Culture, identity and the concept of boundary

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My topic is concerned less with the political and jurisdictional aspects of the frontier than with people's consciousness of it.[1] Boundary is a term which is much more familiar to anthropologists than frontier. As I shall suggest later, it conveys a less specific idea than 'frontier' —although anthropologists differ in this respect considerably from other social scientists. The proposition on which I wish to focus is that boundary is essentially a matter of consciousness and of experience, rather than of fact and law. As an item of consciousness, it is inherent in people's identity and is a predicate of their culture.

Apart from 'boundary' itself, the title of the present chapter includes within its brief span two frequently abused words, 'culture' and 'identity'. I shall attempt to be resolutely empirical. Without any semantic finesse, I shall treat identity as the way(s) in which a person is, or wishes to be known by certain others. 'Culture as identity' thus refers to the attempt to represent the person or group in terms of a reified and/or emblematised culture. It is a political exercise, manifest in those processes which we frequently describe as 'ethnic', the components of which are referred to as 'symbols'.

These are all words which have some currency in ordinary language, and whose academic and anthropological usage is thereby considerably complicated. In anthropology, 'culture' has gone through a succession of

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[1] This paper draws on three other publications: 'Culture as identity: an anthropologist's view', *New Literary History*, 24 (1) 1993, pp. 195-209; my forthcoming book, *Self Consciousness: an Alternative Anthropology of Identity*, Routledge, 1994; and 'Boundaries of consciousness, consciousness of boundaries', to be published in a volume of essays arising from the conference on *The Anthropology Of Ethnicity*, Spinhuis, 1994.

paradigm shifts. In the past it was used to suggest a determination of behaviour. There was also a major school of thought which treated culture as the means by which the supposedly discrete processes of social life, such as politics, economics, religion, kinship, were integrated in a manner which made them all logically consistent with each other. In this view, the individual became a mere replicate in miniature of the larger social and cultural entity. The tendency now is to treat culture much more loosely —as that which *aggregates* people and processes, rather than integrates them. It is an important distinction for it implies *difference* rather than similarity among people. Thus, to talk about '*a* culture', is not to postulate a large number of people, all of whom are merely clones of each other and of some organising principle. That is important, for in ordinary language, the word is still used all too frequently to imply this.

Moreover, if culture is not *sui generis*, exercising a determining power over people, then it must be regarded as the product of something else: if not the logical replicate of other social processes —say, relations of production— then of social interaction itself. In this perspective, we have come to see culture as the outcome and product of interaction; or, to put it another way, to see people as active in the *creation* of culture, rather than passive in receiving it. If we are —in the contemporary jargon— the *agents* of culture's creation, then it follows that we can shape it to our will, depending on how ingenious and powerful we may be. And this, in the matter of the politicisation of cultural identity, is another most significant characteristic to which we will return.

Culture, in this view, is the means by which we make meaning, and with which we make the world meaningful to ourselves. It is articulated by symbols. Symbols are quite simply carriers of meaning. To be effective, they should be imprecise, in order that the largest possible number of people can modulate a shared symbol to their own wills, to their own interpretive requirements: a tightly-defined symbol is pretty useless as anything other than a purely formal sign [Cohen 1985: 18]. Symbols are inherently meaningless, they are not lexical; they do not have a truth value. They are pragmatic devices which are invested with meaning through social process of one kind or another. They are potent resources in the arenas of politics and identity.

Culture, identity and symbolism all converge on the concept of ethnicity. In some respects, this is the most difficult word of the three, since it appears to mean something —indeed, has been imported into lay usage for this reason— but, in practice, means either everything or nothing at all. When a British politician or policeman says 'ethnic', they mean 'black' or, at least, 'different', 'other'. When the spokespersons of ethnic organisations say 'ethnic', they mean minority, usually disadvantaged or discriminated minority. When the racial theorist says 'ethnic', he refers to a relationship of blood and descent. If the word is to be anthropologically useful, it cannot

refer exclusively to any of these. Ethnicity has become a mode of action and of representation: it refers to a decision people make to depict themselves or others symbolically as the bearers of a certain cultural identity. The symbols used for this purpose are almost invariably mundane items, drawn from everyday life, rather than from elaborate ceremonial or ritual occasions. Ethnicity has become the politicisation of culture [Paine 1984: 212]. Thus, it is in part, a *claim* to a particular culture with all that that entails. But such claims are rarely neutral. The statement made in Ethiopia, 'I am Oromo', or in Northern Ireland, 'He's a Prod', are clearly not merely descriptive: they have an added value, either negative or positive, depending on who is speaking and to whom.

I referred above to the entailments of cultural claims. One aspect of the charged nature of cultural identity is that in claiming one, you do not merely associate yourself with a set of characteristics: you also dissociate yourself from others. This is not to say that contrast is the conscious motivation for such claims, as some writers have argued [egs. Barth 1969; Boon 1982], but it *is* implicit and is understood, the more so the more highly charged the situation may be. Cultural identity also entails a *patrimoine* and a history, or the acknowledged need to create these. It is in the expression of all of these entailments that the boundary, and especially the symbolic marking of the boundary becomes crucial.

If the ethnic card is played in identity, it is not like announcing nationality. Ethnicity is not a juridical matter, carrying legal rights and obligations. It is a political claim, which entails political and moral rights and obligations. I use the word 'nationality' rather than 'nationhood' since, as we know, 'nationhood' may also be a statement of claim, and is one which is often made to emphasise the circumstances of its denial. The putative 'nationhood' of Scotland, or of 'the Jewish People' or of the Basques, are the axiomatic premises for claims: say *to* nationality, or to the legitimacy of Israel's occupation of so-called Judaea and Sumeria. But these are utterly different from the argument made by Hong Kong Chinese regarding their entitlement to a British passport; or from that of the British government concerning sovereignty and Gibralter or the Malvinas. The one, nationality, is an argument about legal status. The other, nationhood, is a claim about the character and integrity of one's cultural identity. They may well coincide in a process which Løfgren describes as 'the nationalisation of culture' [1989] in which attempts are made to forge a distinctive identity, for any of a variety of strategic reasons. His example is the creation of the national symbols and consciousness of 'Swedishness' in late 19th Century Sweden. But there is much other contemporary anthropological work on this issue, and the historian Peter Sahlins has ingeniously demonstrated the modulation over time of local and national identity in the transnational Pyrenees region of the Cerdagne (France)/Cerdanya (Spain) [Sahlins, 1989].

Now, the position has been taken in the past in anthropology that

ethnicity — politicised cultural identity — was merely contrastive: that is, that it is invoked only to draw a real or conceptual boundary between one group and another. This suggests that the boundary is situational — invoked with respect to some groups and for some purposes, but not others. This does not sound much like 'frontier'. This position, associated primarily with Fredrik Barth, has dominated ethnicity studies for twenty five years. It seems to me inherently unsatisfactory. Suffice it to say that in treating ethnicity just as a *tactical* identity, it ignored both *self*-consciousness and the *symbolic* expression of ethnic identity. The first suggests that an ethnic identity means different things to those who participate in it; the second directs us to the question of how ethnicity can have these infinitely variable meanings while still retaining its coherent expression.

Ethnicity —the political expression of cultural identity— has two distinctive registers to which we should attend. The first is used for the *apparently* dogmatic statement of more or less objective doctrine: " I am a Palestinian" —and certain things will be understood as following from that. The second is for contentious statements which treat ethnicity as the context of, or as an aspect of identity with very *un*certain implications: "I am a *particular* Palestinian". The apparently monolithic character of ethnic identity at the *collective* level thus does not pre-empt the continual reconstruction of ethnicity at the personal level. Ethnicity has a definite appearance, but rather indefinite substance.

This same discrimination of appearance from reality, of substance from insubstantiality, is pertinent to the related idea of 'boundary'. This most topical of terms, or the entity which it expresses, seems to have preoccupied the social sciences since the late 1980's and the collapse of the central European state socialist empires. In the attempt to shed some conceptual light on a categorical morass, the political scientist Malcolm Anderson attempts to distinguish among 'frontier', 'boundary' and 'border'[2]:

> 'Frontier is the word with the widest meaning... In contemporary usage, it can mean the precise line at which jurisdictions meet, usually demarcated on the ground with posts, stones or fences and controlled by customs, police and military personnel. Frontier can also refer to a region... Even more broadly, frontier is used in specific cases to refer to the vast interior of a continent... The term border can be applied to a zone, usually a narrow one, or it can be the line of demarcation... The word boundary is always used to refer to the line of delimitation or demarcation and is thus the narrowest of the three terms.' (n.d.: 7, fn. 14).

His usage is similar to that proposed by Coakley:

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[2] His dismissal of the term 'march' as 'archaic' (referring to the outer limits of a given territory) will not satisfy anthropologists for whom it has been modernised into the troublesome 'margin'.

'Political geographers conventionally distinguish between boundaries,
which have a precise, linear quality, and frontiers, which have more
diffuse, zonal connotations. The concept of frontier has a broader
social significance than the more restrictive legal concept of boundary'
(1982: 36).

The confusions among these words, all of which express the condition
of contiguity, are those of ordinary usage rather than of science. It might
be helpful to think less in terms of discriminating among them on the
grounds of their putative referents —since ordinary language will not
honour such precision— than in terms of how they are used and what they
are used for. In the discourse of anthropology, such a taxonomy of concepts
and attitudes (rather than of concrete empirical referents) would suggest
almost the opposite of Anderson's and Coakley's surveys: that 'boundary'
is the word with the most general application (since, in anthropology, is has
been used to signify such diverse things); whereas border seems situationally
specific, and frontier has come to be reserved to fairly strictly limited geo-
political and legal applications. The distinction can be accomplished simply
by regarding frontiers and borders as matters of fact; whereas boundaries
are the subjects of claim based on a perception by at least one of the parties
of certain features which distinguish it from others. Whether it refers to a
collective condition, such as ethnic group identity, or to something as
ephemeral as 'personal space', boundary suggests contestability, and is
predicated on consciousness of a diacritical property.[3]

There is a tendency among anthropologists (and, indeed, among other
social scientists who write about ethnicity) to credit the concept of boundary
to Barth's seminal symposium, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969); and,
by implication, to associate it with ethnicity (or, as the subtitle of Barth's
book put it, with the social organisation of cultural difference). But the
concept is really much more fundamental to the discipline and to the nature
of our enquiry. When anthropologists defined the subject as the study of
other cultures, they necessarily (if unwittingly) placed 'boundary' at the very
centre of their concerns. The relativism of anthropologist/anthropologised,
us/them, self/other, clearly implies boundary.

The problem became fixed as one inhering in the distance between
cultures rather than between *minds*. Anthropology has been preoccupied
with the boundaries between cultures. It has preferred to avoid the
boundaries between minds, between consciousnesses, either because these
have been regarded as too difficult to cross (e.g. Needham 1981), or because

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[3] In her recent study of the annual festival in a Scottish Borders community, the geo-
grapher Susan Smith (1993) conflates all three terms by making them expressive of 'space'
(a word to which human geographers seem to resort much as anthropologists do to 'cultu-
re'). While there may be no intrinsic value in discriminating the three words, there surely is
something to be gained from distinguishing the material from the ideal.

such a refocusing of enquiry would have subverted the disciplinary practice
of generalisation and its conceptual bases. This more fundamental problem
has been shoved aside simply by predicating consciousness on culture, which
is itself anthropologically constructed as being different from, and therefore
'relative to', *other* cultures.

One consequence of this has been that anthropologists have been largely
content to assume the existence and integrity of collective boundaries.
Rather than questioning their existence, or questioning the extent to which
they might reasonably be generalised (*whose* boundaries are they?) they
have been concerned almost exclusively with the ways in which boundaries
are marked. There have been significant theoretical debates concerning the
differences among the ways in which they have done this, and concerning
the nature of the boundary marking devices and processes which they have
attributed to people. But there is little room for doubt that their concern
has not extended to the more fundamental question. It has been so central
an ethnographic preoccupation that examples would be somewhat
gratuitous, but to give just an idea of their range: it could be found among
Leach's 'aesthetic frills', those non-technical aspects of ritual which express
collective identity by emphasising cultural possession (see above). It was
explicitly at the heart of Schwartz's depiction of the 'ethnognomomic'
activities of Admiralty Islanders (1975). It was strikingly and movingly
present in Eidheim's famous account of the reaction of Norwegian Saami
to the stigma they supposedly perceived as attaching to them (1969); and
provided the material for the reformulation of migrant West Indian
identities among the Notting Hill carnival participants described by Abner
Cohen (1980; 1992).

So ubiquitous has this kind of work been, especially in studies of ethnicity
and social identity, that we have taken for granted the integrity of its central
concerns: to show how individuals are constructed in the images of their
collective representations. It has imputed boundary-consciousness to people
without pausing to enquire quite what it is that they are supposed to be
conscious of. What is the individual conscious of when she or he invokes a
boundary as a means or source of social identity? Culture and consciousness
are not alternative modalities: culture only exists *as* consciousness. In the
ethnographic literature, people have been constructed in terms of putative
boundaries (localities), and in terms of anthropologists' consciousness of
boundaries, without adequately interrogating these notions.

The terms 'frontier' and 'border' (and boundary, if it is not distinguished
from them) alerts us to lines which mark the extent of contiguous societies,
or to meeting points between supposedly discrete social groups. We have
barely glanced at those more amorphous divisions which appear routinely,
not just between cultures nor even within them, but between intimates who
share culture. As I have suggested, we have shied away from, have even
denied any interest in, the boundedness of the mind, the limits of

consciousness which separate one self from another. We have excused ourselves from such an enquiry on the grounds that it would be too difficult, and that our concept of culture enables us to invent people who are similar to each other. Instead of dealing with the individual, we have restrained our ambition and addressed ourselves instead to whole societies or to substantial parts of them. Yet, looking at individual's boundary transformations should alert us to the qualitative nature of *collective* boundaries.

I will try to illustrate this briefly with reference to rituals of initiation. In dealing with ritualised status passage, we do not seem commonly to have explicitly applied the concept of boundary to divisions between statuses, but there is no reason why we should not do so. We have the evocative notion of liminality to describe the blurriness of transformation, and the acute consciousness of status on either side of it. This is not unlike the exaggerated concern with social identity to be found commonly in geo-political borderlands (eg. Sahlins, 1989; Brown, 1990), and to which I shall return. But the difficulties of passing from status to status seem curiously understated in ethnographic accounts — as if such adjustments were as unambiguous as (albeit more troublesome than) crossing a national border: one moment you are in Italy, the next in France. The worst you are likely to suffer is a brief spell in no-man's land. So it is with accounts of initiation. One day the initiate is a child; the next he or she is initiated and, after due process of seclusion, re-emerges into society bearing the new status of adult, or initiated youth, or marriageable girl. The confusion of liminality, the blurriness of being 'betwixt and between', or being in the social equivalent of no-man's land, is somehow confined temporally by the ritual process and spatially to the initiates' lodge. It is ended by the next ritual phase of re-aggregation. This seems hardly plausible to me. Transformations of status, like crossing geo-political borders, require a process of adjustment, of rethinking, which goes beyond the didactic procedures about which we have been told so much. They require a reformulation of self which is more fundamental than admission to items of lore, or being loaded with new rights and obligations. The difficulties inherent in such self-adjustment may vary according to the nature of the frontiers which are crossed; but our experience of politics and travel should also alert us to the deceptively innocuous character of crossing between supposedly proximate statuses or cultures. The first intimation to us that we are *really* in a different place may be the look of incomprehension on the faces of our interlocutors, or the pained censure by others of our newly inappropriate behaviour. Having crossed a boundary, we have to think ourselves into our transformed identity which is far more subtle, far more individualised than its predication on status.

A boundary-crossing stimulates the awareness of a person *as an individual*, as someone who can step back and reflect on his or her position

with respect to society. If we recognise boundaries as matters of
consciousness rather than of institutional dictation, we see them as much
more amorphous, much more ambiguous than we otherwise have done. It
may be this very ambiguity which inclines societies to invest their various
boundaries so heavily with symbolism. The contributors to my symposium,
Symbolising Boundaries, all describe such processes of marking in
the undramatic circumstances of the British Isles, whether dealing with the
imagery of suburban Manchester or with adolescence in rural
Northumberland (1986). As a matter of ideology, the boundary may be
given dogmatic form. But its internalisation in the consciousness of
individuals renders it much less definitely. I think perhaps this offers us a
clue to the discrimination of boundary, border and frontier. Border and
frontier have the quality of finity, definity, about them. When they are
crossed, one has definitely moved from the Cerdagne to Cerdanya. That is
undeniable, for my passport stamp tells me so. What is much less certain is
what this crossing-point means to those who live on either side of it. The
uncertainty may be glossed by language, currency, by law, lore and by all
the iconography of custom and tradition. But, when all this is said and done,
it remains a gloss on the much more ambiguous boundaries of consciousness.
Borders and frontiers seem to me to have something in common with the
taxonomic absoluteness of anthropological categories; boundaries, with the
blurriness and elusiveness of symbols.

Of course it follows that if one does not know quite what it is that has
been crossed, then one may also be unaware *that* a boundary has been
crossed at all. I share with my adopted countryfolk an intolerant dismay at
the insensitivity of many incoming English people to the notion that in
Scotland they are actually in a different place. No doubt we all have
examples from our field experience of people who fall over their idiomatic
feet because of their cultural boundary errors, and this kind of insensitivity
or clumsiness is also readily observable among those crossing unfamiliar
status boundaries. Again, the examples are legion and perhaps do not need
to be cited to make the elementary proposition that, as objective referents
of meaning (as opposed to political legitimacy) boundaries are essentially
contestable, while borders are not.

In an intriguing examination of Canadian fiction writing, Russell Brown
has showed how central the border is to Canadian identity. Actually, his
claim is more ambitious: '[T]he border is central to Canada's *self-awareness*'
(1990: 32). Without wishing to be pedantic, I find difficulties in this claim:
countries are not self-aware; people are. If he is saying that the border is
significant in individuals' awareness of themselves as being Canadian, that
is fine. But if he is saying that in so far as individuals are aware of themselves
it is *as* Canadians because the border looms so large, I would have to regard
this with some scepticism; and as a failure to appreciate the complexity of
self-identity. He points to the ubiquity of oppositions as a theme in Canadian

literature, but it does not need a structuralist to point out that there is nothing peculiarly Canadian about this. Any anthropologist with experience of peripheral societies, or of societies in which boundaries are heavily invested symbolically, would have made similar observations — but not because of the *border*: the border is a social fact. Whether or not it signifies difference is a matter of social construction, and is more properly thought of as one of *boundary*. If border is fact, boundary is consciousness, and the difference between them is crucial. I suggest a distinction the significance of which I can only assert but not demonstrate. There is a difference between being conscious of what is on either side of a border, and being preoccupied with the boundary as such. The first, again, implies definity: if I go this way, I will be X; if I go that way, Y. The latter seems to me more authentically boundary-conscious: liminal, uncertain, unpredictable.

It is this kind of uncertainty which drives people to grasp for certainty, and which in turn motivates identity. This may be formulated around a collective stereotype or dogma, such as 'Canada's self-awareness'. Or, it may proceed the other way around, by assimilating such cultural products to self-experience. Writing with respect to the Cerdagne/Cerdanya border, and following Benedict Anderson, Sahlins says that national identity,

> 'appeared less as a result of state intentions than from the local process of adopting and appropriating the nation without abandoning local interests, a local sense of place, or a local identity' (1989: 9. See also *ibid*.: 269-70).

Historically, anthropology has privileged the collective and dogmatic and neglected the individual and experiential, as a consequence of its general neglect of selfhood and self-consciousness. It is a neglect which requires repair if we are really to get to grips with the meanings of boundaries.

II

If we return to ethnicity, we will find that a focus on boundary-consciousness will sensitise us to the kinds of circumstance in which ethnic identity becomes salient, in which people's consciousness of themselves *as* ethnic becomes prominent. The minimal conditions are that people recognise that ignorance of their culture among others acts to their detriment; that they experience the marginalisation of their culture, and their relative powerlessness with respect to the marginalisers [Cohen 1975].

With ignorance of a culture goes the denial of its integrity. Because culture is expressed symbolically, and thus has no fixed meanings, it *is* often invisible to others, especially to powerful others. This denial of, or threat to cultural integrity is experienced by people in all manner of ways: through

the subordination of indigenous languages — say, Tamil to Sinhala; Breton
to French; Catalan and Gallego to Spanish; Welsh and Gaelic (like French,
among Quebecois) to English; through the denigration of their tradition
(the examples are almost limitless — Australian Aborigines; Mongolian
Buryats; Basques); and from the outright denial of their distinctiveness —
say, Armenians and most other nationalities in the former Soviet Union,
sectarian groups in South Asia, and so on.

It does happen, *has* happened historically on a massive scale, that such
continuous denigration seems to drive people into cultural retreat where
they either make their tradition a *covert* matter, or appear to desert it in
large measure. But the historical era in which this retreatist stance prevailed
came to an end emphatically during the later 1960s, and was replaced by an
assertive stance in which the putative stigma of cultural inferiority was
transformed into an emblem of its superiority.

So, from the experiential point of view, the politicisation of cultural
identity requires people to react against their own felt disadvantage and
denigration, as well as occurring in characteristic economic and political
circumstances.

Ethnicity is also a matter of historical genre, and we find ourselves now
in the very middle of its often grim apotheosis. The process of decolonisation
appears to have no objective end to it: its logic is to continue the process
to a kind of infinite federalism. Pierre van den Berghe describes ethnicity
in the industrialised world as, "the last phase of imperial disintegration".
He asks, "if the Fiji Islands can be independent, why not Scotland?" [van
den Berghe 1976]. If Sri Lanka, why not a Tamil state within the island; if
Ethiopia, why not Eritrea (again)? And so on. Almost everywhere one
turns, there is being played out an epic struggle for recognition, for the
acknowledgement of rights, above all, for the acknowledgement of cultural
integrity, expressed now in terms of nationhood, even of statehood.
Nationalism now seems more a matter of iconicity than of political economy;
and as such, is being pressed by nationalist activists onto the consciousnesses
of ethnic group members. In this militant mode, there is the attempt to bring
people's boundary consciousness into alignment with putative political
frontiers.

The imperative need to posit culture as identity, and, increasingly, as
ethnicised national identity, can arise from many different circumstances.
I have mentioned earlier those of a perception of imminent and possibly
cataclysmic crisis; and of the attempt to reverse extreme disadvantage. It
appears also when there is a perceived threat to the distinctiveness of a
group through its assimilation or the blurring of its boundaries, or as the
consequence of internal differentiation or disagreement. One finds then a
politicisation of culture or tradition or whatever putative dogma provides
the *raison d'etre* of the group. The call for a *jihad* to unite nations against
a common enemy, in order to mask the internecine nature of dispute among

them; the spurious elevation of Zionism to the status of religious obligation; and the 'metaphorisation' of culture as a response to such historical circumstances as demographic and economic change, secularisation, integration and vulnerability to new kinds of information.

Ethnicity, nationhood, 'peoplehood', came to be contrived using symbols which can be made by individuals to mean anything, to encompass widely varying kinds of personal experience and material conditions. It would be an unjustifiable generalisation to construe as cynical these representations of identity in somewhat contrived cultural terms: their expression and use may well speak rather of a commitment to the integrity of culture and group. In these cases, it is only by making the culture visible, so to speak, that its bearers can gain some awareness of what they have to defend, and those to whom it is vulnerable can be made aware of what they might otherwise damage, unwittingly or deliberately. So far as indigenes are concerned, the iconisation of culture may be no more than a means of agreeing on a very limited number and range of symbols as a kind of lowest common denominator, which can be interpreted and rendered privately by each of them in ways to suit themselves. Apparent uniformity in the terms of public discourse glosses over an uncountable multitude of divergences of meaning. But for outsiders, it is a caution against their cultural blindness.

For example, the tradition of the Fourth World peoples frequently refers to their incomparably expert use of the land, as either hunters and gatherers, or as pastoralists, which was based on their expert knowledge, and attitudes to the land, both of which are peculiar to the people themselves and are not accessible to outsiders. The reason is quite simple: outsiders cannot see the land in the same way; and, therefore, they cannot know what they are looking at. The cultural boundedness of Australian Aboriginal perception has been amply documented both in ethnography and in fiction. The stereotypical insensitivity of the white to Aboriginal sacred places may be a consequence of contempt in some cases; but is certainly the result of cultural blindness in most. To us a stone is a stone; to the Aboriginal, it conceals an ancestor. Another celebrated example is the blindness of Canadian government scientists to the superior indigenous expertise of Mistassini-Cree Indians in Quebec in monitoring the environment, an expertise underpinned by their cultural rights and obligations with respect to the use and stewardship of land.

Wherever one sees this kind of struggle — whether in Norwegian Saamiland; in the Torres Straits Islands; among Kayapó Indians; in South Asian 'communalism' or in Southern Africa — there seems to be an almost irresistible inclination to explain behaviour by treating it as the product of culture: the Zulus or Yanomamo are said to be warlike or aggressive; some other society might be spoken of as constrained in its thought and action by its cosmology or its kinship system or whatever. There is a fundamental confusion here between culture as a body of substantive fact (which it is

not) and as a body of symbolic form which provides means of expression but does not dictate what is expressed or the meaning of what is expressed. In this respect, culture is insubstantial: searching for it is like chasing shadows. It is not so much that it does not exist, as that it has no ontology: it does not exist apart from what people are conscious of, apart from what they *do*, and therefore what people do cannot be explained as its product. Culture can be invoked as a means of representing them — as, for example, when it is deployed as identity. But in those circumstances it must be regarded in the same way as any other symbolic expression: as being inherently meaningless, but capable of substantiation at the discretion of those who use it — multireferential, multivocal, an infinitely variable tool. It is the consequent diversity of meaning which requires us to make a clear distinction between boundaries in people's consciousness, and the legal representation of their distinction from others through borders or frontiers.

It does not matter whether we use the political scientists' and geographers' taxonomies of border concepts or our own, so long as we do make the distinction between barriers in jurisdictional fact and in the mind. We must do this in order not to fall prey to the comfortable assumption that the nationalities on either side of an international dividing line are co-extensive with discrete cultures which themselves dominate and are replicated through the behaviour of individuals. The meaning of the division is to be sought in the consciousness of those who are oriented to it, not in some abstracted collectivity. Unless we recognise the power and persuasiveness of such boundary consciousness, we cannot begin to understand the attraction to people of ethnicity, nationhood or any other collectivity which claims distinctiveness for itself.

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