

Gabriela Popa, PhD researcher
Department of History and Civilization
European University Institute

08 February 2008

Article Review

Rogers Brubaker, 1996: Rethinking nationhood: nation as institutionalized form, practical category, contingent event. In: Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe*. Cambridge University Press, 13-22

There are two ways of reading this chapter, as I see it. On the one hand, it is a critical scrutinization of the analytical tools in studying the nationalisms (i.e. “rethinking nationhood”), continuing the earlier engagements of the author with the prevailing analytical stances in the study of nationalism and attempts to develop alternative analytical resources. On the other hand, it is meant to be an introductory base to a comparative history of the contemporary Eastern European nationalisms with those of the interwar period, both emerging after the breakup of multinational states into nation-states. Thus, the relevance for our project of this chapter is both of conceptual and methodological considerations, as well as of a background for comparative endeavors of post-Soviet and post-Yugoslav nationalisms.

Rogers Brubaker is a sociologist and has published largely on immigration, diasporas and citizenship, nationalism and ethnicity. His theoretical and methodological frame is grounded on Bourdieu’s social theory. To underline the implications and usefulness of the chapter on the further research on nationalism, a brief contextualization of it into the wider work of Brubaker and his links with Pierre Bourdieu’s methodology is needed.

Two main targets of Brubaker’s critique to the current analytical tools in social theory, exemplified though the nationalism studies are *groupism* and *constructivism*. The *groupism* derives from, as Brubaker asserts, the use of *categories of practice* as *categories of analysis*; or what Bourdieu called “our primary inclination to think the social world in a substantialist manner” (cited in Brubaker, 2005). What Brubaker means by “groupism” in the domain of ethnicity, nationalism, and race, is the tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations, and races as substantial entities to which interest and agency can be attributed. (Brubaker, 2005: 417). In this context “categories of practice” are the common sense/ knowledge generated in the mass media, every day practices, official narratives, life stories etc. He argues that these categories belong to our empirical data, not to our analytical toolkit (i.e. “categories of analysis”). Taking this into account, Brubaker proposes to shift away from the use of groups as fundamental units of social analysis to considering groupness as event. In other words, he introduces *time* as an alternative analytical tool to think about nationalisms (ethnicities, etc.)

This shift induces a change in addressing the research questions as well. Brubaker suggests that instead of taking for granted *that* nations (ethnicities) exist, it is more meaningful to pose *why* and *how* questions, and regard the nation as “institutionalized form, practical category, contingent event” (i.e. “how is the nationhood

as a political and cultural for institutionalized within and among states? How does nation work as practical category, as classificatory category, as cognitive form? What makes the use of that category by or against states more or less resonant or effective? What makes the nation-evoking, nation-invoking efforts of political entrepreneurs more or less likely to succeed?" (Brubaker, 1996: 16).

The critique of the *groupism* goes hand in hand with that of the *constructivism*. While asserting that the constructivist approaches to nation are not wrong *per se*, he argues that the "constructed" nature of the nations "is today too obviously right, too familiar, too readily taken for granted, to generate new insights" (Brubaker, 2005). Thus, at a more general level, Brubaker, under considerable influence of Bourdieu, argues that categories taken for granted do not foster a cumulative research and/or enhance intellectual productivity.

In conclusion, although some of the concepts used by Brubaker should be addressed with certain carefulness (for example the use of "political fields", a concept borrowed from Bourdieu, along with that of "*habitus*" is sometimes contested), I have found the reading of the article fruitful in reframing particularly the methodology of examining the perceptions of ordinary people of the official policies of nationalization. Some of the Brubaker's suggestions could help us to think about and frame the concept of "ambiguity" as well, which is one of the main focuses of our common project. But this issue needs a separate, more in depth, further consideration.

Bibliographical references:

Brubaker, Rogers 2005: Ethnicity without Groups. In: Julia Adams, Elisabeth S. Clemens, and Ann Shola Orloff (ed.), *Remaking Modernity. Politics, History, and Sociology*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 470-493.

Brubaker, Rogers 1993: Social Theory as Habitus. In: Craig Calboun, Edward LiPuma and Moshe Postone (eds.), *Bourdieu: Critical Perspective*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 212-235.