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The Material Dimension of Ethnicity

'Building an understanding of the situated relationship between social practice and material conditions is not an option, it is the intellectual demand of archaeology.'

(John C. Barrett, *Fragments from Antiquity*)

Romanian archaeologists have engaged in many debates with their colleagues from neighbouring countries – especially from Hungary and Bulgaria – about the attribution of archaeological items and features to certain peoples from the past. Divergent ethnic pasts have been opposed although they are conceived within a unitary framework, heavily influenced by nationalism, with limited or no theoretical reflection, following the paradigm of an archaeology which sees itself as “a science of the concrete” and its discoveries as “testimonies” from the past. The ancient peoples have been identified on the assumption that they all had unitary cultures, bodies of tradition uniformly shared among their members, reprod “mental templates”, recognisable in the associations on a territory of different categories of artefacts and features, usually labelled “archaeological cultures”, and in “typical” objects, like the “Dacian mug” or the “Sarmatian brooch”, diagnostic items, inseparable from their users, and thought to bear an indelible imprint of the ethnic identity of their producers. The archaeologists working within this framework show the surprising conviction – less so if we keep in mind that generally they use as social theory which is a more or less distilled product of nationalism – that language is the essential trait, the very essence of the ethnic entities they try to recover studying material remains,¹ even if any serious empirical consideration of this matter will abundantly show instances where language is not correlated either with material culture or ethnicity.² Associated with language, funerary customs are frequently postulated to be stable ethnic markers, although, again, the empirical evidence does not support such an assumption.³

This kind of archaeological understanding of ethnicity, present, with unessential nuances, in most published interpretations of ethnic phenomena, has never been exposed as a theory or challenged in the Romanian literature. In the last years there is an increasing uneasiness about it. Mostly because Romanian archaeologists are aware that, during the forty-five years of communist dictatorship, some interpretations, particularly those on ancient ethnic entities, had to comply with the official reconstruction of the past. This has not led to a discussion on the subject, and those few authors who have attempted, after 1989, to reconsider the standards of interpretation in Romanian archaeology, have questioned the use of the data, not the interpretational framework.⁴ One explanation for this situation could be that many archaeologists have come to resent the whole problem of the archaeological identification of ancient peoples, and have taken refuge in the comfortably traditional and 'professional' aspects of archaeological work, in the making of typologies and chronologies. This kind of shelter can only be temporary: ultimately the archaeologist has to leave it, because he or she is expected to reconstruct the historical past, with ethnic entities as the leading actors of that past. In Romania, like in most East and Central European countries, archaeology is regarded as an auxiliary science to history; therefore its scientific goals are supposed to be those of the historians, its empiricism being justified by the assumption that besides specific methods and methodological principles, adequate for dealing with the ancient artefacts and features, there is no need for an interpretative theory distinct from that used in the writing of history.⁵

If we want a better understanding of the ethnic phenomena and of their links with material culture, we have to question the assumptions sustained by scientific tradition and by their conformity with the ideology of the nation-state, starting from the origins and the properties of the interpretative framework currently dominant in Central and Eastern Europe.

Nationalism and the Beginnings of Archaeology

Early scientific archaeology developed in Europe in the early and middle part of the nineteenth century. At that time a rising nationalism was gradually imposing a romantic idealisation of national and ethnic differences. These were explained by the existence of immutable biological factors, thus replacing the rationalism of the Enlightenment, with its belief

in the psychological unity of mankind and its emphasis on the role of environmental influences as the main causes for physical and behavioural differences.⁶ Nationalism gave the new discipline its main goal, consistent with the emerging history of culture: the reconstruction of the origins of nations and, most importantly, the reconstruction of the pristine territories inhabited by the recovered ancestors, to be used as justification for present or future national territories. Thus, “the true patriot becomes of necessity the antiquarian”,⁷ and nationalism the common pool of assumptions on society, justified in the emerging social sciences, from which archaeologists have taken a heavy load of oriented thinking on the nature and distinctive traits of what we now call ethnic entities.

Nationalism is usually defined as an ideology, but it is perhaps closer to phenomena like kinship and religion than to ideologies such as fascism or liberalism, because of the amount of emotional attachment required.⁸ It holds

that the political boundaries should be coterminous with the cultural boundaries of a given territory; in other words, that a state (a ‘country’) should only comprise people of the same kind.⁹

Its myths invert reality, because it

claims to protect an old folk society while in fact it is helping to build up an anonymous mass society.¹⁰

Nationalism can be represented as that way of thinking which allows the members of nations to believe in their “imagined communities”, as Benedict Anderson has styled them although

“members” of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them...¹¹

Thomas Eriksen gives a vivid illustration of how nationalism is able to create a body of cultural tradition shared by a whole nation when writing about the Norwegian “folk culture”. Many of its “typical” manifestations, like ‘traditional’ handicrafts, musical instruments, and folk costumes, were actually quite recent imports from the South at the time when they were fashioned as national symbols by the early nationalists. For example, most of the regional variants of an important type of national costume, the *bunad*, were self-consciously invented in the early decades of the twentieth century, many of them designed by the writer and suffragette Hulda Garborg, the patterns being openly inspired by costumes from continental Europe.¹²

Used in the eighteenth century to designate human progress by self-cultivation, the notion of culture came later on to designate the customs of individual societies, particularly of those with traditional, coherent, ways of life, as opposed to the “civilisation” of the modern urban centres. Works on “*Kulturgeschichte*” began to proliferate after 1780 – see, for example, Gustav Klemm’s *Cultur-Geschichte der Menschheit* (1843-1852) – but only in the second part of the nineteenth century was this notion employed in a manner similar to the anthropological, historiographical and archaeological uses of today. Edward B. Tylor defined it as

*that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society.*¹³

Eduard Meyer, in his *Geschichte des Alterthums*, published from 1884, was, apparently, the first influential author to use this holistic notion of culture to designate the individual cultures (the Egyptian culture, the Asiatic cultures, etc.), the ways of life and thought transmitted by specific peoples from generation to generation. The first known archaeological use of ‘culture’ dates from 1866, when Olof Rygh, in the annual report of the museum in Christiania (Oslo), not only sees spear points and arrowheads as belonging to different cultures and peoples, but also attributes some of them to the Lapps (Saamis), because of their territorial distribution.¹⁴

Thus artefacts have begun to be objects of study by representing ancient peoples, linked genetically to later peoples and nations. The interpretation of ethnicity by archaeologists was limited to the attempts to recognise in the archaeological record those ancient peoples, most of them documented for the first time in the Migration Age, and whose names are still carried by modern nations and employed in the historical justification and rhetoric of modern complex states, despite the cultural diversification and social change that have intervened. The historians of the 19th century used sources like the writings of Bede or Gregory of Tours,

*who set about the task of writing the history of their political masters and thereby justifying their growing hegemonic power. For this reason, the histories were written in terms which rooted these early state-making heroes, such as Edwin or Clovis, in social groups of specific ethnic name, with the intention of projecting a mythical but potent image of cultural homogeneity to match the political unity they intended.*¹⁵

The archaeologists recognised as their task the identification of artefacts and features belonging to culturally homogenous units, thus perpetuating the historical myth and leaving unchallenged many assumptions about

social structure and process. They have produced maps¹⁶ where those homogenous cultural units were represented by distributions of artefacts, supporting the notion of “ancient” or “folk” territory, whose political control in the present was justified by the use of names which in many cases designated both ancient peoples and modern nations. These territorialised bodies of ancient material culture were later defined as ‘archaeological cultures’ and have enjoyed a long career in European archaeology.

The notion of “archaeological culture” was defined and systematically applied to the interpretation of the archaeological record beginning with Gustaf Kossinna, especially after the publication of his work, *Die Herkunft der Germanen*, “a mixture of important theoretical innovations and a fanciful glorification of German prehistory”.¹⁷ Kossinna, born in 1858, studied Classical and Germanic philology, German history and geography; most important for the future direction of his work was the semester in Berlin with Karl Müllenhoff, one of the philologists who at that time tried to solve the problem of the Indo-European origins.¹⁸ He attended the meetings of the Berlin Anthropological Association, where the idea of the unity between culture, people, race and language was dominant; however, Kossinna did not consider it to be of any use for European archaeologists to follow the research of the ethnologists on societies outside Europe¹⁹, a conviction held by many culture-history archaeologists even today, on the same grounds: a distinction between ‘civilised’ peoples (*Kulturvölker*), or culturally creative peoples – for Kossinna the Indo-Europeans – and “primitive” peoples (*Naturvölker*), or culturally passive peoples.

Gustaf Kossinna never tried to prove some of his most important beliefs; never questioned the equality sign between culture and people, never even attempted to demonstrate that there was once a unitary Germanic people, with a single language and a unitary culture, whose initial state was later to be troubled by racial, linguistic and cultural mixtures, but which still conserved enough from its pristine identity to allow historians and archaeologists to separate the foreign influences.²⁰ He attempted to find the Germans in prehistory, as far in time as possible. His regressive method started from the historical times, from the information given by the ancient written sources on the Germanic peoples, information that allowed the delimitation of their territories, and followed those peoples back in time, using a genealogy of “archaeological cultures”. The identification of the material remains belonging to a historically attested ethnic entity was based on the belief that such entities had stable and objective repertoires of cultural traits. Following this line of thought, any

apparition or disappearance of an element of material culture had to be explained by migration, colonisation, conquest or assimilation.²¹ The main methodological principle allowing the linking of the ethnonyms from the ancient sources with cultural territories was the following:

*Scharf umgrenzte archäologische Kulturprovinzen decken sich zu allen Zeiten mit ganz bestimmten Völkern oder Völkerstämmen.*²²

Of course, this implies not only a similitude in the territorial extent of a culture area (*Kulturgebiet*) and that of an ethnic area (*Volksgebiet*), but also that this area was the same for the living culture and for its material remains understood as “archaeological culture”.²³

Kossinna’s work has been criticised in Germany since the 1920’s; the arguments ranged from a generalised scepticism about the possibility to identify historical processes in the archaeological record (M. Hoernes), to the observation that the archaeological record does not allow us to perceive the past cultures in their entirety (K. H. Jakob-Friesen).²⁴ Most of the critiques referred to particular aspects of Kossinna’s interpretations, especially to their empirical ground, not to his basic views on culture and ethnicity, views which at that time were, if we leave aside the racist overtones, shared by most of the academic world. After the death of Gustaf Kossinna in 1932, his views became the official Nazi dogma for the interpretation of prehistory, and the use of German prehistory as propaganda material made an academic discussion almost impossible.²⁵

The end of World War II made the conceptions of Kossinna a target for even more critical positions and created a difficult situation for the archaeological interpretation of ethnicity; the racist views had to be demolished, the conclusions on the extension of Germanic territories in prehistory were contested, but Kossinna’s basic contribution to the archaeological method, the identification of ethnic territories with cultural areas, had to be preserved, as the only usable way to study archaeologically the ancient peoples. One of the most influential critics of Kossinna’s views, H.-J. Eggers, who carried forward the fruitful research on the differences between the distributions of artefacts and the ethnic territories, still regarded in the late 1950’s the “culture = people” idea

*eine an und für sich durchaus richtige Idee die bis heute noch nicht die endgültige methodische Form gefunden hat...*²⁶

In the 1950’s, the archaeologists who did not give up the identification of past peoples tried to improve Kossinna’s method by questioning one of his premises: the homogeneity of the “archaeological cultures”. This could

have been an incentive towards an overcoming of the holistic view of culture; it did not lead to a decisive break with the “culture = people” equation. Thus Gordon Childe noticed that “boundaries of several fields of culture do not necessarily coincide”, but he accepted that “...we might call [the] members [of a culture] a people”, even if he thought that we have no right to assume

*that this people as a whole speaks a single language or acted as a political unit, still less that all its members were related physiologically or belonged to one zoological race.*²⁷

Some of the leading archaeologists working within the framework of traditional, culture-history archaeology, and processual archaeologists, who used a different notion of culture, have recognised that “archaeological cultures”, conceived as overlapping distributions of artefacts and features, are produced by a variety of processes. By examining the distributions of archaeological types, especially when using quantitative rather than mere presence-absence information, archaeologists usually come across a variety of cross-cutting patterns and not to neatly bounded entities. Gordon Childe suggested that those distributions which do not fit together should be eliminated from an analysis in search of ethnic groups and that we should keep to this purpose only the types exclusively associated together. Such an approach only gets rid of the problematic evidence and keeps alive the central assumption contained in the concept of “archaeological culture”: associations of artefact types represent the cultural traditions of human groups. This assumption also survives in the work of David Clarke, who rejected what he termed the “monothetic” view and proposed a “polythetic” one, which accepted the identification of an “archaeological culture” on the basis of a pool of traits that allows the definition of a group of similar entities, without the requirement that each of those traits should be present.²⁸

The most serious challenge to the romantic view of culture as a whole of transmitted particular ways of life came in the 1950’s from what has been called the ecological functionalism of the American neo-evolutionism. It replaced ethnicity with ecological adaptation as the most important explanation of the cultural differences and discontinuities.²⁹ This new understanding of culture has characterised the “New Archaeology” or “processual archaeology” in the 1960’s and the 1970’s, a trend that manifested itself almost exclusively in the United States and Great Britain. Lewis R. Binford was the first archaeologist to argue firmly against the old concept of culture, the normative concept which

viewed [culture] as a vast flowing stream with minor variations in ideational norms concerning appropriate ways of making pots, getting married, treating one's mother-in-law, building houses or temples (or not building them) and even dying.³⁰

and rejected the traditional interpretation of the modifications observed in the archaeological record as a result of the change of the ideas on the ways things should be done, and the widespread assumption that ideas change either because the people who hold them are replaced by different people with different ideas, or because their ideas are influenced from outside by diffusion.

Binford claimed that "culture is not necessarily shared; it is participated in".³¹ He identified for the variation existing in material cultures other sources than ethnic particularity. Taking pottery as an example, cited factors such as function, cooking techniques, the dimensions of the household, the rank of the people using the pottery or the environment where the potters have learned their trade.³² This separation between cultural variability and ethnicity was an important step towards a new approach to the ethnic phenomena, but processual archaeology has changed the focus of the research, relegating the archaeological interpretation of ethnicity to the junkyard of obsolete questions, traditional, culture-history archaeology had to answer. From the archaeologists using the processual paradigm, only a limited segment, that of the historical archaeologists, interested in modern material culture, took an interest in the problems of ethnicity. The new view of culture embraced by the processual archaeologists was holistic as well; many of them have adopted, especially at the beginning of their careers, a systemic view of culture.³³

Binford's critique of the "normative view" of culture meant a clear break with the traditional concept of "archaeological culture". The archaeological research centred on the systematic study of the processes responsible for the patterning of the archaeological record, appropriately divided by Michael Schiffer in cultural and natural (environmental) formation processes,³⁴ has identified a variety of cultural formation processes, like the various forms of exchange, which have nothing or little to do with ethnic phenomena. To take just an example, the ethno-archaeological work of M. Posnansky in Ghana warns archaeologists against making simple correlations between the spread of artefacts and ethnic territories, showing how exchange can cross ethnic borders:

A single Mo potter of the present day makes several distinct types of ware that are used by a variety of different linguistic groups, while a consumer,

*even before the advent of modern transport, would buy, or obtain by barter, specific types of vessel from relatively long distances.*³⁵

Analyses of the distributions of archaeological artefacts and features, showing their different sources and recognising the differences between what the archaeologist can recover and the extinct material culture, have undermined the confidence in the analytical utility of the “archaeological cultures” – which now appear to be products of “contingent interrelations of different distributions produced by different factors”³⁶ – as tools for analysing ethnic phenomena.

In Europe the notion of “archaeological culture” survived, but increasingly separated from an archaeological understanding of ethnicity.³⁷ Some archaeologists took the accumulation of the critiques on Kossinna’s views and the absence of a substitute taking the form of a methodology as proof for the impossibility of inferring anything about the non-material aspects of past societies with the methods of the archaeologist, and limited their work to a positivistic antiquarianism. One of the sceptics, Christopher Hawkes, concluded that, without the help of written texts or oral traditions, archaeology is able to reveal more about what is generically animal in human behaviour than about what is specifically human,³⁸ while another, Glyn Daniel, stated that “there is no coincidence between the material and non-material aspects of culture”.³⁹ But when an archaeological interpretation of the ethnic phenomena is still attempted, especially in Central and Eastern Europe,⁴⁰ the same old method is used, namely that of linking culture areas and ethnic entities, even if no strict rules are assumed and the use of other sources, especially that of the written sources, is recommended.⁴¹

The survival of the “archaeological culture” concept, even in those academic environments where it has been heavily criticised and in the works of those authors who have emphatically recommended its abandonment,⁴² could be explained by a simple practical reason: for almost 100 years archaeologists have classified their finds using this concept, and the results of this tremendous work are needed for any kind of interpretation. To get rid of the unwanted implications of the concept, some archaeologists have pleaded for an explicit use of ‘archaeological culture’ as a classification unit and not as an analytical tool for the recovery of past societies.⁴³ Randi Håland suggested its name should be changed to “the archaeologist’s culture”⁴⁴, and that it should be preserved as a product of the archaeologist’s categories, not to be used for the purpose of ethno-historical interpretation. She makes an excellent point when she writes about

the jump in logic which we make when we talk about logical classes (e.g. A-group artefacts, B-group artefacts) as though we were talking about concrete groups of people (A-group people, B-group people).⁴⁵

Indeed, many archaeologists who are still using the concept of archaeological culture, argue that they make only a neutral classification and see nothing wrong when they speak about the “bearers of the culture X”, although this is a discrete way to insinuate the existence of a social correspondent to the archaeological classification, and this correspondent is, naturally, the ethnic entity.

To summarise the presentation of this highly questionable analytical tool, we will follow Stephen Shennan’s synthesis of the major ideas contained in the notion of “archaeological culture” and their use in the archaeological research:

- a. as a result of the fact that people living in different places conduct their lives differently to a greater or lesser extent, the material residues (and therefore the archaeological record) of those ways of life will also differ;
- b. a culture must be distinguished by a plurality of well-defined diagnostic types that are repeatedly and exclusively associated with one another and, when plotted on a map, exhibit a recognisable distribution pattern;
- c. these entities which have been constructed have been regarded as actors on the historical stage, playing the role for prehistory that known individuals and groups have in documentary history;
- d. in playing this role these ‘cultures’ have been regarded as indicators of ethnicity – self-conscious identification with a particular social group; and
- e. in their role as indicators of ethnicity, archaeological ‘cultures’ have had, and continue to have, a political role as legitimators of the claims of modern groups to territory and influence.⁴⁶

Beyond Holistic Cultures

While most European archaeological research clings to the use of “archaeological culture” as a meaningful concept, the last 20 years have seen growing a radical point of view, arguing against the idea that culture can be analysed as an entity, because

*... 'culture' is not an object to be described, neither is it a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitely interpreted. Culture is contested, temporal, and emergent.*⁴⁷

Culture should be conceived as a constitutive process, "as a series of productive and individual acts aimed at the construction of meaning".⁴⁸ Accordingly, social systems and their structures should not be understood as things acting on people, but as "pre-understandings" which orientate, enable the subject to act knowledgeably and effectively.⁴⁹

Geertz: the Semiotic Concept of Culture

A decisive step away from the notion of culture as a more or less systematic assembly of human ideas and their products, ranging from institutions to material culture, was made by Clifford Geertz. His view of culture:

*...man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.*⁵⁰

is directed against the notion of culture as a set of rules and against the reductionist views which represent culture as a structure of interacting systems.⁵¹ He admits that cultures have "a minimal degree of coherence", but his scientific goal is not the perception of that coherence as a system:

*it is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something... Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape.*⁵²

Culture appears as a context of meaning made of construable signs, not as an entity to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed.⁵³ It cannot be reduced to a system made of interrelated elements, because it is through the flow of behaviour, of social action, that cultural forms find articulation, in states of consciousness, as well as in artefacts. Their meaning is drawn

from the role they play (Wittgenstein would say their "use") in an ongoing pattern of life, not from any intrinsic relations they bear to one another.

*...Whatever, or wherever, symbol systems "in their own terms" may be, we gain empirical access to them by inspecting events, not by arranging abstracted entities into unified patterns.*⁵⁴

Barth's Critique of the Holistic Views on Culture and Society

The current concepts of "culture" and "society" are seen by Fredrik Barth as celebrating the

*the connectedness of disparate institutions; the fitness of custom for a place and a lifestyle; the sharing of premises, values and experiences within a community,*⁵⁵

although we know

that not only interests but also values and realities are contested between persons in stable social interaction with each other.

and that

*[t]he perfection of mutual comprehension and communication which is generally enshrined in our definition of society is not paradigmatic of social life.*⁵⁶

If these empirical truths so seldom find their way in anthropological writing, this is because anthropologists are trained to suppress the signs of incoherence – sometimes seen as inessential consequences of modernisation – from the cultures they know have always been conglomerates of diverse accretions. Fredrik Barth stresses the role of structuralist anthropology – 'with its emphasis on abstractable logical patterns embedded in superficially diverse forms' – in asserting a missing connectedness:

*...instead of trying to make our theories embrace what is there, we are led to picking out some small, distinctive pattern in this confusing scene, and applying our ingenuity to salvaging a (functionalist) holism by constructing (structuralist) isomorphies and inversions of this randomly chosen pattern, as if it encoded a deeper connectedness.*⁵⁷

This way of conceiving culture does not exclude the patterning of cultural actions; it suggests that

*we must expect a multiplicity of partial and interfering patterns, asserting themselves to varying degrees in various fields and localities; [that]... any claim to coherence should be contested where it has not been demonstrated.*⁵⁸

Although cultural constructions are so diverse, we know we can expect an amount of shared meaning that allows communication and association. This should not be confused with integration in a cultural whole because

Culture is distributive in a population, shared by some but not by others. Thus it cannot, with Goodenough, be defined as what you need to know to be a member of a society...⁵⁹

For Fredrik Barth, societies are *disordered*, open systems, characterised by an absence of closure;⁶⁰ for a better understanding of how societies really work he suggests two generalisations:

1. *Actors are always positioned: people live their lives*

with a consciousness and a horizon that encompasses much less than the sum of the society... Somehow, people's various limited horizons link up and overlap, producing a world much greater, which the aggregate of their praxes creates, but which no one can see. It remains the anthropologist's task to show how this comes about, and to chart that larger world that ensues.⁶¹

2. *Events are always at variance with the intentions of individual actors,*

because they are the outcome of the interplay between material causality and social interaction.⁶²

Fredrik Barth is very close to Clifford Geertz in his rejection of anthropological formalism, of the search for underlying, hidden principles which generate the cultural world as a whole:

the forms of culture are not best explained by abstracting their general principle, but by asking what each particular pattern might be evidence of. We must ask just what kind of consistency we find in each particular pattern, and why this form develops just here?⁶³

The task of the anthropologist is represented as the explanation, by particular efficient causes, of some partial order, the absence of order needing no explanation.

Bourdieu on the Reproduction of Culture: the Habitus

Both Barth and Geertz have emphasised the dynamics of culture, the ever-changing shape of its spiritual and material aspects and the generation of meaning as context related behaviour. Pierre Bourdieu has attempted

to fill the gap between the image of culture as being in constant change and the functions tradition plays in all societies, by coining a notion, that of *habitus*, which allows a better understanding of how cultural patterning comes into being and changes. He too takes his distances from the structuralist point of view that people think and act according to templates and rules which are only hypostases of eternal, pan-human, cognitive structures, a point of view that would make history, as real, non-reversible change, impossible or epiphenomenal, and individuals powerless in their endless reproduction of structure. Bourdieu regards responsible for the cultural patterning not the timeless structures of Lévi-Strauss, but the *habitus*, conceived as

systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in any way being the product of obedience to rules "produced by" the structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition).⁶⁴

Habitus is not fixed, it shifts from one generation to the next or from one class to another, according to the different material conditions people experience; it does not determine action, but merely guides it, producing 'a common sense world endowed with the objectivity secured by consensus on the meaning (*sens*) of practices and the world.'⁶⁵ *Habitus* can be understood as another way to represent cultural transmission, but its main value for the study of social reality is the subtle balance between the cultural patterning and individual, active roles. Material things and mundane practices have a central role in the installing and the reproducing of the *habitus*:

simply by inhabiting the space of their house, carrying on their day-to-day activities, people constantly internalise the generative schemes of their culture, schemes which are always historical and culturally relative. ...The special significance of portable artefacts lies in the way in which they may be deployed, orchestrated, and brought together to create a context for discourse, defining what can and cannot (and what need and need not) be said,⁶⁶

what is called by Pierre Bourdieu the realm of the undiscussed, the *doxa*.⁶⁷ "Objects can euphemize statements which would be considered inappropriate, reminding people that there are always limits to discourse which cannot be transgressed", or could express solidarity in a silent way, or could even convey an open challenge to authority.⁶⁸

The concept of *habitus* allows us to study the dynamics of material culture without favouring either tradition or agency, the social groups or the individuals, in a way similar to Csikszentmihalyi's understanding of the artefact as product of a human intentionality conditioned by the existence of previous objects.⁶⁹ If *habitus* could be used to understand ethnic sentiments as "able to pass from practice to practice without going through discourse or consciousness",⁷⁰ remains problematic.⁷¹

Ethnicity: Competing Theories

At a time when processual archaeology, with its adaptive view of culture and lack of concern for the ethnic phenomena, was at its peak, in the late 1960's and the early 1970's, a new interest appeared in the social sciences for group identities, especially for the ethnic groups in the United States and the new African nations. This interest has extended to all similar phenomena and imposed a new concept, ethnicity, which has replaced the old concept of race, now restricted in American cultural anthropology to the biological realm, bringing the discussion on ethnic groups, peoples and nations on a common ground.

"Ethnicity" is generally understood as the character or quality of an ethnic group and is recorded with this meaning for the first time in the *Oxford English Dictionary Supplement* from 1972, where the first registered use is that by the American sociologist David Riesman in 1953.⁷² Despite its spreading use, the concept raises several problems. Conceived as designating a universal form of group identity, shaped in such different entities as the ancient *gentes* and the ethnic groups in contemporary complex societies, its capacity to cluster realities of the same order has been contested.⁷³ Even when applied to a narrower range of phenomena – e.g. by setting a point in the course of social evolution for the emergence of ethnicity⁷⁴ – the concept has different definitions, and it is frequently used with no explicit definition at all.⁷⁵

The use of "ethnicity" is no safeguard against the perpetuation of nationalist notions: they have gradually been appropriated by contemporary "tribes", "ethnic groups" and "nations", so that it is no wonder that anthropologists or sociologists who encounter them risk to promote the view that nation-like grouping is a characteristic for all humans to the rank of a universal truth in their use of the new concept.

Most definitions of ethnicity are an enumeration of traits; the co-occurrence of these traits is supposed to identify an ethnic entity, in a way similar to that in which co-occurrences of material traits make the "archaeological cultures". As Reinhard Wenskus' synthesis⁷⁶ has shown, an empirical examination of the manifestations of these traits prevents us from using any of them, or any combination of them, as diagnostic criteria independent from context.⁷⁷ Of course, one could cite some of these traits, like having a name and a tradition, as being characteristic for most, if not all ethnic entities. But these, even if associated, are not enough to distinguish ethnic entities from other social aggregates, from other we-groups like clubs of stamp collectors or aristocratic families.

The currently existing approaches to ethnicity have been conveniently divided in two general positions: the "primordialist" and the "instrumentalist", the latter sometimes styled as the "circumstantialist".⁷⁸

Primordial or Instrumental?

Edward Shils used "primordial" to distinguish between types of social bonds (personal, primordial, sacred and civil ties). For him "primordial attachments" were those inherent in kinship ties, seen as generated by the "ineffable significance attributed to ties of blood",⁷⁹ not merely as a function of interaction. Later, "primordialist" was employed to qualify those positions which consider ethnic identity to be the "basic group identity".

Clifford Geertz has written about the "overpowering" and "ineffable quality" attached to ethnic ties, which the participants tend to see as exterior and coercive, the strength of the "primordial bonds" being described as differing "from person to person, from society to society, and from time to time". What Geertz names "primordiality" is attributed by individuals to the ties of religion, blood, race, language and custom; it does not inhere in these bonds.⁸⁰ This "primordiality" originates from

the "givens" ... of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them, the givenness that stems from being born in a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. These congruities of blood, speech and custom, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves. One is bound to one's kinsman, one's fellow believer, ipso

*facto, as the result not merely of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but at least in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself.*⁸¹

For Harold Isaacs,

*basic group identity consists of the ready-made set of endowments and identifications which every individual shares with others from the moment of birth by the chance of the family into which he is born at that given time in that given place.*⁸²

Its primordial quality resides in its anteriority and in its being automatical:

*the baby acquires a name, an individual name, a family name, a group name. He acquires the history and origins of the group into which he is born. The group's culture-past automatically endows him, among other things, with his nationality or other conditions of national, regional, or tribal affiliation, his language, religion, and value system – the inherited clusters of mores, ethics, aesthetics, and the attributes that come out of the geography or topography of the birthplace itself, all shaping the outlook and way of life upon which the new individual enters from his first day.*⁸³

In other words, this is the primordial social positioning for any human being, ascribed at birth, a start which certainly will affect its future, but in a variable degree, depending on a plurality of circumstances, ranging from the development of personality to changes in environmental conditions. The power of this initial conditioning is enhanced through its celebration by the society in myths and rituals, ideologies and political ceremonies.

Some of those who criticise the “primordialism” approaches like those of Edward Shils, Clifford Geertz and Harold Isaacs, seem to engage in a misunderstanding: these authors do not think that ethnicity precedes society or that it has a paramount role in its workings; they just emphasise how ethnic identity is perceived by the social actors.⁸⁴ What “primordialists” intend to say is that the members of ethnic groups regard these kinds of attachments as ineffable, beyond critical reason – it is well known that social actors are often unable to explain their feelings and behaviours – not that they are inscrutable for social scientists.

‘Primordialist’ approaches⁸⁵ are effective in explaining the persistence of some ethnic entities over considerable periods of time, even when the conservation of a particular ethnic identity appears to be to their own social disadvantage.⁸⁶ But we should expect from them an explanation of why and how “primordial attachments” come into being through the

processes of ethnogenesis which imply a reconfiguration of the basic group identity.

The “primordialism” of Shils and Geertz, with its emphasis on what people believe about their identity, therefore an ethnic “primordialism”, is very different from the primordialism that functioned, and still does, in the formerly communist countries. This is best exemplified by the work of one of the leading Soviet ethnologists, Yulian Bromley. His theory of ethnicity assumes that a stable core of ethnicity – the “ethniko”, i.e. “ethnos in the restricted sense of the word” – persists through all the social formations, even after major changes in the environment, and should be conceived as a cultural system organically related to the cultural whole.⁸⁷ He defines “ethnos” as being

*a historically formed community of people characterised by common, relatively stable cultural features, certain distinctive psychological traits, and their consciousness of their unity as distinguished from other similar communities.*⁸⁸

Such a view on ethnicity, stressing the stability of those objective cultural traits which define an ethnos and including a psychological dimension, can be accommodated with the nationalist views which survived in the public discourse during the communist dictatorships and after their end. It is very close to what most Central and East European archaeologists have in mind when they try to recognise ethnic entities in the archaeological record.

The instrumentalist approach to ethnicity takes all the “mystery” and the “ineffable” from this kind of group identity, by attempting to identify what interests are at work, and, most importantly, who could promote and even generate attachments that apparently have nothing in common with them. The central idea is that ethnicity is not an anonymous product of culture, human nature or some other primordial factor, but socially constructed by individuals and groups who forge, from a variety of traditions and cultural traits, their own identity.⁸⁹ Instrumentalist approaches see ethnicity as context dependent, and frequently contain explanations based on “the idea of rational self-interested human action inherent in the notion ‘economic man’.”⁹⁰

Some authors focus on the elite competition for resources and suggest that the manipulation of ethnic symbols is vital for gaining the support of the masses and achieving political goals.⁹¹ Others examine the group and individual strategies of maximising wealth, power, and status by joining ethnic or national communities, or through secession.⁹²

For example, Abner Cohen understands the ethnic group as a collectively organised strategy for the protection of economic and political interests shared by a variety of groups. In order to pursue their interests these groups develop “basic organisational functions: distinctiveness (some writers call it boundary); communication; authority structure; decision making procedure; ideology; and socialisation”. These groups will articulate themselves by drawing on existing cultural practices and beliefs, such as kinship, ritual, ceremony and cultural values. Thus, according to Cohen, the use of culture to systematise social behaviour in pursuit of economic and political interests constitutes the basis of ethnicity.⁹³

The instrumentalist approach has the advantage of separating ethnicity from culture and that of offering useful models for the understanding of the dynamics and the situational aspects of ethnicity. Its increased presence in the recent literature is partly due to a capacity to go beyond ideologies and to investigate the actors and motivations of contemporary ethnic movements. Most important, it shows that ethnic entities are, to a greater or lesser extent, artificial, that they are more similar to institutions than to spontaneous cultural wholes.

The perception of ethnicity as artefactual could be expected to have more influence in proto-historical European archaeology, since Reinhard Wenskus, in his capital book, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*, published in 1961, frequently cited by German and Austrian historical and archaeological writings on ethnicity, promotes a very similar point of view. He emphasises that the members of an ethnic entity have different positions and attitudes towards the traditions which maintain its cohesion, from indifference and passivity to the active, almost exclusive, role of the “*Traditionskern*” in their conservation and transmission, associated with their use, frequently through deliberate alteration, for the promotion of specific political interests.⁹⁴

Despite its popularity in Western Europe and the United States, the instrumentalist approach has been frequently criticised. G. Bentley finds it reductionist because the

*analyst's mental models are transformed into causal principles located in the (conscious or unconscious) minds of the people whose behaviour is being studied. ...if ethnic groups act in ways that appear strategically advantageous, then strategic advantage must be the raison d'être of these groups.*⁹⁵

Siân Jones rejects the assumption that human behaviour is essentially rational and directed towards maximising self-interest, as an over-

simplification of the perception of interests by culturally situated agents. She remarks that

membership in a particular ethnic group (or nation) does not confer a homogenous perspective on the individuals concerned, and it cannot be assumed that members of an ethnic group will agree as to what is in their "interests",

and assumes, rightly, that

members of different ethnic groups, and to some extent members of the same ethnic group, will perceive their interests and their identities differently and follow different courses of action.⁹⁶

Nonetheless it is an excessive simplification to believe that interests groups act only by supporting specific interests declared as such, leading inevitably to permanent confrontation and social instability, especially in complex societies. It seems important to follow how groups can make their interests significant for larger parts of the society, associate them with what is perceived as common sense, uphold them by promoting uniformities, public meanings, legitimated by their alleged ubiquity and antiquity, which deny or downgrade unwanted specificities in favour of what is presented as human nature.

The instrumental and primordial approaches focus on potentially complementary aspects of ethnicity.⁹⁷ We can accept that members of ethnic groups may, and frequently do, regard their ethnic identity as "primordial", anyway it is obvious that most members of modern nations do so. This is enough to legitimate the "primordialist" approach and does not invalidate an "instrumentalist" one, unless we use the view that considers societies systems in which everyone follows a set of rules, and we understand by culture those rules and their ideational backgrounds. We should be able to perceive the differences between groups and individuals, differences that can manifest themselves in contrasting attitudes towards their ethnic identity, and lead to a coexistence of ethnic "primordial" sentiments and 'instrumental' behaviours in the same society, even manifested by the same individual in different circumstances. If we accept that primordial sentiments can be consciously used, enhanced, even generated for a variety of purposes related to political and economic power by groups of interest, as the history of nations abundantly shows, we have also to accept that the best way to understand these groups is an instrumentalist perspective.

Fredrik Barth: Culture and Ethnic Boundaries

Although some authors consider him to be one of the “fathers” of “instrumentalism”, Fredrik Barth’s approach to ethnicity, one of the most commented and the most influential, contains a full recognition of the fact that ethnic identity functions as “primordial”:

... regarded as status, ethnic identity is superordinate to most other statuses, and defines the permissible constellations of statuses, or social personalities, which an individual with that identity may assume. In this respect ethnic identity is similar to sex and rank, in that it constrains the incumbent in all his activities, not only in some defined social situations. One might thus say that it is imperative, in that it cannot be disregarded and temporarily set aside by other definitions of the situation.⁹⁸

Fredrik Barth contests a premise widely held in the social sciences, in history and archaeology, namely that:

there are aggregates of people who essentially share a common culture, and interconnected differences that distinguish each such discrete culture from all others. Since culture is nothing but a way to describe human behaviour, it would follow that there are discrete groups of people, i.e. ethnic units, to correspond to each culture.⁹⁹

He also challenges “the simplistic view that geographical and social isolation have been the critical factors in sustaining cultural diversity”,¹⁰⁰ and invokes two results of the empirical ethnographic research that are resumed as follows:

1. ...boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them. In other words, categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained *despite* changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories.
2. ...stable, persisting, and often vitally important social relations are maintained across such boundaries, and are frequently based precisely on the dichotomised ethnic statuses. In other words, ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundation on which embracing social systems are built. Interaction in such a system does not lead to its liquidation through change and acculturation; cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence.¹⁰¹

Barth's definition of ethnicity:

...we give primary emphasis to the fact that ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus have the characteristic of organising interaction between people,¹⁰²

stressing the subjective character of the ethnic categorisation, is an attempt to overcome the weaknesses of the definitions made of lists of cultural traits, definitions that leave the essence of the phenomenon obscured.¹⁰³

The cumulative definitions of ethnic entities – as summarised by Fredrik Barth – conceive them as being populations characterised by the following traits: 1. they are largely biologically self-perpetuating; 2. share fundamental cultural values, realised in an overt unity in cultural forms; 3. make up a field of communication and interaction; 4. have a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order.¹⁰⁴ Such definitions are not very far from the traditional proposition that a race = a culture = a language; they prevent us “from understanding the phenomenon of ethnic groups and their place in human society and culture”, because such a view

... allows us to assume that boundary maintenance is unproblematical and follows from the isolation which the itemised characteristics imply: racial difference, cultural difference, social separation and language barriers, spontaneous and organised enmity.¹⁰⁵

The emphasis on the culture-bearing aspect makes the classification of persons and local groups as members of an ethnic group depend on the presence of particular traits of culture. The differences between groups are perceived as differences in trait inventories; thus the analysis becomes one of culture, not of ethnic organisation.¹⁰⁶ Ethnic particularity should not be understood as the sum of “objective” cultural differences because it is supported only by those which “the actors themselves regard as significant”:

some cultural features are used by the actors as signals and emblems of differences, others are ignored, and in some relationships radical differences are played down and denied.¹⁰⁷

Common culture appears to Fredrik Barth as a possible outcome of ethnic organisation, not as generating ethnicity.¹⁰⁸ The cultural content, characterised by continuous change, is used to express ethnic difference in many different ways and forms;

[t]hey may be of great relevance to behaviour, but they need not be; they may pervade all social life, or they may be relevant only in limited sectors of activity.¹⁰⁹

Thus the continuity of the ethnic entities is given by a persistent dichotomization between members and outsiders, which uses cultural traits whose relevance is contextual, and not by an "objective", stable repertoire of cultural traits.

Barth recognises two orders in the cultural contents of ethnic dichotomies:

*(i) overt signals or signs – the diacritical features that people look for and exhibit to show identity, often such features as dress, language, house-forms, or general style of life, and (ii) basic value orientations: the standards of morality and excellence by which a performance is judged.*¹¹⁰

After defining the ethnic entities as ascriptive and exclusive groups, Barth sees their continuity as depending on the maintenance of a boundary:

*The cultural features that signal the boundary may change, and the cultural characteristics of the members may likewise be transformed, indeed, even the organisational form of the group may change – yet the fact of continuing dichotomization between members and outsiders allows us to specify the nature of continuity, and investigate the changing cultural form and content.*¹¹¹

Thus an investigation of ethnic phenomena should focus on the ethnic boundaries that define the groups, not on the cultural material enclosed by them. These boundaries are of course social, but they can also have a territorial correspondent. Their maintaining entails the existence of criteria for determining membership and ways of signalling membership and exclusion,

*a recognition of limitations on shared understandings, differences in criteria for judgement of value and performance, and a restriction of interaction to sectors of assumed common understanding and mutual interest.*¹¹²

Barth's bold interpretati" in traditional archaeology. If a cultural whole can no longer be understood as corresponding to an ethnic entity, if ethnic significance is attached only to a small, unpredictable part from the cultural repertoire, the archaeologists should change the way they study ethnic phenomena.¹¹³ As Randi Håland has written, the problem is not that material culture does not signify ethnic identities, but that

*one cannot decide from first principles which differences in a material culture have served this function. Assumptions about the idiomatic use of cultural forms thus have to be based on an evaluation of this alternative, in relation to other possible interpretations.*¹¹⁴

The distributions of artefacts, creating the illusion of a nation-like cultural homogeneity, can have an ethnic meaning, but this meaning is entirely dependent upon context, and therefore we must expect to see artefacts change their significance as the context changes. The archaeologist should attempt to grasp this context, using any kind of useful information, and follow the changes in material culture, taking into account all the relationships that might contribute to the revealing of their contingent meaning.

To avoid any misunderstandings about what the context might mean in the archaeological study of ethnicity, it is necessary to stress that the tendency to require for the analysis of ethnic phenomena archaeological "ensembles", like "archaeological cultures" or any other associations of archaeological types and/or features, and to reject individual items or features as reliable ethnic markers, a tendency shared by much of the current archaeological research, does not lead to a reconstruction of the social context. This approach, bearing the imprint of the holistic view of culture, includes no investigation on what the nature of the relationships between the different categories of artefacts and features might have been. A single item, used as a diacritical sign, may, in certain circumstances, carry more information about the ethnic identity than a hundred archaeological "types". One can immediately think at the present day national flags or at the artefacts or cultural traits promoted by the nation-state at the rank of national symbols, eventually by their inclusion in the 'folklore'. From Lewis Binford to Witold Hensel, many archaeologists have recognised that not all artefacts are of equal interest for the archaeological study of ethnicity;¹¹⁵ still more assign, on purely impressionistic grounds, a strong ethnic significance to particular types of artefacts, assuming that they keep it for the whole period of their use and in any archaeological context.

The role of the diacritical signs of identity in a living society was studied by Fredrik Barth among the Pathan, a population inhabiting an important territory in the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Cultural diversity within the Pathan is as great as across its boundaries. However, the members of this ethnic group select certain cultural traits which distinguish them from their neighbours. These are: patrilineal descent from a common ancestor, Islam religion, language, customary attitudes and actions in relationships (for instance in hospitality), and also some items of dress. Barth emphasises the role of context asserting that while

it is true that ethnic groups are distinguished by a number of cultural traits which serve as diacritica, as overt signals of identity which persons will

*refer to as criteria of classification. ...it is equally obvious that the ethnic dichotomies do not depend on these, so that the contrast between Pathan and Baluch would not be changed if Pathan women started wearing the embroidered tunic-fronts used among the Baluch.*¹¹⁶

If this assertion would refer to an individual or a few, it could be an accurate prediction; otherwise it seems very unlikely that an element of material culture, used by a population for its self-definition, could be taken over by another, thus changing the symbolic context of their relation, without any consequences either for the ethnic definitions of any of them, or for the meaning of that element.

Material Culture and Social Meanings

Anthropologists like Fredrik Barth write about culture without paying attention to the distinction we have been taught in school: that between spiritual and material culture, generally understood as a distinction between high and low, between the world of the ideas and that of humble, useful, every-day objects, “an epiphenomenon of more real and serious things, such as social structure, social identity and language”.¹¹⁷ Curiously, most culture-history archaeologists spend their lives studying ancient artefacts, but in professional indifference towards the unprecedented abundance of artefacts surrounding us and their meanings. This can be explained by the status of ancient artefacts: they are “antiquities”, singled out by the event of their discovery.

A common misunderstanding of the archaeological record is to see it as a “testimony”, a document of ancient times, that, with appropriate training, insight and, of course, “historical sense”, can be useful when no “real” documents, that is the written sources used by the historians, are available for the reconstruction of the past. How can archaeologists write history just by establishing chronologies and imposing current classificatory habits on ancient artefacts? Much of the meaning the artefacts had is lost for us in the absence of the “traditions of interpretation”, determined by habitual understanding,¹¹⁸ which allow us to ‘read’ contemporary material culture by freezing, with the help of public meanings, what is essentially a dynamic process of assigning meanings to the material world.

An important obstacle to the understanding of material culture is the expectation that the meanings of material culture could be revealed as linguistic meanings. But,

if knowledge enables action, then all practical actions may be regarded as knowledgeable, in as much as they involve sensory expectations being carried forward into practice. If this is accepted, then we must allow for non-linguistic and pre-linguistic knowledges, as practical ways of knowing the world, but which informants would have considerable difficulty in ever expressing verbally. This may help us to understand, for example, why people who may not “know” the meaning of certain actions, such as some rituals, will still feel committed to maintaining their practice.¹¹⁹

Material culture is commonly seen only as passive, as been acted upon, although it forms the settings and contexts for social action, as a part of the social discourse, of the process continually bringing society into being.¹²⁰ Even when it expresses group identities, material culture is not merely a reflection of some more “real” aspect of society; it is used, it can convey a comment on society, or ambiguous meanings serving one or several purposes.

Archaeologists should move away from the “dealing with the material evidence as if it were some externalised and objective record of a past process” and recognise that “material culture was implicated in the creation of past human subjectivities”. The object of archaeological analysis should then be the understanding of how these subjectivities could have been created by human will which worked upon the material conditions it inhabited. People know the world they inhabit, and they rework that knowledge through their active engagement with the world. This situates our analysis of the past in a frame of reference which is more local and particular than that usually employed by archaeologists, simply because of the concern with the day-to-day maintenance of traditional practice by people, not with the long-term existence of some abstract “social system”.¹²¹

In the last few decades, social scientists and archaeologists have been less attracted by the search for cultural universals that could directly link human behaviour to material culture, because they have reached the conclusion that the role played by the changing cultural context in the patterning of material culture allows only few such simple correlations.¹²² Apparently, what Randall McGuire names the material correlates of ethnically specific behaviour – a concept inspired by the terminology of Michael B. Schiffer’s behavioural archaeology – is more likely to be represented in the archaeological record than the material symbols of ethnic identification. Since ethnic boundaries tend to channel social life, they would have an effect on socialisation and patterns of customary behaviour. Material correlates of such behavioural differences may include

variations in rubbish disposal patterns, or differences in the floor plans of dwellings, which reflect differing behavioural requirements for space. The problem is that we still have to sort out which social dimensions should be linked with the patterning detectable in the material culture. McGuire gives the example of slavery in the antebellum South, a situation in which class and ethnicity were so highly correlated that by measuring one social dimension one measures several, and that of situations with conflicting symbolic requirements:

*when a low economic status characterises an ethnic group, attainment of higher economic and social status by members of this group often entails adoption of material culture symbols, behaviours, and ideologies which characterise a different ethnic group, even if the original ethnic identity is maintained.*¹²³

The Study of Style and the Ethnic Phenomena

Like the notion of culture, that of style has an apparent self-evidence that could make it useless for analytical purposes. Style could be described as the definite colour, shape, sound and feel of a body of culture, bounded in time and space, difficult to decompose analytically, more accessible to that “pervasive kind of reasoning that scans a scene and sizes it up, packing into one instant’s survey a process of matching, classifying and comparing” described by Mary Douglas.¹²⁴ The dynamics of style is mostly represented in a simplified form, as a succession of coherent sequences, more or less linked to the previous one.

In culture-history, traditional archaeology, the concept of style is usually used for those artefacts considered to be “art”, although the widespread use of “analogies” includes sometimes interpretations of the similarity relations which appear between the artefacts as witnessing historical and cultural relationships between their producers and users. Archaeologists have thus engaged in circular argumentation, the stylistic description being employed to reveal the history (e.g. diffusion, migration etc.) which explains the style.¹²⁵

Style as an entity, as a unique and personal phenomenon which can be linked to a subject, has been a central characteristic of modernist thinking, one that has influenced all kinds of cultural practices in the 20th century. The common use of style in archaeology can be seen as an example of what J. Derrida has named logocentrism, understood by Victor Burgin as

*our tendency to refer all questions of meaning of "representations" to a singular founding presence which is imagined to be "behind" them, whether it be "author", "reality", "history", "Zeitgeist", "structure" or whatever.*¹²⁶

Margaret Conkey assumes that logocentrism is at work when the meaning of an artefact is referred to its "style" and when the style of an artefact is referred to its social group, although the notion of style is useful precisely because it captures the "whole image", the indivisibility of an artefact as an object of socially conditioned perception.

In their introduction to a volume of studies on the use of style in archaeology, Margaret Conkey and Christine Hastorf assert that there is no theory or method for "capturing" style, and, accordingly, we should not bother about defining a unitary concept or specifying a single way of doing stylistic analysis. The use of "style" should remain flexible and problematic, and archaeologists should accept the ambiguity and the relatively undetermined nature of their inferences. The same authors recognise a tension between style understood as an interpretative instrument used by the archaeologists and style as a means to manipulate the material culture in the past.¹²⁷ It does not seem useful though to reproduce or to transform the inherent complexity of style and to arrive at something as ambiguous as a starting point; one should try to decompose and to ascribe, to separate kinds of style, to look for functions and for meanings in context, without forgetting that artefacts and their style work and are perceived as an entity, not as an assembly of functionally distinguishable parts.

An understanding of the uses of style must take into account its interpretative quality. Stylistic expression is generated by an interpretation of traditions; its reception depends on the context of the receiver who makes a pattern around a particular event, recalling and creating similarities and differences.¹²⁸

Ian Hodder emphasises the duality of event and interpretation contained in style. He defines style as being both "an objective way of doing",¹²⁹ stemming from the fact that

any action has to be done in some manner or other, and in making that choice, the actor continues a particular style,

and

the subjective and historically evaluated referral of an individual event to an interpreted general way of doing, ...a reading of the stylistic choice in relation to one of several general "wholes".¹³⁰

Both the acts of doing and of observing have style; style involves interpretation as event and event as interpretation. Any interpretation changes the context in which it is made and has a real “objective” existence as event.¹³¹ These “events” are scaled by social groups from meaningless to paradigmatic and to forget this is to promote a utopian representation of societies as composed of equivalent agencies, institutional and individual. Ethnic identity is just one of the “public meanings” which could be embodied in style. The individual interpretation can take many referents, but not all of them are of the same rank, some are more “legitimated” by authority than others, while others remain private.

Style means more than following a set of rules: being “stylish”, often involves playing with rules in competent and appropriate ways. Style

*involves linking general rules with a specific context, referring the individual event to a general “way of doing”. ... style is active and creative in that the relationships within style do not simply “exist”, but have to be “created”. To create style is to create an illusion of fixed and objective relationships. Style embeds event in interpretation but fixes that interpretation as event. It provides the potential for the control of meaning and thus for power. Style links a particular social context to a general way of doing, and thus acts upon that context.*¹³²

The view of style as being “the referral of the individual event to a general class”, involving both event and interpretation, includes an inbuilt dynamic understood not only as a gradual change by interpretation, but also as a succession of “fixed presents”, as in the common archaeological assumption that phases in which certain decorative styles predominate can be identified. Ian Hodder recognises that archaeologists may be right insofar “style is one of the mechanisms used to ‘fix’ meanings and that social actors can create a ‘present’ by halting the continual running of interpretations”.¹³³

Style and Function

For a long time style has been divorced from function, a separation now contested. For example, Randi Håland and Robert Dunnell argued that, since a single trait cannot possess both functional and stylistic significance, the functional traits, defined as having adaptive consequences, cannot be used as ethnic markers because they must inevitably distribute over, rather than create, boundaries of neighbouring ethnic groups.¹³⁴ But the research on technological processes of fabrication and decoration

has led to their characterisation as technological styles, as probability sets that certain raw materials, decorative elements, techniques and so on will be chosen and will appear in certain contexts. The probability that a certain something will be used is not universal, but relative to a specific context and to "past histories of use and manufacture".¹³⁵ In her study of the prehistoric metallurgy in the Andes, Heather Lechtman presents the technological processes not as reflections of value systems, but as symbolic economy, as ideology, and thinks that only the study of these processes can bring us to a full understanding of formal variation and to a better stylistic description. This will enable us to grasp why, notwithstanding apparent similarities in formal attributes, artefacts can belong to different styles, or why differences in formal attributes should not hinder us in perceiving a stylistic unity, expressed in ways inaccessible to exercises in pattern recognition, but recognisable as technological style. It is worth mentioning that the classificatory work of the traditional culture-history archaeology has paid attention to this; if we take as an example the brooches from the Roman Age, the currently employed classifications¹³⁶ utilise the construction, the mechanism of the brooch, as well as other technological details, as major criteria in distinguishing the groups of types.

The style/function dichotomy is likely to produce misunderstandings on the nature of artefact variability by inducing the idea of a separation between ideal and material, ideological and economic, and so on. Function is not determined by the environment, but by cultural choice, and this involves a great amount of style. Style has functions, but it does not consist of those functions. Still the dichotomy is useful, because it condenses two kinds of major pressures accompanying the production and use of artefacts and can organise the search for the sources of stylistic variation.

A way of distinguishing between style and function, used by many processual archaeologists, is that between *adjunct* form, understood as variation added on, supplemental to the utilitarian *instrumental* form involved in the manufacture of an artefact, and its functioning as an item in the techno-economic realm. The decoration of the artefacts is generally seen as the best example of adjunct form "because it is largely free to vary outside of the mechanically contingent design constraints imposed by functional necessity upon instrumental form", and therefore "style-rich".¹³⁷ James Sackett admits this distinction, and places the most of the stylistic potential in "the realm of adjunct form, precisely because its options are largely unconstrained by the mechanical contingencies that fetter instrumental form".¹³⁸ He thinks that instrumental form is also a "great

reservoir of style" and ethnically as significant as adjunct form, because for an artefact to comply with the utilitarian ends, its maker must

*choose (whether consciously or not) among a considerable variety of isochrestic alternatives [for example, if he is a potter] with respect to clays, tempers, shapes, thicknesses, and techniques of construction and firing ... [even if] no single one of these elements may have offered as great a range of choice as the decoration, ... the total stylistic potential of the pot's instrumental formal variation might rival that of the decoration itself.*¹³⁹

Style as Information Exchange

Although Martin Wobst was not the first to point out the importance of style as communication, he has the merit of formulating a clear definition, which presents style as

*that part of the formal variability in material culture that can be related to the participation of artefacts in the process of information exchange.*¹⁴⁰

He has advanced the hypothesis that the categories of artefacts more likely to carry stylistic messages are those with a higher degree of visibility and which are regularly present in contexts of social contact, and expected these symbols to be only a minor part of the cultural repertoire.¹⁴¹ In his paper from 1977, Martin Wobst embraced one of the main principles of processual archaeology, that of the optimal action, by suggesting that the utility of the stylistic messages diminishes as the distance between the emitter and the receiver increases, inasmuch as there would be fewer messages that could not be transmitted more cheaply using another mode of communication.¹⁴²

Stephen Plog has used a suggestion by Dean J. Saitta, developing the ideas of Wobst – if stylistic variation is to be seen as a communication means, then the messages “should be associated with artefacts requiring little post-production maintenance or artefacts which have low turnover rates, so that message integrity and longevity is maximised.” – to explain, for the pottery from the American Southwest, the difference in stylistic variation between the kitchen pottery, banded or corrugated, with a shorter use-life, and the painted pottery, represented mostly by serving bowls and storage vessels, with a longer use-life, which would increase their utility in carrying social messages thus explaining their higher elaboration in decoration.¹⁴³

These considerations in terms of efficiency are not confirmed by some ethno-archaeological researches. Polly Wiessner sees style as an efficient means of transferring information only in certain circumstances and finds little evidence in the anthropological literature for efficiency as an important consideration in identity displays. She points out to the contrary: as can be seen in the ceremonial dress in many cultures, or in the amount we spend on fashion in our culture, such displays are often extravagant, the resources and effort expended being an index of ability and worth.¹⁴⁴ The expectation that high visibility artefacts will carry messages of ethnic identity minimises the role of self-identification, the most important property of ethnicity for anthropologists like Edwin Ardener.¹⁴⁵ Thus we can expect that there are instances when the markers of ethnic identity are completely invisible for outsiders, and this expectation has been met.¹⁴⁶

If visibility is not a universal criterion for selecting items more appropriate than others to convey ethnic information, other criteria seem to fail as well. Ethnographic studies show that nearly any cultural attribute may be socially meaningful, and that the specific meaning varies from one context to another. What is bound to complicate the task of the analyst is that material culture may refer to several group identities, from age to language groups.¹⁴⁷

Communication implies the use of specific signalling mechanisms to bracket the field in which it is spoken and acted, the competent use of such mechanisms being a part of each agent's practical ability. Material culture is involved in communication, it

*becomes a system of signification, it is meaningfully constituted by being referred to in talk and in action, by framing the actions and guiding the movements of the interlocutors, and by being exchanged between them.*¹⁴⁸

Communication is realised through the use of a code, which imposes meaning in such a way as to limit the options of possible interpretations. It can take the form of "authoritative discourse", that discourse "which seeks continually to pre-empt the space of radically opposed utterances".¹⁴⁹

Styles of Style

The archaeological literature on style has already produced sets of distinctions that claim to cover its properties, which have generated, and still do, intricate theoretical polemics and simple misunderstandings that

plague the research. The most discussed distinctions are those proposed by James Sackett and Polly Wiessner.¹⁵⁰

James Sackett regards stylistic variation as coming mostly from the choosing among forms with equal utilitarian potential (isochrestic variation), from a spectrum of equally viable options, of equivalent alternatives, in order to achieve any goals in manufacturing and/or using material items. He expects empirical proof or disproof of this tenet, by the use of procedures typical for the processual archaeology: by comparing the operation of different forms – in terms of efficacy and cost-efficiency – in their cultural context.¹⁵¹ In this way Sackett expects to distinguish between utilitarian variation and style.

In its reformulation from 1990, isochrestism is explicitly recognised as an etic point of view, style being “regarded primarily as an organizing concept imposed on material culture by the researcher rather than an emic pattern he attempts to evoke from it”.¹⁵² However, assuming that isochrestic choices are “largely dictated by the technological traditions within which they have been enculturated as members of the social groups that delineate their ethnicity”, by “factors allied to ethnicity”, Sackett comes to understand isochrestic variation as “diagnostic or idiomatic of ethnicity” and states that a

*social group or unit of ethnicity tends to possess its own distinctive style, and the overall degree of stylistic similarity represented by the groups' material cultures as wholes can be regarded as a direct expression of their ethnic relatedness.*¹⁵³

This reasoning links the technological traditions with the ethnic tradition, disregarding the empirical fact that many technological traditions, some of them with diverse ethnic backgrounds, are usually alive within an ethnic entity; their “relatedness” in terms of style cannot be explained just by postulating a higher degree of cultural uniformity inside the ethnic entity than that existing between such entities. The relations with other technological traditions are more likely to be a function of contiguity and contact than of “ethnic relatedness”, a vague concept in which is embedded a tension between the emic and the etic, between the distinctiveness of the exalted origins promoted by ethnic traditions, and the reality of cultural contacts. The concept of isochrestic variation, while referring to “largely automatic choices about how to do things which arise from local patterns” does not take us very far in analysing or explaining those patterns, because it offers no other option than to understand spatial variation and change in terms of variation in people’s “mental templates” of how to do

things, thus bringing the discussion within the old paradigm of culture-history.¹⁵⁴

In order to escape the critiques to which isochrestism has been subjected, Sackett defends another notion, designed to enhance its passive quality and its understanding as potentiality, that of *vernacular style*:

*the bedrock design notions artisans of any given group would inherit and in turn perpetuate as the agents of that group's craft traditions, notions that are as deeply and unconsciously imbedded in their behaviour as their motor habits, the dialects they speak, or the received opinions they hold with respect to questions of proper conduct or the supernatural. Inculcated as much by insinuation as by instruction, and therefore all the more unquestioned, these design notions constitute a kind of substratum to the group's style, the heavy sediment that lies at the bottom of its reservoir of stylistic production. They even might be viewed as a kind of stylistic genotype of which in actual material products can be viewed as contextually dependent phenotypic expressions.*¹⁵⁵

This is for him the kind of ethnically significant stylistic variation accessible to prehistoric archaeology. He illustrates the concept with the example of a Van Gogh copy of a Hiroshige lithograph. Sackett supposes that:

*[a]lthough the two productions are essentially identical in subject matter and composition, the vernacular distinctiveness of the traditions in which the two artisans worked is apparent to even the most casual observer,*¹⁵⁶

but the way in which Van Gogh has done the copy, determined by several factors including artistic traditions and his reaction to them, has very little, if anything, to do with his ethnic identity.

To better locate his vernacular style, Sackett takes as an example the cross-cutting patterning observed by William Longacre in his ethno-archaeological study of the Kalinga ceramics, where "not so much the specific design elements they bear ... point to ethnic distinctions among the pots, as are combinations of motifs and compositional features such as symmetry".¹⁵⁷ Such a "grammar" of Kalinga artisanry is comparable to the one Henry Glassie perceived as underlying folk housing in eighteenth-century Virginia, and would give us access to what

*might be called deep style, that is, the realm of patterning that unifies and provides congruence to the vernacular styles that underlie isochrestic choice from one domain of cultural life to the next.*¹⁵⁸

The problem is that *deep style*, even when it is well documented, should not automatically be seen as a correlate of ethnicity without an analysis of the ways such basic uniformity can be generated, not only assumed, by ethnic entities, because it could stem from other pervading realities, such as religion or economy, and their interactions.

Sackett's understanding style, as a significant structuring of material culture within ethnic borders, "brought to life", activated in order to achieve iconic ends, has been criticised by Polly Wiessner. She separates style from isochrestic variation and sees them as generated by different kinds of social action:

the negotiation of identity relationships in the case of the former and the rote passing on of ways of doing things in the latter,

and as having very different goals:

to create relative identity relations as opposed to replicate a way of doing things,

each deserving to be investigated in its own right. She also plays down the capacity of the isochrestic variation to signify ethnicity and emphasises the importance of determining

under which conditions artefacts are used in social strategies, under which ones they are not, and the implications of this for variation in material culture.¹⁵⁹

Polly Wiessner regards the specificity of the referent the most important criterion in distinguishing kinds of style. She isolates emblemic styles, like the emblems of football clubs, with very specific social referents, from assertive styles, like clothing styles, with more vague associations.¹⁶⁰ Emblemic style is defined as the

formal variation in material culture that has a distinct referent and transmits a clear message to a defined target population about conscious affiliation or identity... Because it has a distinct referent, emblemic style carries information about the existence of groups and boundaries and not about the degree of interaction across or between them,¹⁶¹

while assertive style is defined as the

formal variation in material culture which is personally based and which carries information supporting individual identity ... It has no distinct referent as it supports, but does not directly symbolise, individual identity and may be employed either consciously or unconsciously. ...consequently

[it] has the potential to diffuse with acculturation and enculturation, providing a measure of interpersonal contact for archaeologists... Whether it carries such information, however, is a complex matter that depends on a number of decisions of the maker and on the natural, functional and social properties of the object...¹⁶²

It is evident that almost all instances of style accessible to the archaeologist would be labelled by Wiessner as “assertive” style, and her description of the difficulties encountered in its interpretation is very appropriate. The interpretation of emblematic style as is not less problematic because the context may indicate a loss of meaning or a resemantisation: to take just an example, artefacts which we can regard as emblems, pieces of jewellery with an unambiguous Christian meaning, have been found in burial contexts which exclude the belonging of the deceased to the religious (social) group of the Christians.

“Emblematic style” has a wider relevance than the creation and definition of supra-local or ethnic groups: it can be used to construct aspects of differentiation like age, gender and social class; “precisely why particular aspects emerge as salient in a particular context is a matter of considerable importance, and it is quite likely that there will be interactions between them”. Thus, archaeology should concentrate on recognising any emblematic uses of style in the definition of groups, by distinguishing them from other aspects of stylistic variation, “whereas changes over time in the structure of spatial distributions could give an indication that a particular material attribute has acquired an emblematic role”,¹⁶³ and then on the determination of the referents. This should be achieved through the use of independent lines of evidence in order to establish whether age, gender or social class are relevant.

Apparently Wiessner’s distinctions apply better to style in its initial social setting, to the intended types of meanings, than to what happens to the artefacts or styles during the lifespans of their existence. A category of artefacts can cross the border between “assertive” and “emblematic” in both directions. This is common for the “emblematic” styles, which are frequently copied, imitated, in ways not always recognisable for archaeologists, with a loss of the initial meaning(s) that can be complete. On the other hand, a particular type of decoration on pottery could over a period, and without changing its form, play an “assertive” role, then an “emblematic” one, or represent mere “isochrestic variation”, depending on context.¹⁶⁴

Conclusions

The current research on ethnicity and material culture has reached a conclusion, shared not only by anthropologists, processual and post-processual archaeologists, but also by some archaeologists working in a traditional, culture-history framework¹⁶⁵: bounded culture traits are not to be equated with ethnicity; therefore continuity in material culture, more exactly the continuity of technological and stylistic traditions, should not be interpreted as ethnic continuity and cultural discontinuities not necessarily as the end of a people. Ethnic identity is linked to only a part of the cultural repertoire, which can be invisible for the archaeologist, and even that part is subjected to change, many times unpredictable, non-linear change, ethnic continuity consisting in a persistent dichotomization, not in the particular ways of expressing it.

The holistic concept of culture, which sees it either as supported by underlying structures, or as generated by social rules everyone is bound to follow, is losing ground in favour of more realistic concepts. These show culture to be an outcome of the social practice which makes manifest partial structures of meaning and their interaction. The same can be said about the notion of “archaeological culture”, now used mostly for descriptive convenience, and gradually replaced with more adequate concepts.

There is no simple link between the archaeological record, the outcome of natural and cultural formation processes, and the social practice we should attempt to recover. Social practice can be obeying, reacting, commenting or even opposing different sets of rules, promoted by unequivalent agencies in a context that changes at an uneven rate. Therefore no uniformitarian assumptions can help us to assess the interaction between ethnic and other group identities, between ethnic identity and individual identity in a particular case.

Ethnic identity is not uniformly distributed; we cannot expect to find it expressed evenly in the archaeological record. It is not a matter of degree, so a model with a compact centre and diffuse borders is not an adequate representation. It is not of the same kind among the members of an ethnic entity. While the body of ethnic tradition might be the same, individuals and social groups use or live their ethnic identity in different ways, which are likely to be visible in the material culture they produce and use. If we follow the understanding Reinhard Wenskus has proposed for the mechanisms of ethnic identity during the Roman and Early Migration ages

and try to identify the "emblems" of ethnicity among the members of the "*Traditionskern*", that is, for the archaeologist, mostly through the study of princely graves¹⁶⁶, we find very seldom 'traditional' objects, products of local technological usages or embodiments of ancestry; instead we are confronted with high value imported objects from the Roman Empire, meant to express high social position, and even a compatibility across ethnic borders between rulers of the same rank. The burials of the rulers are so different from the burials of the common people, that by using uniformitarian assumptions on the nature of ethnicity and its expression in material culture, we could separate them as belonging to a different ethnic identity, although ethnic tradition is carried on almost exclusively by the ruling class.

Artefacts and features are instrumental in the maintenance and assertion of ethnic identity. But the way they do this is neither specialised nor stable. "Passive" styles can be mobilised to express ethnicity, or bear no ethnic significance; they can extend beyond ethnic boundaries, or be restricted to small territories inside them. The discerning of ethnic significance in "emblemic" styles is a difficult task for the ethno-archaeological research, where the social context is available. Even more so for the archaeologist who has direct access only to those artefacts and assemblages which have been preserved and excavated. The meanings we try to reconstruct were assigned to artefacts which appear to us in more or less incomplete associations and sequences, and it is impossible to establish a relation between what has been recovered and what was once existing. The assignation of meaning was not arbitrary; it had to take into account the existing meanings, the relationships present in material and spiritual culture, linked by constant referral and comparison. Therefore structured meanings are present in the archaeological record, in the associations of artefacts and features, and we can try to grasp them using any available additional information on the possible referents, such as that provided by physical anthropology and the written sources.

Perhaps the best way to gain access to the extinct structures of meaning is to follow their transformation in time. A good example of such archaeological work is that done by Heinrich Härke on the Anglo-Saxon weapon burial rite: if in the beginning, in the fifth century AD, this rite displayed ethnic affiliation, but also descent, wealth, status and age groups, in the seventh century AD, the changes in the composition of the weapon sets and in the context of their deposition enable us to perceive a narrowing of their meaning to that of elite symbols.¹⁶⁷ This shows how Anglo-Saxon

society changed its values, losing the interest for the signification of an ethnic dichotomy and favouring a strong symbolic support for social status.

The recovery of ethnic meanings, as difficult as it is for the archaeologists, should not be abandoned. Their presence in artefacts/features and their associations can be detected by studying as much of the archaeological context as possible. That is why a shift from the mapping of the distribution over wide areas of single categories of artefacts, often reduced to single types, from the celebration of uniformity through the use of simplistic classification strategies, to the recovery and study of the local archaeological contexts in all their particularity, especially where longer chronological sequences are available, could lead to an overcoming of the present stalemate in the understanding of ancient ethnic phenomena.

This also entails a recognition of archaeological work as more than specialised knowledge about antiquities, offering technical expertise for the use of ancient objects in historical reconstructions. If the archaeological study of ethnicity is to go beyond the reassuring recognition/confirmation of the social present, if archaeologists, no longer satisfied with traditional goals, like typology and chronology, want to understand social facts, like group identities, through the study of material culture, they need a “loss of innocence”¹⁶⁸ about the representations of society they use and to act like social scientists, using such images and models not as sources of authority, but as heuristic devices whose explanatory power comes from the confrontation with the archaeological record, allowing them an access to a potentially upsetting past.

NOTES

1. For literature on the subject of language and ethnicity and for the observation that most Polish archaeologists conceive ethnic groups as identical with linguistic groups see Olsen and Kobylinski 1991: 15. No doubt the Bible, with its story about the Tower of Babel and the creation of the peoples-languages who afterwards spread all over the world (*Gen.* 11, 4-9) played a major role in imposing this equivalence, which dominated the medieval tradition and was taken over by emerging philological science, replacing the Tower of Babel with the Migration Age. See Graus 1985: 71-72: '*hier hätten sich die einzelnen Völker durch allmähliche Ausgrenzungen aus großen Sprachgemeinschaften "konstituiert", die sich in ihrem Grundstock nicht mehr veränderten, die die Geschichte Europas bestimmten. Von dieser Zeit an habe es "europäische Völker" gegeben, die sich dann "weiterentwickelten", manchmal im vollen Bewußtsein ihrer Eigenart, manchmal mit dem Zurücktreten des Bewußtseins und dem Weiterwirken der Eigenarten in geheimnisvollen "Tiefen des Volksbewußtseins"*'.
2. See the examples gathered by Hodder 1978: 9-16; some of them show partial correlation or a 'gradual fall-off of similarity'; see also Daniel 1962: 110 and Renfrew 1973: 264.
3. Daim 1982: 63 points to the presence in funerary ritual of older traditions having a territorial distribution that does not match the territories occupied by the ethnic entities. See also Ucko 1969.
4. *E.g.*, Popa 1991.
5. On the relationship between archaeology and history in the research of ethnic phenomena, see Niculescu 1998.
6. Trigger 1989: 111.
7. O. F. Owens, *Surrey Archaeological Collections* 1 (1858): 2-3, quoted in Trigger 1989: 148.
8. Anderson 1991: 5.
9. Eriksen 1997: 105.
10. Gellner 1983: 124.
11. Anderson 1991: 6. The emergence of nations is linked 'with the decline of sacred texts and languages, and with the rise of literacy underpinned by the crucial motor of the printing press. Through printed works in the vernacular individuals gain a sense of being a part of the imagined community of their nation; the reader is invited to share the experience of unknown others' (Banks 1996: 127; see Anderson 1991: 37-46).
12. Eriksen 1997: 110-111, with data from Østerud 1984.
13. Tylor 1871: 1, quoted in Trigger 1989: 162, from where I have taken this outline of the uses of 'culture'.
14. See Meinander 1981: 106.
15. Austin 1990: 16.

16. The maps function as public symbols, showing the nation as a fixed entity, as an abstraction which can be easily taught through the national educational system and the mass media. See Anderson 1991: 170-178.
17. Trigger 1989: 164. Eggers 1974: 200-202, remarks that the article published by Oscar Montelius in 1888, "*Über die Einwanderung unserer Vorfäter in den Norden*", contains many of the ideas later emphatically asserted by Kossinna, including the assimilation between culture and people, and the attempt to demonstrate, following the genealogy of a material culture, that of a people.
18. Eggers 1974: 200-202.
19. Eggers 1974: 239 quotes, with no reference, one significant assertion: "*Ich kann von einer stärkeren Heranziehung der Völkerkunde nur warnen; europäische Kultur und Außereuropa, das sind stets zwei verschiedene Welten gewesen.*"
20. See Eggers 1974: 238-239.
21. Olsen and Kobylinski 1991: 9; see also Bergmann 1972: 108.
22. Kossinna 1911, quoted in Eggers 1974: 211 who comments: "*er bringt nicht Beweise, er stellt Behauptungen auf.*"
23. See Eggers 1974: 213, where a culture area is defined, in Kossinna's terms, as being one "*in dem man in einer bestimmten Zeit immer wieder dieselben Gerätetypen, dieselben Grabformen und dieselben Siedlungsformen feststellen kann.*"
24. See Wenskus 1977: 114.
25. This situation makes us appreciate more the courageous critiques of Ernst Wahle (Wahle 1941).
26. Eggers 1974: 200.
27. Childe 1951: 57 and 49 (quoted in Hodder 1978: 4-5).
28. Shennan 1989: 13. See Clarke 1968.
29. See Steward 1955, White 1959 and Service 1962.
30. Binford 1965: 204.
31. Binford 1965: 205.
32. Binford 1965: 205-207.
33. See, e.g., Binford 1962, Binford 1965, Plog 1975 and Salmon 1978
34. For a monograph on this problem see Schiffer 1987. See also Schiffer 1988.
35. Hodder 1978: 14-15 and Posnansky 1973: 159.
36. Shennan 1989: 13.
37. One of the expressions of the disenchantment among German archaeologists with the notions of "archaeological culture" and "culture area", and with the possibility to link them with ethnic entities, is the increasing use of a more neutral term, "*Formenkreis*", cautiously defined by T. Capelle (Capelle 1995): "*zeitlich und räumlich eingrenzbares prähist[orischen] Material im Kartenbild und damit heute sichtbar werdende, eventuelle ehemalige Verbreitungsgebiet einer Gegenstandform oder auch der spezifisch faßbaren Ausdrucksformen einer anderen kulturellen Erscheinung.*"

38. Hawkes 1954, quoted in Trigger 1989: 266.
39. Daniel 1962: 134-135. Another sceptical position is that of Angeli 1991: 200, who thinks that it is impossible to infer institutions, behaviours and beliefs only from material artefacts. See also Bergmann 1972: 106: "*Die augenblickliche communis opinio ist, daß die ethnische Deutung entweder ganz unmöglich oder nur von einem geringeren Stellenwert in der Forschung sei.*"
40. See Chapman and Doluchanov 1993: 6-7 for some particularly conservative definitions linking "archaeological cultures" and "ethnic entities" by Zakharuk 1964: "An archaeological culture is an aggregation of chronologically and territorially inter-related archaeological sites (complexes) of a defined type, which reflect the territorial diffusion and stage of historical development of a group of related tribes speaking the dialects of the same language" and by Braichevsky 1965: "We regard archaeological culture as the association of archaeological phenomena which correspond to a certain ethnic identity. We cannot recognize as a culture an assemblage which does not correspond to a definite ethnic identity."
41. Bergmann 1972: 106.
42. See Chapman and Doluchanov 1993: 8, referring to Colin Renfrew and Stephen Shennan.
43. See Håland 1977 a: 2-3 and Hodson 1980.
44. Håland 1977 b: 27.
45. Håland 1977 b: 28.
46. Shennan 1989: 5-6, who considers these traits "controversial but essential, tenets of much archaeological methodology today." His most serious objections are against point c: "... cultures cannot be considered as historical actors since they are not real entities" and d.: "the question of the origin of ethnic identity... is analytically distinct from that of the nature of archaeological 'cultures'".
47. Clifford 1986: 19.
48. Dougherty and Fernandez 1981: 415, quoted in Conkey 1990: 12.
49. See Barrett 1994: 36, who refers to Giddens 1984 and Gadamer 1975.
50. Geertz 1973 a: 5. Clifford Geertz invokes Max Weber for this definition, but gives no reference.
51. Geertz 1973 a: 7.
52. Geertz 1973 a: 20.
53. Geertz 1973 a: 14.
54. Geertz 1973 a: 17.
55. Barth 1989: 120-121.
56. Barth 1992: 20.
57. Barth 1989: 122
58. Barth 1989: 128.
59. Barth 1989: 134. See also Barth 1989: 137-138: "the collective product is not only a result of distributive culture being temporarily pooled: it also reproduces the distributive character of culture in the tradition."

60. Barth 1992: 21.
61. Barth 1989: 139-140.
62. Barth 1989: 134.
63. Barth 1989: 132-133.
64. Bourdieu 1977: 72.
65. Bourdieu 1977: 80.
66. Austin and Thomas 1990: 45-46.
67. Bourdieu 1977: 169.
68. Austin and Thomas 1990: 46-47.
69. Csikszentmihalyi 1993: 21.
70. Bourdieu 1977: 87.
71. For the use of *habitus* in the understanding of ethnicity, see Bentley 1987 and the controversy with Yelvington (Yelvington 1991 and Bentley 1991).
72. See Glazer and Moynihan 1975: 1.
73. One extreme position is that of Karen Blu: "the term ethnicity should be dropped altogether as a cross-culturally useful analytic term...[and] restricted to describing and analyzing what is does best, namely an important form of social differentiation in the United States" (Blu 1980: 226, quoted in Banks 1996: 48)
74. See, e.g. Shennan 1989: 19: " 'Ethnicity' may ... be a rather special kind of group identity associated with the appearance of states, in contrast with other kinds of more flexible group definition..."
75. See Isajiw 1974: 11, cited in Jones 1997: 56, for a survey of sixty-five sociological and anthropological studies of ethnicity, where he has found only thirteen that included some kind of definition of ethnicity, and fifty-two containing no explicit definition.
76. Wenskus 1977: 14-112.
77. The same observation by DeVos 1975: 7: "If one seeks, however, to define those characteristics that comprise an ethnic group, one ultimately discovers that there are no essential characteristics common to all groups usually so designed."
78. By Glazer and Moynihan 1975: 19 and Scott 1990: 147.
79. Shils 1957: 122, quoted in Jones 1997: 65.
80. Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 8.
81. Geertz 1973 b: 259. After this frequently quoted passage, Clifford Geertz adds: "...for virtually every person, in every society, at almost all times, some attachments seem to flow from a sense of natural – some would say spiritual – affinity than from social interaction".
82. Isaacs 1975: 31.
83. Isaacs 1975: 32.
84. For such an understanding of "primordialism" see Scott 1990: 150, quoted in Jones 1997: 65: "Both Shils and Geertz use the concept of primordialism as a means of describing certain kinds of social attachment, rather than an explanatory concept." See also Grosby 1994: 54: "It is an act of interpretative

cognition that we perceive something to be in the category of the primordial. Primordially only asserts that human beings classify themselves in accordance with primordial criteria. It does not say that the referents of the criteria necessarily exist in the form in which those who refer to them believe. It does say a) that human beings do make classifications of the self and the other in accordance with such criteria, and b) that on the basis of these classifications, they form groups, membership in which influences the conduct of their members."

85. No comments will be made here on some special brands of "primordialism", with limited influence in the social sciences, like the "socio-biological" primordialism (see van den Berghe 1986) and the "psychological" one (see Kellas 1991).
86. See Jones 1997: 68 and McKay 1982: 397.
87. Bromley 1977: 35-41.
88. Bromley 1974: 66, quoted in Banks 1996: 19. Bromley emphasises the 'objective' character of the ethnic entities, produced by "historical processes" and not '*durch einen Willensakt der Menschen*' (Bromley 1977: 28)
89. Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 9, with reference to Cohen 1969, Bhabha 1990 and Cohen 1994.
90. Jones 1997: 72.
91. See Cohen 1974 and Brass 1991.
92. See Banton 1983 and Hechter 1992.
93. Cohen 1974: xvi-xvii and xxi, quoted in Jones 1997: 74.
94. Wenskus 1977: 1-112, esp. 64 and 72.
95. Bentley 1987: 48, quoted in Jones 1997: 76. See also Epstein 1978: 310: 'to describe an ethnic group as having interests is one thing, to define it in these terms is something quite different.'
96. Jones 1997: 79. See Asad 1980: 645, and Sharp and McAllister 1993: 20.
97. For the possibility of a synthesis of the two approaches see McKay 1982 and Scott 1990. Siân Jones believes that an articulation of the two perspectives overlooks that they are based on "conflicting notions of human agency manifested in an unproductive opposition between rationality and irrationality, and the economic and symbolic domains of social practice" (Jones 1997: 82).
98. Barth 1969: 17. See however, for "ethnic identity as a situational construct", Geary 1983.
99. Barth 1969 a: 9.
100. Barth 1969 a: 9.
101. Barth 1969 a: 9-10.
102. Barth 1969 a: 10.
103. Barth 1969 a: 13-14.
104. Barth 1969 a: 10-11. Fredrik Barth refers, as an example, to the definition of Narroll 1964.

105. Barth 1969 a: 11. See also further: "This ...limits the range of factors that we use to explain cultural diversity: we are led to imagine each group developing its cultural and social form in relative isolation, mainly in response to local ecological factors, through a history of adaptation by invention and selective borrowing. This history has produced a world of separate peoples, each with their culture and each organized in a society which can legitimately be isolated for description as an island to itself."
106. See Barth 1969 a: 12
107. Barth 1969 a: 14.
108. See also Barth 1992: 23: 'Such an account does not link the social by definition to repetition, norms and shared ideas as blueprints for acts prerequisites for social action. On the contrary, it outlines interactional processes which may generate a degree of convergence, with pattern as an emergent property. I see system as an outcome, not as a pre-existing structure to which action must conform.'
109. Barth 1969 a: 14; see also further: "neither of these kinds of cultural 'contents' follows from a descriptive list of cultural features or cultural differences, one cannot predict from first principles which features will be emphasized and made organizationally relevant by the actors."
110. Barth 1969 a: 14.
111. Barth 1969 a: 14.
112. Barth 1969 a: 15. For a similar view on the nature of ethnic identity see DeVos 1975: 6: "Like Barth, I think that how and why boundaries are maintained, rather than the cultural content of the separated group, are what one must examine in the study of ethnic relations. I too contend that boundaries are basically psychological in nature, not territorial. These boundaries are maintained by ascription from within as well as from external sources, which designates membership according to evaluative characteristics which differ in content depending on the history of contact of the groups involved."
113. The first archaeological contributions to make use of Barth's view on ethnicity are Håland 1977 a and Kleppe 1977.
114. Håland 1977 a: 12.
115. Binford 1962 and Hensel 1977.
116. Barth 1969 b: 131-132.
117. Shennan 1991: 30-31.
118. Austin and Thomas 1990: 45.
119. Barrett 1994: 71. John Barrett suggests an alternative goal for the archaeological inquiry: "not to recover some transcendental truth available to the past and to the present, but to reveal the conditions under which certain knowledges become possible". Further (p. 71-72), he argues that it does not matter if we are not able to uncover the meaning of the archaeological monuments, "for they were never the expression of a single truth". Instead, we should understand 'how the logic of the known world

- could have been revealed and sustained, thought and acted through afresh, as various traditions of knowing were reworked upon the available physical resources. For critiques of the currently dominant “linguistic” models of culture, see Hodder 1989 and Bloch 1991.
120. See Austin and Thomas 1990: 45, Barrett 1988: 7 and Hodder 1986: 6.
 121. Barrett 1994: 35-36.
 122. Wiessner 1989: 58. See the examples cited by Hodder 1978: 7-8. One of the most discussed examples is based on a study carried in the Fulani village of Bé in North Cameroon. Here ten female potters were working, seven of them Fulani, two Gisiga and one Lame. Each cultural group made different wares, but a comparison between the ethnic identity of the inhabitants and the cultural affiliation of the pottery present in the village shows that, if the identity of the main cultural group, the Fulani, is well represented in the pottery, Gisiga pottery seriously underestimates the number of the Gisiga people (David and Henning 1972: 22).
 123. McGuire 1982: 164, who cites several attempts – from the field of historical archaeology – to separate those material remains indicating ethnicity from those that indicate other social dimensions: Otto 1977, Otto 1980; Carillo 1977, Ferguson 1980, Baker 1980, Greenwood 1976 and Greenwood 1980.
 124. Douglas and Isherwood 1996: viii.
 125. Conkey 1990: 8 and note 7.
 126. Burgin 1986: 32, quoted in Conkey 1990: 6.
 127. Conkey and Hastorf 1990: 3.
 128. Hodder 1990: 45.
 129. See also Kroeber 1948: 329: “for things to be done well they must be done definitely” (quoted in Sackett 1990: 35-36).
 130. Hodder 1990: 51.
 131. Hodder 1990: 45-46.
 132. Hodder 1990: 46.
 133. Hodder 1990: 46.
 134. Håland 1977 a and Dunnell 1978.
 135. See Lechtman 1977 and Lechtman 1984, quoted in Conkey 1990: 13.
 136. See, e.g., Almgren 1923 and Riha 1979.
 137. Sackett 1990: 33.
 138. Sackett 1990: 42. His quarrel is not with adjunct form “but with adjunctism, that is, the position that style resides solely in decoration”.
 139. Sackett 1990: 33-34. See also Plog 1983: 134-135, who, discussing pottery, regards the thickness of the walls or the physical composition of the fabric as potentially having an ethnic significance, and Friedel 1993: 41: “The material itself conveys messages, metaphorical or otherwise, about the objects and their place in a culture.”
 140. Wobst 1977: 321.
 141. Wobst 1977: 328-330. M. Pokropek expressed a similar point of view. He identified as ethnic markers the elements of the dress and the transportation

- means (the build of the carts, types of horse-gear). For him the reason these items are likely to be ethnically significant is not their visibility from a great distance, but the frequency with which they appear in situations of inter-group contact (Pokropek 1979: 153, quoted in Olsen and Kobylinski 1991: 15).
142. Wobst 1977: 323. Authors of several ethnoarchaeological works have attempted to verify his predictions, thus stimulating the debate. See, e.g., Sterner 1989. See also Plog 1983: 127, with literature, on the problem of what social context would be likely to foster stylistic messaging.
 143. Plog 1983: 138 with reference to Saitta 1982.
 144. Wiessner 1984: 193. For identity display in ceremonial dress, see Strathern and Strathern 1971.
 145. Ardener 1975: 346-348, quoted in Olsen and Kobylinski 1991: 15.
 146. Examples of less visible cultural traits used as ethnic markers, like stools, pottery, the manicure of dogs, butchering methods or hearth location are mentioned by Plog 1983: 138, with references to Hodder 1982, Hole 1978, Jones 1974, Myers 1975. See also Eidheim 1971: 60, quoted in Olsen and Kobylinski 1991: 15.
 147. See Cordell and Yannie 1991: 98-99.
 148. Barrett 1994: 74-75, with reference to Giddens 1979 and Giddens 1984.
 149. Asad 1979: 621.
 150. Sackett 1982 and Wiessner 1983. See also Macdonald 1990 who separates the expression of the individual style (panache) from that of the group style (protocol), in order to discover the changing relationships between the individual and the group in a society.
 151. Sackett 1990: 33 and note 3 to page 43; see also Sackett 1977: 373 and Sackett 1982: 73-74.
 152. Sackett 1990: 35.
 153. Sackett 1990: 33.
 154. Shennan 1989: 19-20. Sackett contests that his model has only made 'explicit what most archaeologists knew intuitively.' (Sackett 1990: 40).
 155. Sackett 1986: 274-275.
 156. Sackett 1990: 39-40.
 157. Longacre 1981: 63. See also Washburn 1989.
 158. Sackett 1990: 41. See Glassie 1975. James Sackett thinks that this is what researchers labelled as structuralists, semioticians, and symbolic anthropologists often seem to be talking about (see Hodder 1982 and Deetz 1977). He finds an exciting recent example of such a quest for deep style in a study by B. and D. Tedlock (Tedlock and Tedlock 1985) on "inter-textualities" within and among such seemingly diverse aspects of Quiché Maya life as textiles, instrumental music, storytelling and divination.
 159. Wiessner 1984: 195. Sackett 1990: 39, charges Polly Wiessner with the re-defining of his isochrestism by emphasizing the existence of an "essentially static core of technology that largely entails the routine duplication of standard types", a technological core that he thinks does not exist.

160. Wiessner 1990: 107-108.
161. Wiessner 1983: 257.
162. Wiessner 1983: 258.
163. Shennan 1989: 20-21, who mentions a practical problem for the archaeologist: "If, for example, patterns of group definition are short-term and fluctuating, as we have suggested they often will be, then any material aspect of them may not be detectable at the relatively low levels of chronological resolution normally available to prehistorians."
164. Shennan 1989: 21.
165. See e.g. Ament 1986: 251: "*Stabilität der materiellen Kultur gewährleistet nicht unter allen Umständen eine Konstanz der ethnischen Identität, wie umgekehrt auch Brüche in der Entwicklung der materiellen Kultur nicht zwangsläufig mit ethnischen Veränderungen einhergehen.*"
166. For this problem see Kossack 1974.
167. Härke 1992: 164.
168. Clarke 1973.

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