Theories of Ethnicity: A Critical Appraisal (Contributions in Sociology)

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Perhaps no aspect of social relations has stirred more academic controversy than the subject of race and ethnicity. Theories that explain the persistence and vitality of the ethnic phenomenon--as well as commentaries on these theories--abound in sociological and anthropological literature. This study is the first, however, to critique the field as a whole. Thompson offers systematic comparisons of current theories, testing both their internal consistency and their adequacy as analytical tools. Thompson's study focuses the debate on ethnicity in a constructive and original fashion.

Thompson devotes a chapter to each of the major theoretical traditions that now dominate the field of ethnicity: sociobiology, primordialism, assimilationism, world-system theory, and neo-Marxism. He describes the basic tenets of each theory and demonstrates that the facts they seek to explain are embedded within their theoretical assumptions. He attributes disagreements among the theories less to differences over facts than to the way they are interpreted within different worldviews arising from divergent philosophical and scientific presuppositions. He shows that it is not possible to critique any theory using the assumptions of another theory, arguing that theories can be internally critiqued based on the relationship between their adequacy as theories and the framework they offer for making normative choices. Thompson's study focuses the debate on ethnicity in a constructive and original fashion. The book will be of interest to scholars, teachers, and students working the areas of race and ethnic relations or theoretical criticism.

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