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CHAPTER 1

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Prelude

The planning phase for the 2017 Annual Meetings of the Southern Anthropological Society in Carrollton, Georgia, began shortly after the 2016 elections, which represented a significant shift in politics and social life in the United States. The new President, with an “America First” agenda focusing quite entirely on one cultural vision and one cultural definition using criteria that surprised the majority of people, heralded the meaning, significance, and dangers of ethnocentrism in ways that shook and disrupted the citizenry. Even as early as December 2016, it seemed urgent that we, as anthropologists, reexamine foundational concepts like ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, and racism in deeper and more provocative ways than we had grown accustomed to. The spirit and earlier works of our disciplinary fore-parents, such as Franz Boas, Melville Herskovits, W. E. B. DuBois, and Zora Neale Hurston, called out to be reexamined and remembered—tied back into our central goals as social scientists now in the twenty-first century. And, so, the conference theme, “Ethnocentrism,” made itself felt all around us as we watched citizenry protest through marches, letter-writing campaigns to politicians, media posts, bumper stickers, and ongoing yard signs.

The election had initiated us into a period of liminality where we were not sure where we were heading and most of us, regardless
of our positionality, remained anxious and without clear expectations. Emotions were raw, and the sense of common trust and fraternity that many of us had known prior to the election ended rather abruptly. As we grappled to understand what was happening and sought a foothold to allow us to respond, many of us, as social scientists, began looking for historical patterns. This conference was to be a forum in which we could examine all types of ethnocentrism and ways that communities could respond. We considered many angles of ethnocentrism, including nationalism and partisanship, looking to other countries, other cultures, and other times in an attempt to better grasp what was happening all around us.

Word and Concept

The concept of ethnocentrism has roots deep in our anthropological heritage. Although many social scientists attribute its coinage to William Graham Sumner in his 1906 book, *Folkways*, Bizumic (2014, 7), building on earlier research of Bracq (1902) and Banton (1998), traces the concept of ethnocentrism to the writings of Ludwig Gumplowicz (ca. 1879). Because Gumplowicz’s work, published significantly earlier than Sumner’s, was available only in German and Polish, it appears that Sumner “leaned” on the concept and identified it in 1906 to a wide group of English-speaking social scientists with no reference to the earlier scholar. Sumner did further develop the idea and provided us with a perspective that is most commonly in use today.

This early work already foretold the complexity and hydra-like quality of ethnocentrism. Gumplowicz ([1899], 155-6) used the term *syngenism* to refer to the feeling, the attraction that individuals have for a unity of sameness:

> Man is not so bad as crass materialism pictures him; neither is he so large hearted as Christian philosophy in
vain requires him to be. He is neither devil nor angel, simply human. Fettered to the community by natural ties of blood, habit and mood of thought, his egoism is social, his sympathies are social; to demand more than social sympathy is to demand something unnatural and superhuman and to credit him with less than social egoism is to do him wrong. But social egoism includes social sympathy, social sympathy is social egoism. Let us call their union syngenism and we have identified the motive of all social development and the key to its solution.

Developing further this idea of in-group/out-group, Sumner writes ([1906] 2008, 15):

Ethnocentrism is . . . this view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it. . . . Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways the only right ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, these excite its scorn. Opprobrious epithets are derived from these differences. “Pig-eater,” “cow-eater,” “uncircumcised,” “jabberers,” are epithets of contempt and abomination. . . . For our present purpose the most important fact is that ethnocentrism leads a people to exaggerate and intensify everything in their own folkways which is peculiar and which differentiates them from others.

And what constitutes the group? Interestingly, although ethnocentrism is a concept that decidedly carries the idea that there is an openly-acknowledged shared ethnicity among a group of people, Sumner effortlessly translates this concept to the state and a sense of nationhood as if it were its own ethnicity (ibid., 19):
All states give the same security and conditions of welfare to all. The standards of civic institutions are the same, or tend to become such, and it is a matter of pride in each state to offer civic status and opportunities equal to the best. Every group of any kind whatsoever demands that each of its members shall help defend group interests. Every group stigmatizes anyone who fails in zeal, labor, and sacrifices for group interests. Thus the sentiment of loyalty to the group, or the group head, which was so strong in the Middle Ages, is kept up, as far as possible, in regard to modern states and governments. The group force is also employed to enforce the obligations of devotion to group interests. It follows that judgments are precluded and criticism is silenced.

Yet, unlike nationalism, ethnocentrism carries with it a sense of kinship (Milhaye 1985, 106). This fictive biological foundation makes the group seem natural and effortless. Where individuals otherwise might seek to distinguish themselves from a unified group, under conditions of ethnocentrism these same individuals will sense a pull towards a larger, more cohesive identity. Émile Durkheim, sensing this same divide between the individual and the group identity, referred to this as a double being: “an individual being which has its foundation in the organism and whose activities are therefore strictly limited, and a social being which represents the highest reality on the intellectual and moral order that we can know by observation—I mean society” (cited in Leaf 1979, 163). Who we are depends on both self and group—and humans as individuals are members of many different groups. It is our social natures, the give and take of identities, that define us.

Interestingly, both scholars, Gumplowicz and Sumner, noted that ethnocentrism also frequently pairs itself with religion, providing a legitimacy and basis to claim moral rectitude (Bizumic 2014, 5).
A Dangerous Hydra

Ethnocentrism can be imagined as a capricious hydra. Group identity, critical as a cohesive and active force, provides individuals with assets and advantages. It allows for enhanced security and protection, for the ability to alter and manipulate social and physical environments, and for leverage in a wide range of activities. While humans have always used kinship as a grouping mechanism, with the development of ethnocentrism these same humans could now belong to non-kin groupings and motivate others to align with any number of causes and interests. Ethnocentrism is effective. It works well at keeping individuals together, in line, affirmed.

It also is the groundwork for cultural diversity. When separate groups form, they distinguish themselves along certain well-worn paths best exemplified through Durkheim’s definition of religion. While he referred to these as differences of religion, they also adhere to the distinctions between any kinds of groups, sacred or secular: differences in ritual, belief, forms of organization, and ethic norms (values) (Durkheim 1995, 44). It is ethnocentrism which allows for the development of difference within the group—the idea that one practice or belief is better than another, more commonsensical, more just, more efficient. And from so simple a beginning1 . . . have emerged all sorts of hydra-like consequences: from pride, dignity and distinction, to competition, discrimination, warfare, genocide. Like so many critical concepts, ethnocentrism, too, is a cline. It contributes significantly to our ability to survive in a mild form by prompting differences that allow for cross-fertilizations, re-imaginings, competitive drives, and innovations, yet in its most destructive form it leads humans to seek the extermination of those who are different. How to control this “beastly” force has grown to have the most significant impacts since the development of state societies.
Causes and Relief

In this little volume, we seek to provide our readers with examples of ethnocentrism in its various guises across time, genres, and cultures. Our authors, using their various specialties within anthropology, have considered the form and impact of ethnocentrism in multiple areas—from historic treaties between nations and ways of defining selfhood as a nation within a state society to ethnocentric applications within music and health. Seeing the creative diversity and intensity of ethnocentrism reminds us that even today, as we face increasingly visible signs of social fracture within nation-states, we are dealing with a well-worn friend and foe.

In Chapter 2, “Borders and Bridges,” Christine Kovic’s cogent scholarship on the “policies of exclusion” draws our attention to ethnocentrism in policy and practice around us, right now, being perpetrated in our names at the international border between the United States and Mexico. Her work calls us to respond urgently to these violations of human rights that are causing suffering and death. These lines being drawn between Us and Them reverberate and percolate all throughout our society—as she says, “policies also cross borders.” She urges us to connect the dots between what is happening on the border and perspectives and actions occurring within all levels of our society. Whether you live along the border or deep within the “heartland,” our country (and other countries) are immediately impacted by ethnocentric policies.

Chapter 3, “Examination of the Reconciliation Movement in the Canadian Cultural Genocide,” draws our attention across the northern border and into Canada, focusing on the history, challenges, and failures within the Canadian reconciliation movement with Aboriginal peoples. Yeju Choi deftly documents the historical roots of this process, reminding us of the context of reconciliation amidst cultural genocide and deceit. Although Canada established the Truth
and Reconciliation Commission in 2006 and tried to utilize methods such as storytelling to encourage open dialogues about past abuses and possible ways to mend the social fabric between immigrant-citizens and first peoples, this process was flawed. Choi reminds us that when those in power determine the methods and means of reconciliation, it perpetrates abuse, regardless of the stated goals and objectives. A process that appeared to seek healing “strengthened the stereotypes and biases against Aboriginal people.”

Brandon Lundy and Kezia Darkwah examine the immigrant Manjaco peoples of Cabo Verde (Cape Verde) in Chapter 4, “Becoming Manjaco.” Serving as a buffer of sorts between Africa and Europe, Cabo Verde is today a vibrant and tense melting pot of diverse cultures and ethnicities. From their work in ethnographic surveys of Bissau-Guinean immigrants on the islands of Boa Vista and Santiago, Lundy and Darkwah direct our attention to the politics of othering via economic disparity and geographical longevity among immigrant groups. Their work, while pointing out the discrimination and violation of immigrant rights in Cabo Verde, also suggests that effective and culturally sensitive immigration policies do have “a clear effect on both local receptivity and foreign guests’ community integration.” While ethnocentrism challenges nation-states, it can be managed better when federal policies align with humanitarian principles, resulting in a more unified and stable society.

In Chapter 5, “Through a Glass Darkly,” Kathleen and Daniel Ingersoll take a broader perspective on ethnocentrism, looking at how other cultures and other historical periods are framed and depicted from the lens of the observers. Using the example of Rapa Nui where they have done anthropological research for more than a decade, the Ingersolls trace the depiction and appreciation for the monumental architecture on Rapa Nui as a function of our own ethnocentric cultural biases in which we aggrandize the monumental
and project our own cultural values onto what we encounter, remaining oblivious to the potential of finding new ways to understand. It is a cultivated ignorance.

Ethnocentrism extends beyond cultures; it also projects distinctions within a same culture and impacts sub-cultural groups in various ways. In Chapter 6, “Feeding Variety,” Ayla Samli looks at the ethnocentrism of nutritional access and standards in the American diet as it affects schoolchildren and adult refugees. Her work reminds us of the socioeconomics of food, which intersects with identity and health and is deeply ethnocentric. Samli argues that the standards of nutrition used in social institutions throughout the United States are themselves based more on identities and the intersections between economics, politics, and history than on biology and nutritional needs. Her research, though, ends on a positive note about ethnocentrism: she imagines “nutrition classes where newly arrived refugees and immigrants participate alongside of their Title 1 counterparts to explore, sample, and enjoy exciting and healthy flavors and possibilities from an array of cultural backgrounds.” In short, she pushes us to see ethnocentrism as a culinary delight that results in healthier people biologically and socially.

Our final chapter, Chapter 7, “The Wu Tang Clan and Cultural Resistance,” pushes us to consider the language and symbolism of ethnocentrism in the genre of music, actually inviting us to consider this from multiple perspectives. In a detailed and sensitive analysis of the Wu Tang playlist and its musical roots, Michael Blum examines the ways that ethnocentrism has been called out by those suffering its effects. Not only do we hear the drama of ethnocentrism in the lyrics of Wu Tang, but we also experience it as readers. Listening to these words—many sharp-edged and socially astute—calling out conditions that have oppressed peoples over long periods and been too invisible for too long, Blum’s fearless hand keeps us moving...
along the trajectory of this extraordinary musical group’s documentation of society-as-it-is for too many today.

Notes

1. These are the words that Charles Darwin used to refer to the origin of species from a single-celled organism.
Bibliography


