As a result of a comparative project of anthropological studies of small countries, he also co-edited (with Andre Gingrich) a volume entitled *Small Countries: Structures and Sensibilities* (2017).

For the time being, his latest book is *World Watching: Streetcorners and Newsbeats on a Journey through Anthropology* (2019b), which links personal biography to changes in the discipline of anthropology over the last half a century. In 2005, the University of Oslo awarded him an honorary doctorate and in 2010 the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography gave him the Anders Retzius gold medal. Launched officially at the EASA's 13th Biennial Conference in Tallinn, a collection of essays was published by Berghahn Books to acknowledge his contribution to the discipline (Hylland Eriksen et al. 2014).

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