

Remarks on Brubaker: Ethnicity without groups

1) 'Groupism'

Construing an 'ism' could be a first practical step if you want to successfully fight with some theoretical 'enemies'. Brubaker's vivid portrayal of 'groupism' (the “tendency to represent the social and cultural world as a multichrome mosaic of monochrome ethnic, racial and cultural blocks”) is like depicting a theoretical target before shooting on it. However, after the identification of the 'enemy' he is trying to justify the homicide by giving a satisfying answer to the question 'what's wrong with 'groupism'?'. According to Brubaker, “ethnic common sense” is wrong, because it “is a key part of what we want to explain, not what we want to explain things *with*; it belong to our analytical data, not to our analytical toolkit.”

What's wrong with the Brubaker's answer? Nothing is wrong, except that it is an answer to an obvious common sense question “What's wrong with...?”. Is it possible to avoid common sense answers by asking common sense questions? Is it possible to avoid common sense concepts like “ethnic groups” in theory, as suggested by the title of the chapter?

2) Beyond 'groupism'

Brubaker is suggesting eight basic answers to the question 'How can we go beyond groupism?':

- by 'rethinking ethnicity' (not as a substance, as a thing, or an entity or organism, but “in relational, processual, dynamic, eventful, and disaggregated terms”, “in terms of practical categories, situated actions, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, discursive frames, organizational routines, institutional forms, political projects, and contingent events.”) 'Groupness' as “a contextually fluctuating conceptual variable” - a basic analytical category, instead of the 'group' as an entity.
- by realizing that “The reality of ethnicity and nationhood ... does not depend on the existence of ethnic groups or nations as substantial groups or entities.” (p. 12)
- by treating 'groupness' as an event, as something that happens;
- by distinguishing 'group' and 'category' ('a potential basis for group-formation or “groupness”). According to him, by studying the politics of categories, both from above and from below (p. 13) we can “envision ethnicity without groups”.
- by studying “the dynamics of *group-making* as a social, cultural, and political project, aimed at transforming categories into groups or increasing level of groupness”. (Here, Brubakers points that more often “group crystallization and polarization were the result of violence, not the cause”, which is vividly illustrated by the KLA case in which deliberate violence was used as an effective strategy of group-making).

- By distinguishing “groups” and “organizations” as principal agents of the conflict (“the chief protagonists of most ethnic conflict”) and recognizing that “the relationships between organizations and groups they claim to represent is often deeply ambiguous.” (p. 16)
- by focusing on “framing and coding”, especially on “struggles over the interpretative framing and narrative encoding of conflict and violence”, on “meta-conflicts” (conflicts over the nature of the conflict) as integral part of the conflict and coding biases (“using ethnic framing to mask the pursuit of clan, clique, or class interests” (p. 17).

The last, and the most interesting answer to the question 'How can we go beyond groupism?' lies in the subsection 'Ethnicity as Cognition'. According to Brubaker:

“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.” (p. 17)

Cognitive perspectives on ethnicity, as delineated by Brubaker, were the main benefit for my constructivist approach to national symbols and identities. As a matter of fact, “the second order” language proposed by Brubaker could be very helpful in answering *how* ethnicity is constructed and how “people identify themselves, perceive others, experience the world, and interpret their predicament in racial, ethnic, or national rather than other terms” (p. 18).

Unfortunately, it was very hard to me to realize how Brubaker's poorly elaborated rethinking of “ethnicity as cognition” could help us to specify “how 'groupness' can 'crystallize' in some situations” as well as to help us linking “macrolevel outcomes with microlevel processes” (which is crucial for our project).

3) Implications

Brubaker is again familiar with common sense, when he is asking the common sense questions “What is the point of all this” and why should we have to study ethnicity without groups.

Concerned about the practical consequences of his theoretical approach, he is offering five different implications of his critique of groupism. According to Brubaker:

- “sensitivity to framing dynamics, to the generalized coding bias in favor of ethnicity” can help us to reveal the “real interest” behind groupist interpretations of conflict and violence. Here, Brubaker is suggesting that violence in the former Yugoslavia, represented as ethnic conflict or ethnic war, “may have as much or more to do with thuggery, warlordship, opportunistic looting, and black-market profiteering than with ethnicity” (p. 19).
- Recognition of the centrality of organizations in “ethnic conflicts and ethnic violence... can remind us not to mistake groupist rhetoric for real groupness...” (p. 19). It is not clear why Brubaker is still using the terms “ethnic conflict and ethnic violence” if, usually, there are

other equally or more important interests masked with the ethnopolitical groupist rhetorics endorsed by particular organisations.

- “awareness of the possible divergence between the interest of leaders and those of their putative constituences, can keep us from accepting at face value leaders' claims about the beliefs, desires, and interests of their constituents” (p. 19). Brubaker is very naïve if he believes that his critique of groupism can be more helpful in identifying and unmasking the political manipulation by way of ethnopolitical rhetoric, than, for example, a critical discourse analysis of the ethnopolitical rhetoric or some other strategy.

- We should focus our “analytical attention and policy interventions on the processes through which groupness tends to develop and crystallize” because “high level of groupness may be more the result of conflict (especially violent conflict) than its underlying cause”. At least for me, the expression “declining curves of groupness” sounds very attractive. I will certainly use this expression in some footnote in the historical part of my paper about the national flags as superconductors of “groupness”.

- Intra-ethnic mechanism (in-group “policing”, monitoring, or sanctioning processes...) are of critical importance “in generating and sustaining putatively interethnic conflict”. Especially relevant in Macedonian case is what is described as “ethnic outbidding”, manifest in the last electoral campaign, where the main outburst of violence (physical or psychological) happened between the political parties within “the ethnic Albanian camp” and within “the ethnic Macedonia camp”.

4) “Ethnicity at work in a Transilvanian Town”

In this section, Brubaker is trying to illustrate how his theoretical framework could be employed in the case study of Cluj. According to his conclusion, “even in a setting of intense elite-level ethnic conflict and (...) deeply rooted and stable ethnic identifications, one can analyse the workings of ethnicity without employing the language of bounded groups”. However, even if I will accept that his category-centered approach to ethnicity is successful in this particular case, it does not follow that “ethnicity without groups” will work in each particular case, especially in the cases of “groupness” crystallized not as a result of violence, but as a result of a political manipulations with national symbols.

5) Conclusion

“...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.”

By re-framing of our inquiry we could end up studying something else than “ethnicity”?!?

How is it possible to end up with such a conclusion from the premise that ethnicity is a way of perceiving, interpreting, and representing the social world?

If “ethnicity” is misleading rubric, then it should be considered as a part of our “common sense”, not as a part of our analytical vocabulary. **“But that is an argument for another occasion.”**

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