

LITHUANIAN ETHNICITY IN CANADA: TOWARD AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE AND PRACTICE*

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This essay introduces an anthropological approach which gives primacy to the study of the self, as well as to the investigation of individual experience and practice as important factors responsible for the construction, diversity, and continuity of ethnicity. This theoretical perspective can be effectively applied in the ethnographic exploration of Lithuanian ethnic identity in the context of multiethnic Canada. There are also a number of specific topics and directions for further research within this subject area.

It was during the 1960s that the discipline of anthropology recognized ethnicity as a valid and important object of study. Ethnic studies gained prominence in anthropology at that time as a result of the new ethnic and anti-colonial movements, as well as a reaction to structural-functionalism and the theory of assimilation and acculturation. Recently, as some writers observe, ethnicity has become the major industry not only in anthropology, but in other social sciences as well, such as history, sociology, and political science (cf. Verdery 1994:33; Vermeulen and Covers 1994:2; Glazer and Moynihan 1975; Cohen 1994b:59).

The growing scholarly interest in ethnicity can be attributed to the increasing prominence of this phenomenon in many contemporary societies throughout the world. In the words of Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Eriksen (1993:ix), "ethnic relations can be identified in virtually every society... and... they may just as well be balanced and peaceful as they may be violent and volatile." The predictions made by many social theorists at the turn of the century that ethnicity would lose its significance and eventually disappear due to modernization and industrialization were obviously wrong. As ethnicity becomes more significant ideologically, researchers continue to ask themselves why difference is being increasingly asserted in ethnic terms, why and how this identity of loyalty to one's ancestral roots persists, what are the principal factors that underlie its continuity in contemporary nation-states or in multi-ethnic societies (cf. Verdery 1994:51).

Although over the past three decades numerous social scientists have made considerable contributions to the theory of ethnicity, the work of anthropologist Fredrik Barth, another Norwegian, holds a special place in this field. It was his volume entitled *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, published in 1969, that set the tone for anthropological studies of ethnicity for over two decades and still continues to provide important theoretical insights today.

Influenced by the American tradition of social psychology and symbolic interactionism, notably the Chicago School, Barth was among the first anthropologists to reconceptualize ethnicity as a dynamic phenomenon which entails transformation and continuity. By rescuing ethnic studies from structural-functionalist approaches, he placed them in the realm of interactional and transactional paradigms and taught anthropologists to analyze ethnicity not as a static homogeneous *structure* but as a dynamic *process* (cf. Cohen 1994a:9, 1994b:60; Tonkin 1989:5-11; Verdery 1994:36).

In his interactional model, Barth (1969:10-17) views ethnicity as a changeable and evolving social identity which is defined and articulated "at the boundary." According to him, it is at the boundary that ethnic groups encounter each other and it is there that the identity of an ethnic group is contrastively defined in relation to the other (cf. Banks 1996:11-13; De Vos and Romanucci-Ross 1995:16; Cohen 1994a:10).

It should be pointed out in passing that the metaphor of boundary is of great importance not only in ethnic studies but is fundamental to the entire discipline of anthropology. This metaphor points to the essence of what anthropologists strive to accomplish in their research as they attempt to cross boundaries between cultures - "to extend our own consciousness in order to comprehend another's..." (Cohen 1994a:125; cf. Cohen 1994b:63). Boundary is a locus for self-reflexivity, of

thinking about oneself in relation to the other. It is at the boundary and in liminal situations that people become especially aware of themselves and their "significant others" (cf. Prus 1994:18ff).

The self-other opposition is one of the central concerns in Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogue. For this Russian philosopher of culture, the concept of otherness or *drugost* is one of the most essential elements of human existence and a vital prerequisite for the understanding of norms that govern relationships at work in culture. As Bakhtin sees it, the individual, just as culture itself, is never whole or entirely complete and it exists dialogically. To quote Bakhtin (in Todorov 1992:96): "to be means to be for the other, and through him, for oneself."

While emphasizing the need to study the boundaries of ethnic groups and their "dialogic" interaction, Barth neglected the analysis of the content that those boundaries enclose; such elements of ethnicity as religion, language, various cultural practices and aesthetic forms, among others, were largely overlooked in his theory (cf. Banks 1996:12). To quote Barth (1969:15): "the critical focus for investigation becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group rather than the cultural stuff that it encloses."

Equally neglected in Barth's work was the self: the individual's experience and "self consciousness" *vis-à-vis* his or her ethnic identity were regarded by him as unimportant. In this respect, Barth's approach is in keeping with the dominant tradition of Western social sciences to approach culture from the top down, by giving preference to the collective social structure over the individual (cf. Cohen 1994b:72).

While most anthropologists presently working in the field of ethnicity continue to see Barth's theory as valid and relevant, some writers have expressed the need to revise and further develop his insights advanced almost thirty years ago (cf. Verdery 1994:33-35; Vermeulen and Cohen 1994). Specifically, it has been argued recently that ethnic boundaries cannot be adequately understood without coming to terms with the discourse or content they enclose. To fully define what constitutes an ethnic group, anthropologists should attempt to document the claims and perceptions of the individuals and their symbolic practices that constitute that discourse (cf. Bourdieu's (1977) "practice" and "*habitus*"). In other words, to capture the awareness of individuals who can reflect and reveal their position with respect to the ethnic group to which they belong. The best way to understand the dynamics of ethnicity is through the viewpoint of those engaged in its creation and maintenance (cf. Cohen 1994b:68; Handler 1988:31; Prus 1996:xviii).

Influenced by this perspective, increasingly more researchers tend to view ethnicity as an "organization of difference", that is, not as an integrating but as an aggregating social identity which implies diversity of experience, practice, and perception (see Verdery 1994:44-50). Polyvocality, or *raznogolosost'*, to borrow Bakhtin's term, is an outstanding characteristic of any ethnic group.

This approach to ethnicity has been especially well articulated in the recent work of British anthropologist Anthony Cohen. Cohen (1994a, 1994b) contends that it is unsatisfactory to simply generalize ethnicity to the members of a particular ethnic group. Researchers should be equally concerned with the individual, his or her self consciousness, and with the symbolic expression of ethnic identity. He urges us to go beyond the generalized character of ethnicity at the collective level and to explore how it is being constructed and defined at the level of individual participants. In other words, Cohen calls for a radical shift from an anthropology of the collective to an anthropology of the person (cf. Verdery 1994).

Furthermore, he contends that it is not only the boundaries between ethnic groups, but also the boundaries of selfhood that should appear on the anthropologist's research agenda. A better grasp of how the boundaries of individual consciousness are constructed and maintained will allow us to better understand how collectivities are constructed and bounded. In Cohen's words (1994a:133), "...collectivities are themselves the products of their individual members, so that ethnographic attention to individuals' consciousness of their membership is the appropriate way to understand the collectivity...."

He underscores that ethnicity is not merely a contrastive feature used to invoke and maintain boundaries *vis-a-vis* other ethnic groups, as defined in Barth's perspective. Cohen writes (1994:61): "when I consult myself about who I am, this entails something more than the rather negative reflection on 'who I am not.' It is a matter of autobiography: of things I know about myself, of the person I believe myself to be."

To illustrate Cohen's point: if someone in multicultural Canadian society contrastively identifies himself or herself as being of Lithuanian background rather than of Polish or Ukrainian descent, it does not imply that individual is just like any other Lithuanian, for members of this ethnic group have their own understanding of what it means to be a Lithuanian or, more specifically, what it means to be "a good, better, true, or bad Lithuanian" - the categorizations often used by Lithuanian-Canadians (cf. Huseby-Darvas 1995:164-167).

Lithuanian ethnicity in Canada is manifest in various material artifacts, as well as in a variety of religious practices and diverse socio-cultural networks (see Danys 1986; Gaida 1967). Consider, for instance, distinctive Lithuanian-Canadian folk art and architecture, or various seniors' clubs, youth organizations, or the Saturday Schools where Lithuanian is the language of instruction. These referents to the group's identity serve to indicate to its members their commonality and boundedness, and convey to them a sense of familiarity, purpose, and continuity in belonging - they are the visible ties that bind, as it were (cf. Handler 1988:41; Reminick 1983:60).

Following Cohen's perspective, it would be erroneous to assume that such ethnic attributes convey to the group's individual members identical or even similar meanings, for each member interprets and assimilates these "impersonal" elements in a very individual way. These public forms constitute the group's definite appearance, yet their significance is a matter of private or individual interpretation which is largely determined by the consciousness and experience of the self. It is precisely the diversity of individual experience and symbolic expression that accounts for ethnicity's heterogeneous and multivocal character; this is what, in Cohen's words, makes it into "an aggregate of selves, each of whom produces ethnicity for itself" (Cohen 1994a:142; cf. Vermeulen and Covers 1994:5; Heelas and Lock 1981:13-14, 32).

Individuals are not passive recipients of the content or "cultural stuff" that the boundaries of their ethnicity enclose; rather, they are active, proactive, and creative. In other words, they have human agency which entails the exercise of choice and the assertion of individuality. In this process, some components of the ethnic content are imbued with great significance and, as a result, appropriated, objectified, and incorporated into the daily lives of group members, while others are rejected (see Cohen 1994a; Handler 1988:50).

To briefly illustrate this, I use the example of the *Tėviškės Žiburiai* (The Lights of Homeland), a weekly newspaper published by the Lithuanian-Canadian community in Toronto (see Danys 1986; Gaida 1967). Over a period of two years, I observed how various individuals of the postwar displaced persons' generation of Lithuanian immigrants, known as DPs, interact with the paper, how they "experience" it and how they make it symbolically meaningful to themselves, by using it to "imagine" their community and the other outside its boundaries (cf. Anderson 1991).

For some representatives of this generation, the delivery of the newspaper is one of the most important events of the week, awaited with great anticipation. These individuals read the paper with great interest and put it away into storage but never discard it as something unwanted. In some households, the *Tėviškės Žiburiai* is kept in the living room next to religious pictures, family photographs, and eclectic decorative items with Lithuanian subject matter. Thus, the paper becomes an integral part of an improvised domestic "shrine" where religious sentiments, familial attachments, and memories of the old country are symbolically displayed. In such interiors, there are usually no objects with noticeable "Canadian" reference (cf. Riggins 1990).

While for some DPs the paper is of great symbolic importance, for others it has very little meaning. I have heard a number of representatives of this immigrant generation remark that the paper is *nuobodybė*, that is a boring periodical not worth reading or even subscribing to.

If such diversity in the perception of this newspaper can be documented within a single immigrant generation, one wonders how it is interpreted across a wider generational spectrum: What cognitive meaning does it have for other generations of Lithuanian-Canadians who are dispersed throughout various occupational and social strata of Canadian society? How is it interpreted by Lithuanians of diverse social and cultural backgrounds who have immigrated to Canada over the past decade or so?

The case of *Tėviškės Žiburiai* is just one among many examples of how a particular attribute of Lithuanian ethnicity in Canada is perceived by individual members of the group. We should further inquire, for instance, into how this identity is expressed in various aesthetic forms, such as folk arts and crafts, and how such forms are interpreted individually (cf. Vastokas 1994). Also, we need to establish how the Lithuanian language is used as an agent to define and symbolize this identity (cf. Isajiw 1977:135), or how Lithuanian ethnicity is actually mediated by various rituals and ceremonials of belonging, such as a Christmas mass at the parish church or the annual celebration of February 16th, Lithuania's independence day (cf. Danys 1984; Millet 1975). Exploiting the family metaphor, such occasions reaffirm the group's ancestral origins and provide experiences which help inform individual participants who they are and how much they really belong (cf. Roosens 1994:86, De Vos and Romanucci-Ross 1995). Finally, we need to assess Lithuanian ethnicity at the interface with other "differencing" identities of individual group members, such as age, gender, or sexuality (cf. Verdery 1994:48).

These aspects of Lithuanian ethnicity in the Canadian context can be most productively explored by using the theoretical framework I introduced above. Following Cohen, in order to better grasp what constitutes this ethnic identity, it is essential that we attend to the individual experience and practice through which it is formed.

These experiences may entail the individual's symbolic interaction - or "dialogue" - with various material and non-material elements that constitute the group's ethnic content, with other group members, or with others positioned beyond the group boundary. It is only by ethnographically documenting and analyzing these dimensions at the level of daily experience that we can hope to offer an adequate explanation of the processes that underlie the continuity and increasing diversity of Lithuanian ethnicity in contemporary Canada.

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* A slightly modified version of this essay was presented at the Second Conference on Baltic Studies in Europe entitled "Values and Norms in Society in Change," which was held at Vilnius University on August 20-23, 1997.