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# Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks by Andreas Wimmer

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**Wimmer, Andreas. *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. vii + 293 pages. Paperback, \$22.95.**

Sociologist Andreas Wimmer continues his research on nationalism and ethnic conflict in this text, of which several chapters are based on previous publications. Tapping sociological approaches to ethnicity, comparative studies of ethnic boundaries, a case study of ethnically diverse neighborhoods in Switzerland, and empirical analysis of national and international data sets, the author challenges common assumptions about how ethnicity and culture contribute to formation and revision of boundaries.

Wimmer presents the alternative views of ethnicity in sociological literature. On the one hand, the eighteenth-century philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder envisioned the world as “made up of peoples each distinguished by a unique culture, held together by communitarian solidarity, and bound by shared identity” (p. 16). On the other hand are deviations from the Herder conception, such as the social anthropologist Fredrik Barth’s notion that ethnic divisions ensue from maintaining a boundary irrespective of cultural differences. For those following this latter situationalist school, ethnic identities are viewed as relational rather than mutually exclusive. Wimmer recommends utilizing individuals, localities, class, and institutional fields to examine ethnic group formation.

Chapter three presents strategies that may be pursued in ethnic boundary making and identifies means of boundary making. For instance, actors may attempt to revise a boundary to a more inclusive or less inclusive level, labeled expansion and contraction, respectively. Another model focuses on nation building to incorporate or amalgamate ethnic groups. Further, transvaluation strategies endeavor to change the normative principles of stratified ethnic systems. Finally, positional strategies highlight individual or collective movement within a hierarchical system of ethnic categories. The means of making boundaries include the use of symbols, discrimination, mobilization, and coercion.

In Chapter four, Wimmer develops a theoretical framework for assessing ethnic boundaries. He claims that it differs from other approaches in several ways. First, his framework “does not follow the static logic of standard typologies in comparative ethnicity” (p. 111). Second, his multilevel process theory diverges from mainstream social science in that it does not rely on the same group of independent and dependent variables to make predictions. Third, his process theory integrates elements of both micro and macro-level sociological research. Wimmer uses the next three chapters to demonstrate how his theory of boundary making can be employed in empirical research. In Chapter 5, he studies ethnically diverse neighborhoods in Switzerland, finding that racial or ethnic divisions are secondary rather than primary principles of classification. In Chapter Six, coauthored with sociologist Kevin Lewis, an investigation of collegiate Facebook profile pages shows “how important disentangling various homogeneity-producing mechanisms are for a proper understanding and estimation of *any* form of boundary making in any social network” (p. 167). In Chapter Seven, Wimmer and fellow sociologist Thomas Soehl analyze data from the European Social Survey with multilevel statistical models, holding that the results substantiate the peril of equating ethnic diversity with cultural differences.

In the final chapter, Wimmer reviews the results of the study and points to areas for future inquiry. Among the most important conclusions is that only those minorities suffering political disadvantages and discrimination are culturally distinguishable from the majority. Going forward, Wimmer recommends improving systematic study of stability and change as

well as strategies of ethnic closure. Ironically, doing so could prevent “overcomplexity by introducing a clear set of hypotheses about what drives boundary-making processes” (p. 214).

In the years between Wimmer’s 2002 and 2012 publications on related topics, two other books have approached ethnicity in a similar manner. Sociologist Rogers Brubaker’s *Ethnicity without Groups* offers a series of essays challenging conventional views that treat ethnic groups as separate actors. Anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* demonstrates that ethnicity is a much more dynamic feature of social relationships than previously conceived. The Wimmer text is shorter in length than either of the latter two books.

Though its utility is overstated at times, Wimmer’s quantitative approach to examining ethnicity and boundary making is both unique and valuable for this field, as debunking stereotypes is as important as developing new theories. One cannot ignore the practical application of Wimmer’s findings: he castigates Europeans for claiming that Muslim immigrant values are substantially distinct from other religious or ethnic groups. In the current debate about the future of Iraq, Wimmer’s research would seem to argue against the Biden-Gelb plan for a partition of that country based on primary ethnic or religious affiliation.

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