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'Ethnic group', the state and the politics of representation

Peter Ratcliffe

Introduction

The assertion, even if only by implication, that 'ethnic group' categories represent 'real' tangible entities, indeed identities, is commonplace not only in the realms of political and policy discourse but also amongst contemporary social scientists. This paper, following Brubaker (2002), questions this position in a number of key respects: of these three issues will dominate the discussion that follows. First, there is an interrogation of the proposition that those to whom the categories/labels refer constitute sociologically meaningful 'groups' as distinct from (mere) human collectivities. Secondly, there is the question of how these categories emerge, i.e. exactly what series of events, negotiations and contestations lie behind their construction and social acceptance. Thirdly, and as a corollary to the latter point, we explore the process of reification that leads to these categories being seen to represent 'real things in the world' (ibid.).

As will be seen below, nation states take very different positions as to the salience accorded to 'ethnic' diversity or, more pertinently, ethnic 'difference'. As Morning (2008) points out, most states now collect official statistics on social divisions of this form. The manner in which they do varies considerably, however. Many identify 'ethnic groups': others refer to 'race', 'kin/tribe', religion/faith, linguistic background, nationality and/or ancestry. The reasons for doing so are many and varied, some benign others less so. Some, most notably in the European context France, do not (**at least officially**) recognise the existence of such divisions (in the French context, formally, in deference to republican ideals and traditions).

As the attendant political and methodological issues are many and complex, these global variations clearly cannot be dealt with adequately in a brief paper such as this. It therefore deploys a single case study – Britain – to illustrate the ways in which 'ethnic' categories emerge and are then normalised

and propagated to form part of 'common-sense' everyday knowledge. This will be seen to take the form of a complex dialectical process involving negotiation and re-negotiation on the part of a myriad of social actors and structural forces at macro, meso and micro levels. More explicitly, it represents a contested terrain where political priorities and agendas vie with the politics of representation mediated by methodological considerations.

The first section of the paper reviews the plethora of theoretical debates surrounding the meaning of ethnicity and the attendant concept 'ethnic group'. Central to this is the relationship between ethnicity and the other, epistemologically related, factors noted above; namely 'race', nation, geographical origins, ancestry, and linguistic and faith backgrounds. The second takes the discussion of 'ethnic group' rather further by exploring how, and in what sense(s), such groups are 'made' and/or 'un-made'. The third part investigates the factors that ultimately led to the introduction of 'ethnic group' into the agenda of the decennial Population Census in Britain. In section four, we witness the evolution of the measurement process, seen against the background of demands for 'group' recognition and an evolving political and policy agenda that was increasingly critical of such demands. The final section opens with a reflection on the current status of the term and asks the apparently rhetorical question: is it possible for an identity construct of this nature to be captured effectively in a national census and, if so, are there limits to its utility? It concludes with a consideration of a series of much broader and more fundamental questions concerning the reification of 'ethnic group' categories and the contingent material effects.

Ethnicity: site of contestation

Disputes over the nature of 'ethnicity' date back to the origins of sociology as a discipline. In the work of Max Weber, for example, the concept was seen to represent a host of elements that are now commonly seen as more akin to 'race' or nation. He linked the term to the existence of human collectivities which 'entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization or migration' (Weber 1968: 389). Crucial here for later arguments in the current paper are three things: first, the linking of

'ethnicity' to variations in phenotype; secondly, the role of 'memory' (central to Benedict Anderson's – 1993 - notion of 'imagined communities') and, thirdly, what might be interpreted as an implicit elision of collectivity and 'group'. Deferring until the next section the group versus collectivity issue, we begin with the linking of ethnicity to phenotype, in which Weber was, of course, not alone.

Schermerhorn (1970: 12) referred to (ethnic) collectivities as having 'a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood'. Clarifying the term 'symbolic elements' he says that these can include 'kinship patterns, physical contiguity (as in localism or sectionalism), religious affiliation, language or dialect forms, tribal affiliation, nationality, *phenotypical features*, or any combination of these' [italics added]. More recently, Horowitz (1985) deployed the term in a more ascriptive sense, seeing the core features of ethnicity as common origin, *skin colour, appearance*, religion and/or language. Therein lies a key dualism, self-definition and the politics of representation (Marotta 2011) versus external definitions of 'the other'. What they have in common is a resort to the essentialised subject, and the claim that a core element of this subject is physical appearance. In this sense, we also witness an elision of ethnicity with traditional biological conceptions of 'race' (Ratcliffe 2004).

As to 'memories of a shared past' (Bulmer 1986) or a 'subjective belief in …… common descent' [Weber] these presage a primordialist position, albeit one that is 'slippery' in view of its openness to the social constructionist perspective. In contrast to the 'pure' primordial model, whereby '(e)ach society in the modern world contains subsections or sub-systems more or less distinct from the rest of the population' (Schermerhorn 1970: 12), there is a recognition that social actors, in the shape of the 'ethnic subject', may make and re-make history in her/his (re)construction of self-identity. Equally importantly, however, such constructions may be inculcated/imposed as part of a process of ethnic mobilisation (McKay 1982). In the Balkan wars of the 1980s and 1990s, for example, Serbian nationalists invoked the historical image of a 'Greater Serbia' to create a collective sense of injustice and 'hatred of the other' (L. Cohen 1995; Bennett 1997; Davidovic 2001; Ratcliffe 2004). In other words, 'memory' and the perceived shared experience of the 'collectivity' may be viewed as social constructions generated by a dialectical process involving multiple agential forces. The

'constructivist' position, as Bayar (2009) argues, has acquired a hegemonic status in contemporary sociology.

Primordialism suggests that ethnicity and ethnic identity may in essence be frozen in time; that once an ethnic collectivity has been formed it remains so. This has been widely rejected by contemporary sociologists on the grounds of its overt determinism and essentialism. Symbolic ethnicity (Gans 1979) retained the idea of memory embedded in self-identity, but marks a break with the assumption of fixed ethnic collectivities with common attachments/allegiances pervading all aspects of daily life. The proponents of the situational view of ethnicity (Okamura 1981) once again reject simple essentialisms, arguing that the ethnic self is complex and multidimensional. Its elements are seen as emerging in various guises depending on social context (Ratcliffe 2010). Whilst acknowledging the merits of the pervading (anti-essentialist) orthodoxy, Bayer (op. cit.) holds on to the idea that kinship and history play a powerful role in the maintenance and reproduction of ethnic collectivities.

These debates lead to two key questions for the current paper. First: what are the implications of the critique of ethnic essentialisms for the 'measurement' of ethnicity, specifically the identification of 'ethnic collectivities'? Secondly: assuming it is possible to define such collectivities, under what conditions (if any) can these be regarded as 'ethnic groups'?

'Collectivity' or 'Group': the need for 'theoretical/methodological pragmatism'?

Although the implications of anti-essentialism are that the imputation of ethnic collectivities represents little more than a heuristic device, public and policy discourse relies on the construction of socially meaningful categories, i.e. those having a certain commonsense resonance. As noted below, these categories routinely make reference to nationality, geography, ancestry, kinship, 'race' and, occasionally, linguistic or faith background (Morning 2008). Each of these resonates to some degree with those to whom the labels/categories ostensibly refer. This does not, however, imply that those nominally represented by the categories constitute 'real' ethnic collectivities, let alone groups (Brubaker 2002).

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In contrast, Fenton (1999), following Eriksen (1993), argues that there are a number of 'ethnicity making' situations that lead to the formation of 'groups' with common material interests. Primary amongst these would be colonial and imperialist expansion, the subordination of migrant/minority (or 'minoritised') groups at different historical junctures, and the structural positioning of contemporary migrants/minorities, whether predominantly 'economic' in nature or 'political' (as in the case of refugees and asylum seekers). In this view the forces of regulation *qua* structure are the major drivers behind ethnic group formation. Where this differs from the primordial view is that it allows for ethnic groups not only to be 'made' but also 'remade'. In other words, in the course of history material relationships are formed that provide a basis, or catalyst, for the generation of new social formations.

Given the emergence of 'super-diversity' (Vertovec 2007) in the wake of rapid increases in the pace, volume and composition of global migrant flows over the past few decades, there is increasing focus in the literature on transnationalism and 'diasporic communities' (Clifford 1992; Cohen 1997). These debates add an extra dimension to the idea that collectivities/groups can be transformed as part of a dialectical process involving the interaction over time between the individual and her/his social and material context. In this context, the renewed interest in the work of Bhaba (1990), with its focus on the nature and significance of 'home', is unsurprising. It has, after all, the potential to cast considerable light on the extent to which people maintain attachments to more than a single nation and to different historical and cultural contexts.

In terms of the search for 'group-like' qualities, the crucial point relates to 'belonging' and the perception of common interests. Those who favour the idea of symbolic ethnicity (or for that matter Robert Park's 'race relations cycle' - 1950) tend to argue that, in accordance with the 'melting pot' thesis (Glazer and Moynihan 1975), delineations between 'groups' would tend to fade over time, as the degree of acculturation increases.

In contrast, poststructuralist and postmodernist writers bemoan the tendency to reify groups. They argue that doing so constitutes a resort to crude essentialisms (Rattansi and Westwood 1994; Malik 1996a, 1996b). Their view leads to a prioritisation of 'diversity over difference', in other words seeing

ethnicity as something which is diffuse and therefore not amenable to distillation into a number of discrete categories. In Brubaker's (2002: 164) words: "….a diffuse postmodernist sensibility emphasizes the fragmentary, the ephemeral, and the erosion of fixed forms and clear boundaries".

More generally, Brubaker (2002) argues that sociologists have tended on the whole to ignore the problems associated with groups. In critiquing 'groupism' he argues (ibid.: 163): "we tend to take for granted not only the concept 'group', but also 'groups' – the putative things-in-the-world to which the concept refers". Critical realists such as Carter (2000) suggest that existing categories purporting to connote putative groups represent but one slicing of the social world, and that it is also a mistake to impute causal status (even if only by implication) to the 'groups' represented by the given categories. After all, "the tendency to partition the social world into putatively deeply constituted, quasi-natural intrinsic kinds………….is a key part of what we want to explain, not what we want to explain things *with*" [italics in original] (Brubaker 2002: 165).

There is no reason, Brubaker suggests, for us *qua* sociologists to resort to such 'common sense primordialism'. However the problem for the profession, or at least those who are involved in empirical research, is that much of what counts as knowledge about the social world is framed in, indeed circumscribed by, given categories and categorical schema that necessarily constrain exploratory/explanatory accounts. They, in short, may be seen to form "grids for the distortion of social process" (Cicourel 1964).

Despite these quite valid reservations, the current paper argues there are nevertheless certain forms of analysis that can be undertaken legitimately, albeit it with important caveats. Although ethnic categories can be said to represent the outcome of 'common sense reasoning', in the case of official data (i.e. those emanating from departments of state or related public bodies) they invariably emerge from a lengthy process involving extensive research and national consultation exercises. They can therefore be said to constitute 'mediated common sense' reflecting the outcome (often grounded in pragmatism) of debates mired in the complex and contested terrain of recognition claims, political interests/sensibilities and methodological concerns. In deploying the resulting data, sociologists

should therefore be mindful of their limitations. The given ethnic categories can essentially be regarded as providing the basis for an analysis of 'collectivities' of people with certain prescribed commonalities, but not as 'groups' with a collective sense of belonging, interests and/or social agency. In other words, they serve as a heuristic device. The best way to illustrate this argument is to look in some detail at one attempt to capture national data on 'ethnic group', in this case Britain.

'Ethnic group' and the population census in Britain

In the wake of World War II, Britain looked to immigration to meet the challenges of an acute shortage of labour (Peach 1968). Rather than turn immediately to the New Commonwealth, however, the government resorted to a strategy known as the European Volunteer Force (EVF) (Solomos 2003; Ratcliffe 2004). It became clear that the reason for this was that government ministers were concerned about the implications of an influx of 'black' migrants (Carter, Harris and Joshi 1987). 'Race' rather than considerations of language and culture was at the core of the decision. In other words, it was felt that 'white' migrants from Eastern and Southern Europe were preferable to those who were likely to speak English and had grown up societies bearing the imprint of English/British colonialism. Only when this flow of migrants began to dry up was there a concerted effort to attract migrants from, for example, the Anglophone Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent.

Many on the political right felt that their initial concerns had been justified when, in 1958, serious disturbances broke out in Nottingham and in Notting Hill in London. Thus, rather than blaming the events on racism against migrants and agitation in the area by the extreme-right organisation, National Front, it was the migrants themselves and past immigration policy that were seen as culpable. In other words, had the migrants not been admitted those areas would not have witnessed such events! This, mediated by the continued need for labour, provided the political context for the immigration controls imposed through the 1960s.

These considerations were, however, accompanied by an acceptance, at least from the left of centre, that racism was a major problem and that migrants were subject to widespread discrimination. The

introduction, from 1965, of a series of Race Relations Acts was accompanied by extensive research setting out the scale of discrimination in housing, education, the labour market and elsewhere (Rose 1969; Smith 1977). With the establishment of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) under the terms of the Race Relations Act 1976, there were increasing calls for data to be collected, as part of the decennial Population Census, that would provide definitive data on inequalities between 'ethnic groups'. The then Office for Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) duly undertook research designed to test the public acceptability of this extension to the census agenda and to pilot different formulations/formats of the 'ethnic group' question (Sillitoe 1978).

Political opinion was divided on this development, however. Proponents of the question, which included the CRE and many social scientists, argued (a) that the data were needed so as to assess the success, or otherwise, of the anti-discrimination legislation, and (b) that relying on place of birth, or the place of birth of the 'head of household' (which had been used as a surrogate measure of 'ethnicity') were becoming increasingly unreliable[i] given the emergence of the second and successive generations of migrant origin. Opponents of the 'ethnic group' question included some social scientists and inner urban migrants fearful of the potential uses to which the data could be put. Ironically, however, this group also included Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. This was a rather unholy alliance between opposing sides of the political spectrum. Thatcher, driven by a neo-liberal agenda that sought to deny the existence of class and 'race' inequalities (as outmoded 'Socialist dogma') refused to sanction the question's inclusion in the 1981 Census. Indeed, she is believed to have been the only sitting Prime Minister to have taken the proposed Census form to Cabinet, with a view to deleting those questions which she found unacceptable.

An 'ethnic group' question first appeared in the 1991 Census [see question 11 - https://www.census.ac.uk/Documents/CensusForms/1991_England_Household.pdf], but it raised a number of issues, not least whether it could, in any meaningful sense, be regarded as a measure of ethnicity, let alone 'ethnic group'. The obvious point is that, by mirroring the common sense post-war 'race' discourse in which Britain's population was seen as divided into 'white', 'black' and 'coloured', its epistemological basis is essentially (perceived) skin colour. Linked to the phenotype-

based spine are categories that are a mix of geography and nation. Here, what is notable is the particular geographical slicing, which is largely confined to the New Commonwealth territories from which the majority of post-war migrants came. In other words, contemporary political priorities played a major role, a feature also in evidence in the later variants of the question.

The obvious conclusion to be drawn from this is that whatever the question does measure, it certainly is not 'ethnic group'. The 'white' category, for example, conflates a wide array of northern and southern Europeans, including Cypriots of both Greek and Turkish background. 'White' South Africans would also be allocated on the basis of phenotype, unless they select another category. The key point is that the question measures **ascriptive** identity, rather than self-defined ethnicity.

Moreover, the question is inevitably 'Janus-faced' (Duster 2001; Ratcliffe 2008), in the sense that it is driven by two conflicting agendas. The CRE agenda (along with that of a large body of social scientists) demanded that the question focused on how people are perceived, and therefore treated, by others. In a society riven by phenotype-based racism, therefore, the focus on 'skin colour' can be defended. As a result, however, respondents to the question select their 'ethnic group' but cannot embrace a subjectively meaningful sense of belongingness or self-identity[ii]. Those hoping to 'read off' the individual and 'group' needs and aspirations of those captured by the categories, including many of the policy makers who supported the introduction of the question, were inevitably disappointed. Although Morning (2008) rightly included the UK amongst the list of those countries (including all in Europe) which did not formally include a 'race question', it nevertheless constituted a racialised interpretation of 'ethnic group'. Indeed, it is often referred to in public discourse as a 'race question', thereby contributing further to the reification of 'race'. It also features a normative, white 'we' at the apex and a narrowly differentiated (non-white) 'other'[iii]. It is what Hughey (2010: 1289) refers to as the 'shared "groupness"' associated with 'hegemonic whiteness'.

The evolution of 'ethnic group'

What is striking about the development of the question was the dialectical relationship between political and policy discourse and a highly differentiated 'stakeholder' body made up of sociologists/social scientists and representatives of 'civil society'. In the case of the 2001 version, this process of contestation was institutionalised by means of a specially constituted government committee comprising interested parties[iv]. This body took a wide-ranging view of its role, even considering the inclusion of an ancestry question such as that deployed in numerous countries (six, including the US and Canada, in Morning's – 2008 - sample). Following the intervention of one female committee member, however, the idea was quickly dismissed. Her testimony simply drew attention to her own complex biography which could be characterised in a multitude of ways, even restricting consideration to the previous three or four generations[v]. The discussion nevertheless was useful in that it turned the spotlight onto the idea of 'mixed ethnicity/heritage'. Indeed, it underlined the point that 'mixednenss' is a **universal**, rather than particularistic, phenomenon.

Berthoud (1998), amongst others, had already argued that the 1991 question was guilty of dividing the ethnic landscape of Britain into a narrow range of crude essentialist categories. Pointing to research on increases in the rate of mixed-heritage relationships, he suggested that the 2001 question should reflect this aspect of demographic change. It also needed, as far as possible, to be 'future proof' by trying to anticipate likely shifts over time, not least because of the comparability issue – namely the need to facilitate longitudinal analyses. For the latter to be possible, categories clearly need to be amenable to theoretically defensible mappings across successive censuses.

Regrettably, the comparability straightjacket led to the retention of the worst feature of the 1991 question, the inherent racialisation of ethnicity (see question 8 - https://www.census.ac.uk/Documents/CensusForms/2001_England_Household.pdf). The pyramid structure retained 'white' at the apex on the grounds that the category would be ticked by the majority of respondents. The real problem, however, lay in the rather disturbingly atavistic nature of the 'mix' typology in that, by focusing on selected forms of 'white mix', it appeared to hark back to Social Darwinist thought and the scientific racism of the Eugenics movement. It also appears to endorse once again the conceptual framework of 'hegemonic whiteness' (Hughey 2010) by conflating

(perceived) 'degrees of whiteness' and 'mix' in an analogous fashion to that in which the 'race' discourse (Ratcliffe 2004) of the 1950s and 1960s divided the population into 'white', 'coloured' and 'black'. The focus is also on 'racial mix' and not on *ethnic* mix, thereby endorsing the notion of 'race' as a 'floating signifier' (Rattansi and Westwood 1994). Failing to recognise these points, sociologists too often appear to see 'mix' as a particularistic aspect of 'super-diversity' (Vertovec 2007; Song 2012) rather than a generic feature of contemporary societies. Much more worryingly, expansion of the number of categories is occasionally misconstrued, or at least misapplied, as an indicator of increasing ethnic 'fractionalisation' (Patsiurko, Campbell and Hall 2012) rather than simply a 're-slicing' of the social world.

We now consider the interplay of social agency and the politics of identity construction in the generation of the 2001 Census categories. Beyond the focus on 'mix', there was an attempt to generate a more socially relevant and meaningful set of categories than those from a decade earlier. To most it appeared that the expansion of the 'white' category to include the sub-category 'Irish'[vi] was the result of lobbying from Irish groups. In fact, the reality was somewhat at variance with this. The more significant driver was individual social agency, specifically the repeated, and forceful, intervention of one member of the government committee, himself of Irish origin.

As to the categories 'Black' and 'Asian' (whether 'mixed' or not), discussions reflected the widespread demand for, and from, post first-generation migrants to be able to embrace the label 'British'. The problem was that, despite this innovative move towards the implicit acceptance of hybridity, it was immediately undermined by a failure to do so at the level of both category and sub-category. As a result, it is not possible, for example, to distinguish analytically between those self-defining as 'Asian' as opposed to 'British-Asian' let alone, say, 'Indian' as against 'British-Indian'. The same arguments hold for the 'Black groups/collectivities'. In sociological terms, these distinctions could reasonably be expected to prove highly significant.

A growing degree of disaffection with the polity and an attendant decline in political participation lay behind a government marketing campaign with the slogan '*Count Me In*'. Designed to increase the

national response rate, this attempted to drive home the message that the decennial Census was of vital importance not just to the state but to all citizens. The slogan, however, also inadvertently provided a marshalling point for dissident voices, specifically in this case for those of Welsh origin. Objecting to the 'special treatment' given to those of Irish background, they initiated a census counter-campaign under the slogan *'Count Me Out'* (Ratcliffe 2008). Devolution of powers to the Principality had given legitimacy to such claims, but in the case of the Irish more fundamental political considerations came into play. Twentieth century relations between Britain and Ireland and residual tensions between Protestant and Catholic communities in the North, had coincided with the desire on the part of the representatives of those of Irish origin for separate representation.

These increasing demands for recognition raise some interesting debating points, not least surrounding the gradual erosion of the principle of parsimony. A conversation a decade ago between the current author and the director of the US Bureau of the Census at the time of the 2000 US Census, for example, revealed major concerns on the part of the latter that the multiplicity of groups was in danger of undermining the utility of the question as an analytical tool.

Under the Census Act 1920 it became illegal (in Britain) to ask questions on religion. But it was becoming increasingly clear that global categories such as 'Indian', 'Pakistani', 'Bangladeshi' (and, to a lesser extent, 'Irish' concealed significant internal divisions, culturally and materially (Platt 2005, 2007; Owen et al 2006), on which more later. The government census committee was therefore tasked to consider the possible addition of a question on religion, in the full knowledge that its inclusion would require a change in the law. Research was undertaken to assess whether such a question would be acceptable to the public and, in particular, to those of South Asian origin (Rainford 1997). With the growth of Islamophobia through the 1990s (Runnymede Trust 1997, 2000), there were significant concerns that Muslims might be especially loathe to answer such a question. In the event, the research suggested that the opposite was the case.

The Conservative government was opposed to the inclusion of such a question, so the only available route was resort to a Private Member's Bill, where the normal chances of success are minimal. In this

case, however, the proposal benefited from a groundswell of support across the House. In an attempt to block the Bill, however, the government decided to resort to filibustering. As the deadline for finalising the Census form grew closer two master copies of the document were prepared: one with the religion question included, the other with it omitted. So as not to lose the question, supporters ultimately opted for a compromise: that it would be included but its completion would not be compulsory.

The problem with the final version (see question 10 - https://www.census.ac.uk/Documents/CensusForms/2001_England_Household.pdf), however, was that its conceptual underpinnings mirrored those of the 'ethnic group' question. 'Christian' (all denominations) was at its apex, followed by the other major global religions. Once again, therefore, it appeared to suggest a conscious decision to divide the (unitary) 'we' from 'the (differentiated) other'. In doing so, it also effectively conflated the Protestant and Catholic Irish communities. There were also some cynics who mounted an internet campaign to encourage respondents to enter 'Jedi Knight' in the 'Other' category (a move that ultimately failed either to impress ONS statisticians or achieve its aim of generating 'recognition/representation' for 'Trekkies' of this persuasion).

2001 witnessed a series of events that transformed the debate about 'race', ethnicity and faith. A summer of unrest in major towns and cities in the north of England, largely in areas where 'white' and Muslim communities lived cheek by jowl (Kalra 2003; Hussain and Bagguley 2005; DCLG 2006; Cheong et al. 2007; D. Phillips et al. 2008) was quickly followed by the events of 9/11. The latter sharpened the debates about the relationship between contemporary Islam and the West. It also heightened the level of Islamophobia in public discourse, and saw Muslim communities come under ever greater official surveillance (McGhee 2005, 2008; Kundnani 2007, 2009). Overlaid on this were the effects of the expansion of the EU, first in 2004, and then in 2007. The resulting influx of migrants from Eastern Europe added an extra level of toxicity to debates on immigration and, in particular, as to whether the UK could absorb the shocks of 'super-diversity' (Vertovec 2007).

These developments clearly influenced thinking around the 2011 Census question (see question 16 - https://www.census.ac.uk/Documents/CensusForms/EnglandhouseholdformCensus2011_tcm77-262138.pdf). Most obviously, the category 'Arab' was introduced for the first time. This followed a stream of official government-sponsored reports on Muslim communities of differing national background[vii]. Census data on 'Arab' Muslims can now be used, therefore, to complement those on Muslims of 'Indian', 'Pakistani' and 'Bangladeshi' origin. This official recognition of a further, predominantly Muslim, population (albeit one that is highly diverse in ethnic, cultural and national terms) might be viewed with some concern in the context of our earlier comments, these being underscored by recent comments of Prime Minister David Cameron bemoaning the fact that we have 'tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values.'[viii] This 'othering' process, indicated by the unspecified 'our', is firmly located with a discourse of the 'enemy within' (McGhee 2008), in this case infused with Orientalism (Ramadan 2001).

The 'Arab' category replaces 'Chinese' in the 'Other ethnic group' section: the latter now being listed under 'Asian/British Asian', a decision that mirrors the US convention of linking citizens of 'South Asian' and 'East Asian' origin. Beyond this, the question essentially retains its 2001 form, but for two key developments in the 'white' category. First, in response to justifiable criticisms of the way in which 'Irish' citizens were represented in 2001, those of 'Northern Irish' origin are now combined with those defining themselves as 'English', 'Welsh', 'Scottish' or 'British', and are thereby separated explicitly from those from the Irish Republic for whom the sub-category 'Irish' is retained[ix]. Secondly, increasing levels of friction between Traveller groups and mainstream sedentarist communities and the rather belated realisation, on the part of both sociologists and policy makers, that 'white' migrants/minorities could also be both materially disadvantaged and prone to hate crime and xenophobia (DCLG 2009; Van Hout and Staniewicz 2012), the sub-category 'Gypsy or Irish Traveller' was added. However, those of Eastern European origin, irrespective of 'ethnic group', were destined to remain identifiable only from the census question on birthplace.

Concluding thoughts: 'ethnic group' and the political process

If there is one conclusion to be drawn from the above, it is that the construction of an empirical measure of 'ethnic group' in a national census, and future iterations thereof, take the form of a complex dialectical process involving multiple actors and agential forces, mediated by methodological considerations. What is also clear, however, is that certain forces are ultimately of much more efficacy than others. Although a wide-ranging government committee comprising a variety of 'stakeholders' from departments of state, local government, academe, the 'third sector' and a variety of interest groups (including representatives of particular communities), ultimately their deliberations are not determinate. Census questions inevitably reflect the key governmental agendas and priorities at that juncture.

By way of conclusion, this paper raises three key questions:

1. What does a census question on 'ethnic group' actually measure?

Given the contested nature of ethnic categories and the more fundamental theoretical concerns surrounding 'groupness' (Brubaker 2002), there are inevitably questions as to the 'truth value' of the resulting data. As to its **use value**, however, this depends on the answer to a further series of considerations, most notably whether the particular slicing of the population meets the demands of the user. The British example illustrates the point that census questions tend to reflect conflicting agendas. Its 'Janus-faced' character arises from the fact that the underlying drivers are intrinsically incompatible. Given the prevalence of phenotype-based racism, assessing material inequality implies the need for a measure of ascriptive identity. Those seeking to deploy census data to explore broader demographic change and, more especially, the cultural needs and aspirations of communities require a very different kind of (subjective) measure[x]. Conflicting agendas, and political and methodological considerations, undermine the integrity of the question meaning that the resulting data are likely to be viewed by many as sub-optimal. In the British case, 'ethnic group' is in essence a mix of 'race', nation and geography. The most obvious conclusion would be that an 'ethnic group' question such as this can only represent a heuristic measure of social divisions/difference and not, as some social

scientists and others have done, as a 'real' representation of ethnic 'fractionalisation' (Patsiurko, Campbell and Hall 2012).

2. In what sense does such a question lead to a reification of difference and what are the resulting material effects?

Whereas there has been much debate about the measurement of 'ethnic group' (Bradby 1995; Ratcliffe 1996, 2004, 2008, 2012; Aspinall 1997; Berthoud 1998; Song 2012), much less has been said about the subsequent 'life' of the concept as an aspect of the social. The demand for brevity dictates that we focus here simply on what are probably the two most significant problem areas in relation to material impact: the first stemming from the fallacy of mono-causal explanation, the second concerning the association of this social indicator with the alleged demise of multiculturalism.

Carter (2000) presents a compelling critical realist interpretation of the social constructionist project. Largely framed in terms of the concept 'race', his key argument was that analysts and commentators were too quick to see 'race' as the key explanatory factor in accounts of material inequality relating to, for example, housing position, educational achievement, or health status. At one level the concerns were about the precise generative mechanisms that linked a particular aspect of perceived social difference, i.e. a person's putative 'race', with a particular social position. More important, however, was the point that to accord priority to 'race' was to commit the cardinal error of explanation via epiphenomenal reasoning. In the current context, the core issue relates to the (high) degree of explanatory power one cedes to 'ethnic group'. Reification of the form of essentialised ethnic group categories deployed in the census provides a convenient frame for erroneous 'common sense' reasoning (Lawrence 1982).

Examples of this in the policy arena are legion. Official accounts of the urban unrest in various towns and cities in northern England in 2001 were invariably interpreted as conflict between 'whites' and 'Pakistani' or 'Bangladeshi' communities (Home Office 2001a, b). In Oldham, for example, a major street battle between youths of 'white' and Pakistani origin was interpreted at 'face value' – namely that, given the divergent ethnic character of the two 'groups', the explanation for the conflict must lie

therein. A more nuanced account was notable by its absence. This would have noted that the groups were engaged in a turf war between drug gangs (the divergence between the protagonists' heritage stemming from the spatial separation of the two communities). Heritage was indeed a factor in the initial spatial patterning of the town and, given the prevalence of both racism and Islamophobia, any conflict would inevitably be infused by these factors. The point is that the immediate primary 'cause' was related to material inequality and its artefacts, and not ethnic origin.

A second example can be located in influential government reports such as *Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society* (DCLG 2009). Embedded in the community cohesion strategy championed by the New Labour government of Tony Blair (Ratcliffe 2012), the analysis is framed predominantly by social differentials between putative 'groups' as defined by the census categories. This is not surprising given that Blair was known to embrace the latter's reification (Wetherell 2008). So those defined as 'Indian' were deemed to be performing less well in key school outcomes than the 'Chinese' but better than, for example, 'Pakistani' and 'Bangladeshi' pupils. The implicit suggestion is that there must be something intrinsic to members of these groups that influences performance levels. Although gender differentials are noted, internal ethnic and cultural heterogeneity, reflected most notably in regional, linguistic and social background is not (DCLG 2009: 27-53). Furthermore, figures for those of 'mixed' ethnicity (occasionally divided into constituent sub-groups) are presented despite the evident lack of 'groupness' reflected in the label.

A third example would be the way in which research and policy deliberations have dealt with the relationship between poverty and ethnic group. As Platt (2005, 2007) has clearly demonstrated the normative assumption amongst national policy circles that that those of 'Indian' origin are materially better placed than those of Pakistani or Bangladeshi background. Whilst this is incontrovertible in global population terms, this conceals a crucial internal divide. 'Indians' of Muslim origin fare little better than the other two population groups of the same faith background. Underlying this is a complex mosaic of historical structural, regional, linguistic and class factors mediated by the vagaries of past immigration controls that filtered potential migrant cohorts on the basis of qualifications and skills levels and the ongoing presence of Islamophobia. Owen et al. (2006) reached similar

conclusions in terms of faith-based material inequality and spelt out how these were linked to spatial segregation and associated variations in multiple deprivation levels.

To those who might argue that these issues lack political immediacy, one only has to reflect on recent debates surrounding the release, in December 2012, of national census data on 'ethnic group' and 'religion'. These generated heated arguments, not confined to the political Right, about alleged threats to the character of the nation, essentially threats to its traditional 'ethnic' and 'religious' character. Social commentators across the print and visual media drew attention to the marked fall in those describing themselves as 'White British' and 'Christian' and noted concomitant increases in those born outside the UK (and of non-Christian origin), and a significant rise over the last decade of those defined as 'mixed' .

As much of this discussion was couched in terms of multiculturalism this provides a substantive link to the second area of debate identified at the beginning of this section: specifically, policies and practices associated with 'ethnic monitoring'. Here, categories are reified in the custom and practice of 'ethnic managerialism', with the effect that they enter everyday 'commonsense' thinking (in the Gramscian sense – cf. Lawrence 1982). 'The monitored' are effectively 'tutored' in how to define themselves, whether or not they consciously associate with the essence of the underlying construct.

Where its consequences become much more significant, however, are as a cornerstone of the policies and practices of 'multiculturalism' as a dominant policy paradigm. The essence of the attendant debates would be the subject of a quite different paper, save for one key point. There is a common tendency to elide 'multiculturalism' as a theoretical construct or normative empirical statement (about ethnic and cultural diversity), and 'multiculturalism' as a (distorted) projection onto the national policy stage of an elevated form of 'ethnic managerialism'. It is the contingent effects of the latter (not least the tensions and conflicts associated with competition for resources between putative 'ethnic groups') that have led many to conclude, wrongly, that multiculturalism has 'failed' (Ouseley 2007; McGhee 2008). Lentin (2012) goes as far to argue that those falling into the latter camp are guilty of racism, in effect suggesting that attacking multiculturalism in this way merely conceals a new form of

racism. This is a something of an oversimplification, however, in that those adhering to this view are an extremely diverse group, not least because they are frequently talking about very different forms and/or interpretations of 'multiculturalism', as noted above.

3. Do such contingent factors militate against the measurement of 'ethnic group'?

The previous arguments might cast some doubt on the wisdom of collecting data based on ethnic categories, irrespective of their construct validity. But this would be to conflate the data **generation** process with the overly rigid **application** of the categories that have the perverse effect of generating contestation between the 'groups' concerned. However, to regard the categories as a loose, heuristic representation of a diverse (rather than differentiated) citizenry is to avoid this error. More importantly, as previously argued, is the fact that they permit insights into broad patterns of inequality when deployed in conjunction with other social relevant data. It is for this reason that they have often been attacked by sections of the political Right. Ultimately, social researchers have little option but to accept the reality that national censuses are an inappropriate vehicle for generating a theoretically adequate measure of ethnicity or 'ethnic group'.

As intimated earlier, Margaret Thatcher's neo-liberal agenda led her to be deeply concerned about the uses to which census data could be put, in particular the ability to assess levels of material inequality between different sections of the citizenry (notably those denoted by ethnicity, class and gender). Under the current Conservative-led administration her mission appears, somewhat belatedly, to be nearing a 'successful' conclusion in that the 2011 Census may well be the final one of its kind. A national consultation exercise is currently underway both to test out the strength of resolve and commitment amongst proponents of the Census and to seek alternative (cheaper) ways of generating data (of a form acceptable to government). In essence, the perceived problems with 'multiculturalism' combined with fiscal austerity have provided a pretext for the potential removal of what is essentially, at least in theory, a socially progressive exercise. In this context at least, one can concur with Lentin's (2012) argument associating various forms of opposition to 'multiculturalism' with racism.

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[i] To use country of birth as a measure of 'ethnicity' or 'ethnic group' was always highly questionable, of course. The ethnicity of Indian- born Europeans would clearly be misrepresented under this schema.

[ii] An additional problem is that it is the Household Representative Person (HRP) who actually completes the Census form, meaning that the supposed 'self-identification' of household members may not be what it appears.

[iii] It is nevertheless appropriate to point out here that this reflects the (universal) position taken by government statisticians that the largest category numerically should be placed first.

[iv] The current author was an invited member of this committee, tasked with the duty to representing the view from academic sociology.

[v] A comparison with the US is instructive here, for two reasons. Firstly, the 2000 and 2010 US Censuses both include an open-ended question on the topic (despite the coding implications) and, secondly, the wording of the question elides 'ethnic origin' and 'ancestry'. This sits alongside a specific question that reifies the concept 'race'.

[vi] This does, of course, embrace the assumption that most of those self-identifying as Irish would define themselves as 'white'.

[vii] See

http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/research/racecohesionfaith/understandingmuslimcommunities/ (accessed 7 July 2012)

[viii] Speech at the Munich Security Conference, Saturday 5 February 2011. This was particularly interesting in that key sections of the text were simply recycled from a speech he made, in opposition, on 26 February 2008.

[ix] The downside of this formulation, of course, is that it is not possible to disaggregate the constituent groups for analytical purposes. It simply accords recognition by way of nomenclature.

[x] Practical considerations, in particular the imperative to ensure questionnaire brevity, dictate that the measurement of 'ethnic group' is confined to a single question.