Rogers Brubaker: *Ethnicity without Groups*

June Position Paper by Ivona Opetčeska Tatarčevska

The Common Feeling of *Groupism*

To put my research in context, Brubaker, at the beginning of his essay offers a brief review of what *group* is and the senses in which this term might be encountered. Macedonia could offer modern science a new term relative to the notion of identities, that is, COMMUNITY. It is found in the new Macedonian constitution in which the national composition of the Macedonian state is described in the most intricate manner possible. The *members of the majority community*, the new idiotic rhetoric referring to the Macedonian people, consider that this term *community* devalues the state-creating status of Macedonians in their own country.

Brubaker's groupism, implying a materialized entity to which interests and actions are adressed, could be compared to another unique term still in use in Macedonia, although more among the Macedonian diaspora in Australia and Canada. It is the notion of *Nashism* ('ours-ism') promoted by Andrew Rossos[1].

In fact, R. Brubaker considers groupism a tendency of discrete distinction of group/-ings as fundamental constituents of social life, as protagonists in conflicts, as the basic category in social analysis, as opposed to the broader conception of ethnicity.

Brubaker's idea of groupism is to challenge the general tendency of representing the social and cultural world as a multicoloured mosaic of monochromatic ethnic, racial or cultural blocs. This once again refers to Macedonia, where multuculturalism is officially promoted, but the reality is a bicultural contest between the majority and one of the minorities, which we have never figured out precisely what percentage of the population it represents.

Brubaker indicates that this model of groupism is so firmly positioned in the world, not merely in several schools of social theory/analysis, but also in individual approaches such as *rational choice, game theory,* or *agent modelling*, or *cognitive theory, feminist theory,* or *network theory*. And I do hope that Brubaker and I have a terminological understanding as regards his discussion on ethno-methodologies positioning *my* ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology as micro-interactive approaches with thick relations.

In his essay, R. B. has in fact offered us a neat methodological promotion of his scientific approach.

So, in brief, we have discovered constructivists assert that groups are constructed, that they are a fluctuating contingent, while postmodernist diffusionists consider groups to be fragments, erosion of former pure forms and clear boundaries of ethnic research.

---

[1] Rossos, Andrew. *Macedonia and the Macedonians (a History): Studies of Nationalities*, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 2008

In the context of this project, R. Brubaker made me wonder about the wider perspective of my research, its positioning, its definition if you will, that is, about the fundamental postulates, the concepts of the key terms I use in writing my theses.

Since we cannot all come with the same scientific background, Brubaker notified me in a simple yet informative manner that the current predominant approach is constructivism, not only in public policies but also in the media and the academic debates in general.

In this research stage I must stop and think how the *common ethnic feeling according to R. B.* falls into our practice but not our analyitical instruments. The feeling and the opportunity offered by Brubaker to place my scientific discipline within in a wider context of ethno-methodologies, or what Hirschfeld calls folk sociologies, is more than gratifying.

The sufficient evidence of cognitivists referring to the common feeling of ethnic affiliation suggest that certain cognitive social categories, such as ethnicity and race, tend to essentialize and naturalize.

Thus these several categories become carriers of what Smith refers to as "participant's primordiality", or of Medin's "psychological essentialism".

Brubaker's idea that ethnic conflict does not necessarily suggest a conflict between ethnic groups and races is quite true. This thesis was confirmed in Macedonia in 2001. For precisely that reason, due to various constructions, perceptions and interpretations of the conflict, we have not yet formed a clear definition of what had happened to Macedonia in 2001. Hence, seven years later, effective measures cannot be taken in order to resolve the consequences of said situation.

The attempts to balance them out, at least in education and culture, have failed. We are once again in a position of binational operation, within the system of which additional regrouping in another sense takes place. How far might groupism go has been demonstrated by the fact that within Macedonian cultural space the artists have also been grouped according to their affinities towards a certain political option. Thus, an artist publicly advocating a given political party has tacitly been denied the opportunity to work when the opposing party is in power. The same goes for the other national bloc, the Macedonian Albanians.

I find it most interesting for my research work that this groupism has not affected the folk scene in Macedonia. Apart from the *Tanec* ensemble, placed in the category of professional institutions of national significance by the Folklore Department (the one administratively managing activities in the field of traditional dance and music within the Ministry of Culture), the cultural actors in this sphere have not been as polarized as in the others,

Through creating a situation of heroes and victims, Brubaker indicates that reification as a social process should not be criticized. One should, however, seek for the reasons behind the operation of ethnopolitical participants and the terms of their success.

At times, as if the essay describes in detail the constellation of relations and states in which Macedonia has been building its culture. The author has thus offered us some great ideas on how to develop theses, that is, how to methodologically shape our research as well.

Therefore, one could not speak of a Macedonian multicultural model without understanding how and when it was introduced, what the reasons for its introduction were, its results, etc. We thus touch upon the conflict in Macedonia as well, which fundamentaly changed the state composition. The advocates of multiculturalist ideas (the first *benefit*) in Macedonia failed. They had no clear vision, no strategy, and the idea was left to be implemented by the NGO sector while the state cultural and educational politics kept up with their old game only employing a different rhetioric.

I build my attitude towards this text as towards a guideway. I have so far agreed with the simple, comprehensible and academically grounded language of Brubaker who opened up my analytic horizons, a guide with whom I have had an excellent understanding not merely on informative level, but also as regards the scientific approach, so that, as far as I am allowed, I shall conceive my approach following these guidelines.

R. B. has suggested the conception of ethnicity to be more of an advanced discussion: not to regard ethnicity as a concrete, definitive group, but more as grouping and regrouping within a *contigent of events, as a process, as discursive framework within a certain period, as cognitive patterns, as political projects, institutional forms,* that is, as *cultural idioms.*

We would, therefore, need to think of groups and *groupism* (grouping) as a conceptual variable.

Considering his suggested explanations on how to regard ethnicity, nationalism and racism, I am not fully convinced to what extent and in what manner ethnicity, race and nationalism could subsist and operate without the existence of ethnic groups as essential entities.

I have been attempting to find an analogy with Macedonia. Perhaps a good instance of creating groups as a social, cultural or political project would be the new political regrouping of the Torbesh on the Macedonian political scene into political parties (the European Integrations Party - PEI and the European Revival Party - PEO), which have religious grouping in their background.

I might have not been fully informed, but I deem it ingenuous to believe that the Serbian violence in Kosovo was instigated by the KLA. As nextdoor neighbours we feel that it was a project devised a long time ago, which no one dared talk about.

Be that as it may, by viewing groupism as groups/organizations he refuses to realize that ethnic conflicts are created by ethnic groups, but that there are always organizations, in the broadest sense, acting on their behalf, or individuals, lobbyists, formal and informal associations, formations, institutions, organizations, media and networks.

The ambivalence of this whole approach lies in the fact that the connection between these groups and the ethnic groups they are supposedly representing is not always clear. On the contrary, it is so ambiguous that it requires the framing and encoding of the etnic conflict.

We thus arrive at the question of who the actors in the framing and encoding of the so-called ethnic conflict are. He believes them to be journalists, politicians, public figures establishing the frame; that is, as soon as violence is identified as conflict, it is given a framework and afterwards managed through so-called meta-conflicts, or conflicts which do not naturally fall into that category.

By setting up a framework, through current interpretations of the conflict, that is, the violence, one reaches the so-called state of encoding certain parametres into a given conflict, later on reinterpreted, reproduced while, at the very least, old theses are being recreated/recycled to support various interests of the parties involved. The development certainly depends on the modes of perception, interpretation and representation of the social world.

Brubaker himself asks what the purpose of researching ethnicity without the ethnic groups would be, and believes that the critique of groupism involves journalists, researchers, policy makers, etc. He found implications during 5 groupism procedures:

1. The sensitivity of framing the conflict dynamics through which affiliation is generated (or, as Milčo Mančevski in *Before the Rain* would say, choosing sides);

2. The recognition of organization carriers in the ethnic conflicts, their leaders, recognition of their projects, the main purpose of which is group creation;

3. The awareness that political leaders live *off politics* and *for politics*;

4. The sensitivity to variables such as *wanishing, nature calling, contingent*, since they might lead us astray without our analysis even taking note that the group went through a process, that it might have rejected it or entered an *epidemic* stage (as there is an epidemic of albums with folk song covers in Macedonia at the moment), and

5. Finally, the review of ethnicism, nationalism or racism through disaggregation, a crucial critical instrument allowing for consideration of the inner ethnic mechanisms of generating conflicts, including policy making, process monitoring or sanctioning.

Towards the end of his essay R. B. attempts to methodologicaly prove his *groupism* in practice, by employing the empirical example of the Translivanian city of Cluj as opposed to the American practice of equal representation of all groups/categories of citizens at the Pentagon.

The Cluj situation very much resembles the conflict generation in the dormant part of Macedonia, from the Albanian flags case in Gostivar to the series of high-school protests, renamings, etc. His main point was to prove that following several instances of promotion and grouping in an ethnic context in Cluj and Târgu Mureş, the processes declined in the former, while ethnization expanded and enhanced in the latter city.

This is where the analogy between the Macedonian and the Romanian case ends, and the different management of the conflicts begins. The continual new demands made by Macedonian Albanians representatives, the silence regarding certain incidents by Albanian intellectuals, the manifestation of inferiority of the ordinary Macedonian citizen of Albanian origin, or the various levels of disloyalty to the state suggest another long-term goal behind the conflict in Macedonia.

Finally, Brubaker directs us towards a set of questions necessary for the success of this methodological approach.

Reviewing what I have learnt from Brubaker, I feel that I shall often refer to this reading when preparing my working papers.