
Ethnicity without Groups

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For Benjamin and Daniel

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Ethnicity without Groups

Commonsense Groupism

Few social science concepts would seem as basic, even indispensable, as that of group. In disciplinary terms, "group" would appear to be a core concept for sociology, political science, anthropology, demography, and social psychology. In substantive terms, it would seem to be fundamental to the study of political mobilization, cultural identity, economic interests, social class, status groups, collective action, kinship, gender, religion, ethnicity, race, multiculturalism, and minorities of every kind.

Yet despite this seeming centrality, the concept "group" has remained curiously unscrutinized in recent years. There is, to be sure, a substantial social psychological literature addressing the concept (Hamilton et al. 1998; McGrath 1984), but this has had little resonance outside that subdiscipline. Elsewhere in the social sciences, the recent literature addressing the concept "group" is sparse, especially by comparison with the immense literature on such concepts as class, identity, gender, ethnicity, or multiculturalism—topics in which the concept "group" is implicated, yet seldom analyzed on its own terms.¹ "Group" functions as a seemingly unproblematic, taken-for-granted concept, apparently in no need of particular scrutiny or explication. As a result, we tend to take for granted not only the concept "group," but also "groups"—the putative things-in-the-world to which the concept refers.

My aim here is not to enter into conceptual or definitional casuistry. It is rather to address one problematic consequence of the tendency to

take groups for granted in the study of ethnicity, race, and nationhood, and in the study of ethnic, racial, and national conflict in particular. This is what I will call "groupism," by which I mean the tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis.² I mean the tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations, and races as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed. I mean the tendency to reify such groups, speaking of Serbs, Croats, Muslims, and Albanians in the former Yugoslavia, of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, of Jews and Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories, of Turks and Kurds in Turkey, or of Blacks, Whites, Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans in the United States as if they were internally homogeneous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common purposes. I mean the tendency to represent the social and cultural world as a multichrome mosaic of monochrome ethnic, racial, or cultural blocs.

From the perspective of broader developments in social theory, the persisting strength of such groupism is surprising. After all, several distinct traditions of social analysis have challenged the treatment of groups as real, substantial things-in-the-world. These include not only individualistic approaches such as rational choice, game theory, and agent-based modeling, but also network theory, cognitive theory, feminist theory, and densely relational micro-interactionist approaches such as ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. More generally, many constructivist stances treat groups as constructed, contingent, and fluctuating, while a diffuse post-modernist sensibility emphasizes the fragmentary, the ephemeral, and the erosion of fixed forms and clear boundaries. These developments are disparate, even contradictory in analytical style, methodological orientation, and epistemological commitments. Network theory, with its methodological (and sometimes ontological) relationalism (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Wellman 1988) is opposed to rational choice theory, with its methodological (and sometimes ontological) individualism; both are sharply and similarly opposed, in analytical style and epistemological commitments, to post-modernist approaches. Yet these and other developments have converged in problematizing groupness and undermining axioms of stable group being.

Challenges to "groupism," however, have been uneven. They have been striking—to take just one example—in the study of class,

especially in the study of the working class, a term that is hard to use today without quotation marks or some other distancing device. Yet ethnic groups continue to be understood as entities and cast as actors. To be sure, constructivist approaches of one kind or another are now dominant in academic discussions of ethnicity. Yet everyday talk, policy analysis, media reports, and even much ostensibly constructivist academic writing routinely frame accounts of ethnic, racial, and national conflict in groupist terms as the struggles "of" ethnic groups, races, and nations.³ Somehow, when we talk about ethnicity, and even more when we talk about ethnic conflict, we almost automatically find ourselves talking about ethnic groups.

Now it might be asked: "What's wrong with this?" After all, it seems to be mere common sense to treat ethnic struggles as the struggles of ethnic groups, and ethnic conflict as conflict between such groups. I agree that this is the—or at least *a*—commonsense view of the matter. But we cannot rely on common sense here. Ethnic common sense—the tendency to partition the social world into putatively deeply constituted, quasi-natural intrinsic kinds (Hirschfeld 1996)—is a key part of what we want to explain, not what we want to explain things *with*; it belongs to our empirical data, not to our analytical toolkit.⁴ Cognitive anthropologists and social psychologists have accumulated a good deal of evidence about commonsense ways of carving up the social world—about what Lawrence Hirschfeld (1996) has called "folk sociologies." The evidence suggests that some commonsense social categories—and notably commonsense ethnic and racial categories—tend to be essentializing and naturalizing (Rothbart and Taylor 1992; Hirschfeld 1996; Gil-White 1999). They are the vehicles of what has been called a "participants' primordialism" (Smith 1998: 158) or a "psychological essentialism" (Medin 1989). We obviously cannot ignore such commonsense primordialism. But that does not mean we should simply replicate it in our scholarly analyses or policy assessments. As "analysts of naturalizers," we need not be "analytic naturalizers" (Gil-White 1999: 803).

Instead, we need to break with vernacular categories and commonsense understandings. We need to break, for example, with the seemingly obvious and uncontroversial point that ethnic conflict involves conflict between ethnic groups. I want to suggest that ethnic conflict—or what might better be called ethnicized or ethnically framed conflict—need not, and should not, be understood as conflict *between*

ethnic groups, just as racial or racially framed conflict need not be understood as conflict between *rac*es, or nationally framed conflict as conflict between *n*ations.

Participants, of course, regularly do represent ethnic, racial, and national conflict in such groupist, even primordialist terms. They often cast ethnic groups, races, or nations as the protagonists—the heroes and martyrs—of such struggles. This is entirely understandable, and doing so can provide an important resource in social and political struggles. But this does not mean analysts should do the same. We must, of course, take vernacular categories and participants' understandings seriously, for they are partly constitutive of our objects of study. But we should not uncritically adopt *categories of ethnopolitical practice* as our *categories of social analysis*. Apart from the general unreliability of ethnic common sense as a guide for social analysis, we should remember that participants' accounts—especially those of specialists in ethnicity such as ethnopolitical entrepreneurs, who, unlike nonspecialists, may live “off” as well as “for” ethnicity—often have what Pierre Bourdieu has called a *performative* character. By *invoking* groups, they seek to *evoke* them, summon them, call them into being. Their categories are *for doing*—designed to stir, summon, justify, mobilize, kindle, and energize. By reifying groups, by treating them as substantial things-in-the-world, ethnopolitical entrepreneurs can, as Bourdieu notes, “contribute to producing what they apparently describe or designate” (1991c: 220).⁵

Reification is a social process, not simply an intellectual bad habit.⁶ As a social process, it is central to the *practice* of politicized ethnicity. And appropriately so. To criticize ethnopolitical entrepreneurs for reifying ethnic groups would be a kind of category mistake. Reifying groups is precisely what ethnopolitical entrepreneurs are in the business of doing. When they are successful, the political fiction of the unified group can be momentarily yet powerfully realized in practice. As analysts, we should certainly try to *account* for the ways in which—and conditions under which—this practice of reification, this powerful crystallization of group feeling, can work. But we should avoid unintentionally *doubling* or *reinforcing* the reification of ethnic groups in ethnopolitical practice with a reification of such groups in social analysis.⁷

Beyond Groupism

How, then, are we to understand ethnic conflict, if not in commonsense terms as conflict between ethnic groups? And how can we go beyond groupism? Here I sketch eight basic points and then, in the next section, draw out some of their implications. In the final section, I illustrate the argument by considering one empirical case.

Rethinking Ethnicity. We need to rethink not only ethnic conflict, but also what we mean by ethnicity itself. This is not a matter of seeking agreement on a definition. The intricate and ever-recommencing definitional casuistry in studies of ethnicity, race, and nationalism has done little to advance the discussion, and indeed can be viewed as a symptom of the noncumulative nature of research in the field. It is rather a matter of critically scrutinizing our conceptual tools. Ethnicity, race, and nation should be conceptualized not as substances or things or entities or organisms or collective individuals—as the imagery of discrete, concrete, tangible, bounded, and enduring “groups” encourages us to do—but rather in relational, processual, dynamic, eventful, and disaggregated terms. This means thinking of ethnicity, race, and nation not in terms of substantial groups or entities but in terms of practical categories, situated actions, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, discursive frames, organizational routines, institutional forms, political projects, and contingent events. It means thinking of ethnicization, racialization, and nationalization as political, social, cultural, and psychological processes. And it means taking as a basic analytical category not the “group” as an entity but groupness as a contextually fluctuating conceptual variable. Stated baldly in this fashion, these are of course mere slogans; I will try to develop them somewhat more fully in what follows.

The Reality of Ethnicity. To rethink ethnicity, race, and nationhood along these lines is in no way to dispute their reality, minimize their power, or discount their significance; it is to construe their reality, power, and significance in a different way. Understanding the reality of race, for example, does not require us to posit the existence of races. Racial idioms, ideologies, narratives, categories, and systems of classification, and racialized ways of seeing, thinking, talking, and framing claims, are real and consequential, especially when they are embedded in powerful organizations. But the reality of race—and even its overwhelming coercive power in some settings—does not depend on the existence of “races.” Similarly, the reality of ethnicity and

nationhood—and the overriding power of ethnic and national identifications in some settings—does not depend on the existence of ethnic groups or nations as substantial groups or entities.

Groupness as Event. Shifting attention from groups to groupness, and treating groupness as variable and contingent rather than fixed and given,⁸ allows us to take account of—and, potentially, to account for—phases of extraordinary cohesion and moments of intensely felt collective solidarity, without implicitly treating high levels of groupness as constant, enduring, or definitionally present. It allows us to treat groupness as an *event*, as something that “happens,” as E. P. Thompson (1963: 9) famously said about class. At the same time, it keeps us alert to the possibility that groupness may *not* happen, that high levels of groupness may *fail to crystallize*, despite the *group-making efforts of ethnopolitical entrepreneurs*, and even in situations of intense elite-level ethnopolitical conflict. Being analytically attuned to “negative” instances in this way enlarges the domain of relevant cases, and helps correct for the bias in the literature toward the study of striking instances of high groupness, successful mobilization, or conspicuous violence—a bias that can engender an “overethniced” view of the social world, a distorted representation of whole world regions as “seething cauldrons” of ethnic tension (Brubaker 1998b), and an overestimation of the incidence of ethnic violence (Fearon and Laitin 1996; this volume, Chapter 4). Sensitivity to such negative instances can also direct potentially fruitful analytical attention toward the problem of explaining failed efforts at ethnopolitical mobilization.

Groups and Categories. Much talk about ethnic, racial, or national groups is obscured by the failure to distinguish between groups and categories. If by “group” we mean a mutually interacting, mutually recognizing, mutually oriented, effectively communicating, bounded collectivity with a sense of solidarity, corporate identity, and capacity for concerted action, or even if we adopt a less exigent understanding of “group,” it should be clear that a category is not a group.⁹ It is at best a potential basis for group-formation or “groupness.”¹⁰

By distinguishing consistently between categories and groups, we can problematize—rather than presume—the relation between them. We can ask about the degree of groupness associated with a particular category in a particular setting, and about the political, social, cultural, and psychological processes through which categories get invested with groupness (Petersen 1987). We can ask how people—and

organizations—*do things* with categories. This includes limiting access to scarce resources or particular domains of activity by excluding categorically distinguished outsiders,¹¹ but it also includes more mundane actions such as identifying or characterizing oneself or others (Levine 1999; Brubaker et al. 2004) or simply “doing being ethnic” in an ethnomethodological sense (Moerman 1974). We can analyze the organizational and discursive careers of categories—the processes through which they become institutionalized and entrenched in administrative routines (Tilly 1998) and embedded in culturally powerful and symbolically resonant myths, memories, and narratives (Armstrong 1982; Smith 1986). We can study the politics of categories, both from above and from below. From above, we can focus on the ways in which categories are proposed, propagated, imposed, institutionalized, discursively articulated, organizationally entrenched, and generally embedded in multifarious forms of “governmentality.”¹² From below, we can study the “micropolitics” of categories, the ways in which the categorized appropriate, internalize, subvert, evade, or transform the categories that are imposed on them (Domínguez 1986). And drawing on advances in cognitive research, ethnomethodology, and conversation analysis,¹³ we can study the sociocognitive and interactional processes through which categories are used by individuals to make sense of the social world, linked to stereotypical beliefs and expectations about category members,¹⁴ invested with emotional associations and evaluative judgments, deployed as resources in specific interactional contexts, and activated by situational triggers or cues. A focus on categories, in short, can illuminate the multifarious ways in which ethnicity, race, and nationhood can exist and “work” without the existence of ethnic groups as substantial entities. It can help us envision ethnicity without groups.

Group-Making as Project. If we treat groupness as a variable and distinguish between groups and categories, we can attend to the dynamics of *group-making* as a social, cultural, and political project, aimed at transforming categories into groups or increasing levels of groupness (Bourdieu 1991c, 1991d). Sometimes this is done in quite a cynical fashion. Ethnic and other insurgencies, for example, often adopt what is called in French a *politique du pire*, a politics of seeking the worst outcome in the short run so as to bolster their legitimacy or improve their prospects in the longer run. When the small, ill-equipped, ragtag Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) stepped up its attacks

on Serb policemen and other targets in early 1998, for example, this was done as a deliberate—and successful—strategy of provoking massive regime reprisals. As in many such situations, the brunt of the reprisals was borne by civilians. The cycle of attacks and counterattacks sharply increased groupness among both Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, generated greater support for the KLA among both Kosovo and diaspora Albanians, and bolstered KLA recruitment and funding. This enabled the KLA to mount a more serious challenge to the regime, which in turn generated more brutal regime reprisals, and so on. In this sense, group crystallization and polarization were the result of violence, not the cause (Brubaker 1999). The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about the dynamics of the second intifada in Israel and the occupied territories.

Of course, the KLA was not starting from scratch in the late 1990s. It began already with relatively high levels of groupness, a legacy of earlier phases of conflict. The propitious “raw materials” the KLA had to work with no doubt help explain the success of its strategy. Not all group-making projects succeed, and those that do succeed (more or less) do so in part as a result of the cultural and psychological materials they have to work with. These materials include not only, or especially, “deep,” *longue-durée* cultural structures such as the *mythomoteurs* highlighted by Armstrong (1982) and Smith (1986), but also the moderately durable ways of thinking and feeling that represent “middle-range” legacies of historical experience and political action. Yet while such raw materials—themselves the product and precipitate of past struggles and predicaments—constrain and condition the possibilities for group-making in the present, there remains considerable scope for deliberate group-making strategies. Certain dramatic events, in particular, can galvanize group feeling, and ratchet up pre-existing levels of groupness (Laitin 1995b). This is why deliberate violence, undertaken as a strategy of provocation, often by a very small number of persons, can sometimes be an exceptionally effective strategy of group-making.

Groups and Organizations. Although participants’ rhetoric and commonsense accounts treat ethnic groups as the protagonists of ethnic conflict, in fact the chief protagonists of most ethnic conflict—and a fortiori of most ethnic violence—are not ethnic groups as such but various kinds of organizations, broadly understood, and their empowered and authorized incumbents. These include states (or more

broadly autonomous polities) and their organizational components such as particular ministries, offices, law enforcement agencies, and armed forces units; they include terrorist groups, paramilitary organizations, armed bands, and loosely structured gangs; and they include political parties, ethnic associations, social movement organizations, churches, newspapers, radio and television stations, and so on. Some of these organizations may represent themselves, or may be seen by others, as organizations of and for particular ethnic groups.¹⁵ But even when this is the case, organizations cannot be equated with ethnic groups. It is because and insofar as they are organizations, and possess certain material and organizational resources, that they (or more precisely their incumbents) are capable of organized action, and thereby of acting as more or less coherent protagonists in ethnic conflict.¹⁶ Although common sense and participants' rhetoric attribute discrete existence, boundedness, coherence, identity, interest, and agency to ethnic groups, these attributes are in fact characteristic of organizations. The IRA, KLA, and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) claim to speak and act in the name of the (Catholic) Irish, the Kosovo Albanians, and the Kurds of Turkey respectively; but surely analysts must differentiate between such organizations and the putatively homogeneous and bounded groups in whose name they claim to act. The point applies not only to military, paramilitary, and terrorist organizations, of course, but to all organizations that claim to speak and act in the name of ethnic, racial, or national groups—or indeed in the name of any other kind of group (Heisler 1990).

A fuller and more rounded treatment of this theme, to be sure, would require several qualifications that I can only gesture at here. Conflict and violence vary in the degree to which, as well as the manner in which, organizations are involved. What Donald Horowitz (2001) has called the deadly ethnic riot, for example, differs sharply from organized ethnic insurgencies or terrorist campaigns. Although organizations (sometimes ephemeral ones) may play an important role in preparing, provoking, and permitting such riots, much of the actual violence is committed by broader sets of participants acting in relatively spontaneous fashion, and in starkly polarized situations characterized by high levels of groupness. Moreover, even where organizations are the core protagonists, they may depend on a penumbra of ancillary or supportive action on the part of sympathetic nonmembers. The “representativeness” of organizations—the degree

to which an organization can justifiably claim to represent the will, express the interests, and enjoy the active or passive support of its constituents—is enormously variable, not only among organizations, but also over time and across domains. In addition, while organizations are ordinarily the *protagonists* of conflict and violence, they are not always the *objects* or *targets* of conflict and violence. Entire population categories—or putative groups—can be the objects of organized action, even if they cannot easily be the subjects or undertakers of such action.¹⁷ Finally, even apart from situations of violence, ethnic conflict may be at least partly amorphous, carried out not by organizations as such but spontaneously by individuals through such everyday actions as shunning, insults, demands for deference or conformity, or withholdings of routine interactional tokens of acknowledgment or respect (Bailey 1997). Still, despite these qualifications, it is clear that organizations, not ethnic groups as such, are the chief protagonists of ethnic conflict and ethnic violence, and that the relationship between organizations and the groups they claim to represent is often deeply ambiguous.

Framing and Coding. If the *protagonists of ethnic conflict* cannot, in general, be considered ethnic groups, then what makes such conflict count as *ethnic* conflict? And what makes violence count as ethnic violence? The answer cannot be found in the intrinsic properties of behavior. Violence becomes “ethnic” (or “racial” or “nationalist”) through the meanings attributed to it by perpetrators, victims, politicians, officials, journalists, researchers, relief workers, and others. Such acts of framing and narrative encoding do not simply *interpret* the violence; they *constitute it as ethnic*.¹⁸

When an ethnic frame is established, we “see” conflict and violence not only in ethnic, but in groupist terms. Although such perceived groupness does not necessarily reflect what is felt and experienced by participants in an event, a compelling *ex post* framing can exercise a powerful feedback effect, shaping subsequent experience and increasing levels of groupness. A great deal is at stake, then, in struggles over the interpretive framing and narrative encoding of conflict and violence.

Interpretive framing, of course, is often contested. Violence—and more generally, conflict—regularly occasions social struggles to label, interpret, and explain it. Such “metaconflicts” or “conflict[s] over the nature of the conflict,” as Donald Horowitz has called them (1991a: 2), do not simply shadow conflicts from the outside, but are integral parts

of them. To impose a label or prevailing interpretive frame—to cause an event to be seen as a “pogrom” or a “riot” or a “rebellion”—is no mere matter of external interpretation, but a constitutive and often consequential act of social definition (Brass 1996b). Interpretive struggles over the naming and framing of violence therefore merit study in their own right (Brass 1996a, 1997; Abelman and Lie 1995).

How conflict and violence are seen, interpreted, and represented depends significantly on prevailing interpretive frames. Today, ethnic and national frames are readily accessible, powerfully resonant, and widely understood as legitimate. This encourages actors and analysts alike to interpret conflict and violence in ethnic rather than other terms. Analysts are thereby prone to overestimate the incidence of ethnic conflict and violence by “coding” as ethnic instances of conflict or violence that might have been coded in other terms (Bowen 1996; this volume, Chapter 4). Actors, in turn, can take advantage of this coding bias, and of the generalized legitimacy of ethnic and national frames, by strategically using ethnic framing to mask the pursuit of clan, clique, or class interests. The point here is not to suggest that clans, cliques, or classes are somehow more real than ethnic groups, but simply to note the existence of structural and cultural incentives for strategic framing.

Ethnicity as Cognition. These observations about the constitutive significance of coding and framing suggest a final point about the cognitive dimension of ethnicity. Ethnicity, race, and nationhood are fundamentally ways of perceiving, interpreting, and representing the social world. They are not things *in the world*, but perspectives *on the world*.¹⁹ These include ethnicized ways of seeing (and ignoring), of construing (and misconstruing), of inferring (and misinferring), of remembering (and forgetting). They include ethnically oriented frames, schemas, and narratives, and the situational cues—not least those provided by the media—that activate them. They include systems of classification, categorization, and identification, formal and informal. And they include the tacit, taken-for-granted background knowledge, embodied in persons and embedded in institutionalized routines and practices, through which people recognize and experience objects, places, persons, actions, or situations as ethnically, racially, or nationally marked or meaningful.

Cognitive perspectives, broadly understood,²⁰ can help advance constructivist research on ethnicity, race, and nationhood, which has stalled in recent years as it has grown complacent with success. Instead

of simply asserting *that* ethnicity, race, and nationhood are constructed, they can help specify *how they are constructed*. They can help specify how—and when—people identify themselves, perceive others, experience the world, and interpret their predicaments in racial, ethnic, or national rather than other terms. They can help specify how “groupness” can “crystallize” in some situations while remaining latent and merely potential in others. And they can help link macrolevel outcomes with microlevel processes (Hirschfeld 1996).

Implications

At this point a critic might interject: “What is the point of all this? Even if we can study ‘ethnicity without groups,’ why should we? Concepts invariably simplify the world; that the concept of discrete and bounded ethnic groups does so, suggesting something more substantial and clear-cut than really exists, cannot be held against it. The concept of ethnic group may be a blunt instrument, but it’s good enough as a first approximation. This talk about groupness and framing and practical categories and cognitive schemas is all well and good, but meanwhile the killing goes on. Does the critique matter in the real world, or—if at all—only in the ivory tower? What practical difference does it make?”

I believe the critique of groupism does have implications, albeit rather general ones, for the ways in which researchers, journalists, policy-makers, NGOs, and others come to terms, analytically and practically, with what we ordinarily—though perhaps too readily—call ethnic conflict and ethnic violence. Here I would like to enumerate five of these, before proceeding in the final section to discuss an empirical case.

First, sensitivity to framing dynamics, to the generalized coding bias in favor of ethnicity, and to the sometimes strategic or even cynical use of ethnic framing to mask the pursuit of clan, clique, or class interests can alert us to the risk of overethnicized or overly groupist interpretations of (and interventions in) situations of conflict and violence (Bowen 1996). One need not subscribe to a reductionist “elite manipulation” view of politicized ethnicity (Brubaker 1998b) to acknowledge that the “spin” put on conflicts by participants may conceal as much as it reveals, and that the representation of conflicts as conflicts between ethnic or national groups may obscure the interests at stake and the dynamics involved. What is represented as ethnic conflict or

ethnic war—such as the violence in the former Yugoslavia—may have as much or more to do with thuggery, warlordship, opportunistic looting, and black-market profiteering than with ethnicity (Mueller 2000; cf. Kaldor 1999; Collier 2000).

Second, recognition of the centrality of organizations in ethnic conflict and ethnic violence, of the often equivocal character of their leaders' claims to speak and act in the name of ethnic groups, and of the performative nature of ethnopolitical rhetoric, enlisted in the service of group-making projects, can remind us not to mistake groupist rhetoric for real groupness, the putative groups of ethnopolitical rhetoric for substantial things-in-the-world.

Third, awareness of the interest that ethnic and nationalist leaders may have in living off politics, as well as for politics (to borrow the classic distinction of Max Weber [1946: 84]), and awareness of the possible divergence between the interests of leaders and those of their putative constituents, can keep us from accepting at face value leaders' claims about the beliefs, desires, and interests of their constituents.

Fourth, sensitivity to the variable and contingent, waxing and waning nature of groupness, and to the fact that high levels of groupness may be more the result of conflict (especially violent conflict) than its underlying cause, can focus our analytical attention and policy interventions on the processes through which groupness tends to develop and crystallize, and those through which it may subside. Some attention has been given recently to the former, including tipping and cascade mechanisms (Laitin 1995b; Kuran 1998b; this volume, Chapter 4: 107) and mechanisms governing the activation and diffusion of schemas and the "epidemiology of representations" (Sperber 1985; this volume, Chapter 3). But declining curves of groupness have not been studied systematically, although they are just as important, theoretically and practically. Once ratcheted up to a high level, groupness does not remain there out of inertia. If not sustained at high levels through specific social and cognitive mechanisms, it will tend to decline, as everyday interests reassert themselves, through a process of what Weber (in a different but apposite context [1968 (1922):246–54]) called "routinization" (*Veralltäglichung*, literally "towards everydayness").

5) Lastly, a disaggregating, non-groupist approach can bring into analytical and policy focus the critical importance of intra-ethnic mechanisms in generating and sustaining putatively interethnic conflict (this volume, Chapter 4: 98–101). These include in-group "policing," monitoring, or

sanctioning processes (Laitin 1995b); the “ethnic outbidding” through which electoral competition can foster extreme ethnicization (Rothschild 1981; Horowitz 1985); the calculated instigation or provocation of conflict with outsiders by vulnerable incumbents seeking to deflect in-group challenges to their positions; and in-group processes bearing on the dynamics of recruitment into gangs, militias, terrorist groups, or guerrilla armies, including honoring, shaming, and shunning practices, rituals of manhood, intergenerational tensions, and the promising and provision of material and symbolic rewards for martyrs.

Ethnicity at Work in a Transylvanian Town

At this point, I would like to add some flesh to the bare-bones analytical argument sketched above. It is tempting to comment on the United States. It would be easy to score rhetorical points by emphasizing that the “groups” taken to constitute the canonical “ethnoracial pentagon” (Hollinger 1995)—African Americans, Asian Americans, Whites, Native Americans, and Latinos—are (with the partial exception of African Americans) not groups at all but categories, backed by political entrepreneurs and entrenched in governmental and other organizational routines of social counting and accounting (Office of Management and Budget 1994). It would be easy to highlight the enormous cultural heterogeneity within these and other putative “groups,” and the minimal degree of groupness associated with many ethnic categories in the United States (Gans 1979; Heisler 1990).²¹

But rather than take this tack, I will try to address a harder case, drawn from a region that, for a century and a half, has been the locus classicus of ethnic and nationalist conflict. I want to consider briefly how ethnicity works in an East Central European town characterized by continuous and often intense elite-level ethnonational conflict since the fall of communism (and, of course, by a much longer history of ethnonational tension). Here too, I want to suggest, we can fruitfully analyze ethnicity without groups.²²

The setting is the city of Cluj, the main administrative, economic, and cultural center of the Transylvanian region of Romania. Of the approximately 320,000 residents, a substantial minority—just under 20 percent, according to the 2002 Census—identify themselves as Hungarian by ethnocultural nationality.²³ The city has been the site of protracted and seemingly intractable ethnonational conflict since the

collapse of the Ceaușescu regime in December 1989. But this is not, I will argue, best understood as a conflict between ethnic or national groups. To think of it as a conflict between groups is to conflate categories (“Hungarian” and “Romanian”) with groups (“the Hungarians,” “the Romanians”); to obscure the generally low, though fluctuating, degree of groupness in this setting; to mistake the putative groups invoked by ethnonational rhetoric for substantial things-in-the-world; to accept, at least tacitly, that nationalist organizations speak for the “groups” they claim to represent; and to neglect the everyday contexts in which ethnic and national categories take on meaning and the processes through which ethnicity actually “works” in everyday life.

Here, as elsewhere, the protagonists of the conflict have been organizations, not groups. The conflict has pitted the town’s three-term mayor—the flamboyant Romanian nationalist Gheorghe Funar—and the statewide Romanian nationalist parties against the Cluj-based Democratic Alliance of Hungarians of Romania (DAHR), at once a statewide political party with its electoral base in Transylvania and an organization claiming to represent and further the interests of the Hungarian minority in Romania. Rhetoric has been heated on both sides. Mayor Funar has accused Hungary of harboring irredentist designs on Transylvania;²⁴ he has called the DAHR a “terrorist organization”; and he has accused Transylvanian Hungarians of secretly collecting weapons, forming paramilitary detachments, and planning an attack on Romanians. Funar has ordered bilingual signs removed from the few buildings that had them; banned proposed celebrations of the Hungarian national holiday; called for the suspending of Hungarian-language broadcasts on Romanian state television; called for punishment of citizens for displaying the Hungarian flag or singing the Hungarian anthem; and proposed to rename after Romanian personages the few Cluj streets that bear the names of Hungarians.

The DAHR, for its part, is committed to a number of goals that outrage Romanian nationalists.²⁵ It characterizes Hungarians in Romania as an “indigenous community” entitled to an equal partnership with the Romanian nation as a constituent element of the Romanian state—thereby directly challenging the prevailing (and constitutionally enshrined) Romanian understanding of the state as a unitary nation-state such as France. At the same time, it characterizes Transylvanian Hungarians as an “organic part of the Hungarian nation,” and

as such claims the right to cultivate relations with the “mother country” across the border, which leads Romanian nationalists to call into question their loyalty to the Romanian state. It demands collective rights for Hungarians as a national minority, and it demands autonomy, including territorial autonomy, for areas in which Hungarians live as a local majority, thereby raising the specter of separatism in the minds of Romanian nationalists. It demands that Hungarians have their own institutional system in the domain of education and culture—yet that this institutional system should be financed by the Romanian state. It demands the right to public, state-funded education in Hungarian at every level and in every branch of the educational system. It demands the right to take entrance exams to every school and university in Hungarian, even if the school or department to which the student is applying carries out instruction in Romanian. And it demands the reestablishment of an independent Hungarian university in Cluj.

Like ethnic and nationalist organizations everywhere, the DAHR claims to speak for the Hungarian minority in Romania, often characterizing it as a singular entity, “the Hungariandom of Romania” (*a romániai magyarság*). But no such entity exists.²⁶ The many Cluj residents who self-identify as Hungarian are often sharply critical of the DAHR, and there is no evidence that the demands of the DAHR are the demands of “the Hungarians.” On the question of a Hungarian university—the most contentious political issue of the last few years—a survey conducted by a Hungarian sociologist found that a plurality of Hungarian university students in Cluj preferred an autonomous system of Hungarian-language education within the existing university to the DAHR goal of reestablishment of a separate Hungarian university (Magyar-Nándor and Péter 1997). Most Hungarians, like most Romanians, are largely indifferent to politics, and preoccupied with problems of everyday life—problems that are not interpreted in ethnic terms. Although survey data and election results indicate that they vote en bloc for the DAHR, most Hungarians are familiar only in a vague way with the DAHR program. Similarly, there is no evidence that Mayor Funar’s anti-Hungarian views are widely shared by the town’s Romanian residents. When Funar is praised, it is typically as a “good housekeeper” (*bun gospodar*); he is given credit for sprucing up the town’s appearance and for providing comparatively good municipal services. Almost everyone—Romanian and

Hungarian alike—talks about ethnic conflict as something that “comes from above” and is stirred up by politicians pursuing their own interests. The near-universal refrain is that ethnicity is “not a problem.” To be sure, a similar idiom—or perhaps ideology—of everyday interethnic harmony can be found in many other settings, including some deeply divided, violence-plagued ones. So the idiom cannot be taken as evidence of the irrelevance of ethnicity. The point here is simply to underscore the gap between nationalist organizations and the putative “groups” in whose names they claim to speak.

Despite the continuous elite-level ethnopolitical conflict in Cluj since the fall of Ceaușescu, levels of “groupness” have remained low. At no time did Hungarians and Romanians crystallize as distinct, solidary, bounded groups. The contrast with Târgu Mureș, a few hours’ drive to the east, is instructive. In Târgu Mureș, ethnically framed conflict over the control of a high school and over the control of local government in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Ceaușescu intensified and broadened into a generalized conflict over the “ownership” and control of the ethnodemographically evenly divided city. The conflict culminated in mass assemblies and two days of street fighting that left at least six dead and 200 injured. In the days leading up to the violent denouement, categories had become palpable, sharply bounded groups, united by intensely felt collective solidarity and animated by a single overriding distinction between “us” and “them.” The violence itself reinforced this sense of groupness, which then subsided gradually as life returned to normal, and no further Hungarian-Romanian violence occurred, here or elsewhere in Transylvania.

No such crystallization occurred in Cluj. There were, to be sure, a few moments of moderately heightened groupness. One such moment—among Hungarians—occurred when Mayor Funar ordered a new plaque installed on the base of a monumental equestrian statue of Matthias Corvinus, celebrated king of Hungary during the late fifteenth century, in the town’s main square. The statue, erected at the turn of the last century at a moment of, and as a monument to, triumphant Hungarian nationalism, is perceived by many Hungarians as “their own,” and the new plaque deliberately affronted Hungarian national sensibilities by emphasizing the (partly) Romanian origin of Matthias Corvinus and representing him—contrary to the triumphalist image projected by the statue—as having been defeated in battle by “his own nation,” Moldavia (Feischmidt 2001). Another moment

occurred when archeological excavations were begun in front of the statue, again in a manner calculated to affront Hungarian national sensibilities by highlighting the earlier Roman—and by extension, Romanian—presence on the site. A third moment occurred in March 1998, when Mayor Funar tried to bar Hungarians from carrying out their annual 15 March celebration commemorating the revolution of 1848, this year's celebration, in the sesquicentennial year, having special significance.²⁷ A final moment occurred in June 1999 at the time of a much-hyped soccer match in Bucharest between the national teams of Romania and Hungary. In Cluj, the match was televised on a huge outdoor screen in the main square; some fans chanted "*Afară, afară, cu Ungurii din țară!*" (out, out, Hungarians out of the country!) and vandalized cars with Hungarian license plates.²⁸

In each of these cases, groupness—especially among Hungarians, though in the final case among Romanians as well—was heightened, but only to a modest degree, and only for a passing moment. The first event occasioned a substantial but isolated Hungarian protest, the second a smaller protest, the third some concern that the commemoration might be broken up (in the event it proceeded without serious incident), and the last some moments of concern for those who happened to be in the town center during and immediately after the soccer match. But even at these maximally grouplike moments, there was no overriding sense of bounded and solidary groupness for those not immediately involved in the events.²⁹ What is striking about Cluj in the 1990s, in short, is that groupness failed to happen.

To note the relatively low degree of groupness in Cluj, and the gap between organizations and the putative groups they claim to represent, is not to suggest that ethnicity is somehow not "real" in this setting, or that it is purely an elite phenomenon. Yet to understand how ethnicity works, it may help to begin not with "the Romanians" and "the Hungarians" as groups, but with "Romanian" and "Hungarian" as categories. Doing so suggests a different set of questions than those that come to mind when we begin with "groups." Starting with groups, one is led to ask what groups want, demand, or aspire towards; how they think of themselves and others; and how they act in relation to other groups. One is led almost automatically by the substantialist language to attribute identity, agency, interests, and will to groups. Starting with categories, by contrast, invites us to focus on processes and relations rather than substances. It invites us to specify how people

and organizations do things with, and to, ethnic and national categories; how such categories are used to channel and organize processes and relations; and how categories get institutionalized, and with what consequences. It invites us to ask how, why, and in what contexts ethnic categories are used—or not used—to make sense of problems and predicaments, to articulate affinities and affiliations, to identify commonalities and connections, to frame stories and self-understandings.

Consider here just two of the many ways of pursuing a category-centered rather than a group-centered approach to ethnicity in Cluj. First, a good deal of commonsense cultural knowledge about the social world and one's place in it, here as in other settings, is organized around ethnonational categories.³⁰ This includes knowledge of one's own and others' ethnocultural nationality, and the ability to assign unknown others to ethnonational categories on the basis of cues such as language, accent, name, and sometimes appearance. It includes knowledge of what incumbents of such categories are like,³¹ how they typically behave, and how ethnonational category membership matters in various spheres of life. Such commonsense category-based knowledge shapes everyday interaction, figures in stories people tell about themselves and others, and provides ready-made explanations for certain events or states of affairs. For Hungarians, for example, categorizing an unknown person as Hungarian or Romanian may govern how one interacts with him or her, determining not only the language but also the manner in which one will speak, a more personal and confidential (*bizalmas*) style often being employed with fellow Hungarians. Or for Romanians, categorizing two persons speaking Hungarian in a mixed-language setting as Hungarian (rather than, for example, as friends who happen to be speaking Hungarian) provides a ready-made explanation for their conduct, it being commonsense knowledge about Hungarians that they will form a *bisericuța* (clique, literally: small church) with others of their kind, excluding co-present Romanians, whenever they have the chance. Or again for Hungarians, categorically organized commonsense knowledge provides a ready-made framework for perceiving differential educational and economic opportunities as structured along ethnic lines, explaining such differentials in terms of what they know about the bearing of ethnic nationality on grading, admissions, hiring, promotion, and firing decisions, and justifying the commonly voiced opinion that "we [Hungarians] have to work twice as hard" to

get ahead. These and many other examples suggest that ethnicity is, in important part, a cognitive phenomenon, a way of seeing and interpreting the world, and that, as such, it works in and through categories and category-based commonsense knowledge.

Ethnic categories shape institutional as well as informal cognition and recognition. They not only structure perception and interpretation in the ebb and flow of everyday interaction but channel conduct through official classifications and organizational routines. Thus ethnic (and other) categories may be used to allocate rights, regulate actions, distribute benefits and burdens, construct category-specific institutions, identify particular persons as bearers of categorical attributes, "cultivate" populations, or, at the extreme, "eradicate" unwanted "elements."³²

In Cluj—as in Romania generally—ethnic categories are not institutionalized in dramatic ways. Yet there is one important set of institutions built, in part, around ethnic categories. This is the school system.³³ In Cluj, as in other Transylvanian cities, there is a separate Hungarian-language school system paralleling the mainstream system, and running from preschool through high school. These are not private schools, but part of the state school system. Not all persons identifying themselves as Hungarian attend Hungarian schools, but most do (85 to 90 percent in grades 1 through 4, smaller proportions, though still substantial majorities, in later grades).³⁴ In Cluj, moreover, there are also parallel tracks at the university level in many fields of study.

Categories need ecological niches in which to survive and flourish; the parallel school system provides such a niche for "Hungarian" as an ethnonational category. It is a strategically positioned niche. Hungarian schools provide a legitimate institutional home and a protected public space for the category; they also generate the social structural foundations for a small Hungarian world within the larger Romanian one. Since the schools shape opportunity structures and contact probabilities, and thereby influence friendship patterns (and, at the high school and university level, marriage patterns as well), this world is to a considerable extent self-reproducing. Note that the (partial) reproduction of this social world—an interlocking set of social relationships linking school, friendship circles, and family—does not require strong nationalist commitments or group loyalties. Ethnic networks can be reproduced without high degrees of groupness, largely through the logic of contact probabilities and opportunity structures and the resulting moderately high degrees of ethnic endogamy.³⁵

This brief case study has sought to suggest that even in a setting of intense elite-level ethnic conflict and (by comparison to the United States) deeply rooted and stable ethnic identifications, one can analyze the workings of ethnicity without employing the language of bounded groups.

Conclusion

What are we studying when we study ethnicity and ethnic conflict? I have suggested that we need not frame our analyses in terms of ethnic groups, and that it may be more productive to focus on practical categories, situated actions, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, common-sense knowledge, organizational routines and resources, discursive frames, institutionalized forms, political projects, contingent events, and variable groupness. It should be noted in closing, however, that by framing our inquiry in this way, and by bringing to bear a set of analytical perspectives not ordinarily associated with the study of ethnicity—cognitive theory, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, network analysis, organizational analysis, and institutional theory, for example—we may end up not studying ethnicity at all. It may be that “ethnicity” is simply a convenient—though in certain respects misleading—rubric under which to group phenomena that, on the one hand, are highly disparate, and, on the other, have a great deal in common with phenomena that are not ordinarily subsumed under the rubric of ethnicity.³⁶ In other words, by raising questions about the unit of analysis—the ethnic group—we may end up questioning the domain of analysis: ethnicity itself. But that is an argument for another occasion.