

Ethnicity, Race, and Nationalism

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Abstract

This article traces the contours of a comparative, global, cross-disciplinary, and multiparadigmatic field that construes ethnicity, race, and nationhood as a single integrated family of forms of cultural understanding, social organization, and political contestation. It then reviews a set of diverse yet related efforts to study the way ethnicity, race, and nation work in social, cultural, and political life without treating ethnic groups, races, or nations as substantial entities, or even taking such groups as units of analysis at all.

The scholarship on ethnicity, race, and nationalism has become unsurveyably vast. Numerous articles in the various social science *Annual Reviews* have addressed particular themes, problems, and strands of research in this domain.¹ Clearly, any review must be ruthlessly selective. I focus on two trends of the past two decades (though both have older roots). The first is the emergence of an integrated interdisciplinary field of study embracing ethnicity, race, and nationalism in all the varied forms they have assumed in different times and places. The second is the development of a set of analytic resources for studying the way ethnicity, race, and nation work in social, cultural, and political life without treating ethnic groups, races, or nations as substantial entities, or even taking such groups as units of analysis at all.

TOWARD AN INTEGRATED FIELD OF STUDY

The literature on ethnicity, race, and nations and nationalism was long fragmented and compartmentalized. Ethnicity and ethnopolitics; race, racism, and racial politics; and nationhood and nationalism were largely separate fields of study. The literature was fragmented along disciplinary lines as well: There was relatively little cross-fertilization between work in sociology, anthropology, political science, and history, and still less between these and other disciplines such as archaeology, linguistics, economics, and disciplines in the humanities. Finally, the literature was fragmented along regional lines: There was little sustained comparative work and often little awareness of cross-regional variation in understandings and configurations of ethnicity, race, and nationhood. Much of the literature produced in and on the United States, in

particular, was strikingly parochial (Wacquant 1997, pp. 223–24).

This pattern of fragmentation persists in many respects; in some ways, it has even become more pronounced. In part, fragmentation is an unavoidable consequence of the explosion of work on ethnicity, race, and nationalism. Moreover, even as disciplinary compartmentalization has weakened, what might be called paradigmatic compartmentalization has not: discourse-analytic, game-theoretic, institutionalist, political economic, evolutionary psychological, ethnosymbolist, cognitive, network-analytic, and agent-based modeling-oriented work are all, to varying degrees, interdisciplinary undertakings; but apart from a few relatively proximate pairings, there is minimal cross-fertilization among these enterprises. And while the institutionalization of African American studies and other ethnic studies programs in the United States has helped overcome disciplinary boundaries, it has reinforced a group-based compartmentalization.

Yet while fragmentation and compartmentalization persist, a growing body of work has reframed the study of ethnicity, race, and nationalism in broader and more integrated terms. This has generated a new field of study that is *comparative*, *global*, *cross-disciplinary*, and *multi-paradigmatic*, and that construes ethnicity, race, and nationhood as a *single integrated family of forms* of cultural understanding, social organization, and political contestation. This section traces the contours of this new field, addressing each of these characteristics in turn.

In the first place, the field is both expressly and implicitly *comparative*. Following the trail blazed by the pioneering comparative studies of Geertz (1963), Schermerhorn (1970), Degler (1971), Van den Berghe (1978 [1967]), Fredrickson (1981), Banton (1983), Horowitz (1985), Hroch (1985), and others, a growing body of comparative work has taken as its units of analysis not only countries (see inter alia Brubaker 1992, Greenfeld 1992, Lustick 1993, Vujacic 1996, Laitin 1998, Marx 1998, Yashar 1999, Centeno 2002, Wimmer 2002, Ron 2003, Joppke 2005, Kalyvas & Kocher 2007,

¹A selective list of only the most wide ranging of these in the last quarter century would include Olzak (1983), Yinger (1985), B. Williams (1989), Foster (1991), Calhoun (1993), Alonso (1994), R. Williams (1994), Harrison (1995), Brubaker & Laitin (1998), Kohl (1998), Nagel (2000), Winant (2000), Friedland (2001), Sanders (2002), and Chandra (2006).

Posner 2007, Özkirimli & Sofos 2008, Wacquant 2008) but also empires, world regions, and civilizations (Armstrong 1982, Breuilly 1993); regions, provinces, or states within federal polities (Beissinger 2002, Chandra 2004, Wilkinson 2004); cities (Friedland & Hecht 1998, Varshney 2002); ethnoracial, ethnoreligious, and ethnolinguistic groups (Horowitz 2001, chapter 5; Alba & Nee 2003); and historical epochs (Smith 1986, Anderson 1991, Brubaker 1996).

Apart from such expressly comparative work, there is a further sense in which the field is comparative. Even those who are not comparativists per se have become increasingly aware of the broad spectrum of variation in the social organization and political expression of ethnicity, race, and nation; and this awareness has informed the ways in which they construe the field, pose questions, and frame arguments. This comparative awareness is evident in the framing of a number of sophisticated overviews or surveys (Rothschild 1981, Smith 1986, Eriksen 1993, Banks 1996, Jenkins 1997, Cornell & Hartmann 1998, Fenton 1999). But it is also evident even in the case study literature (Hechter 1975, Verdery 1983, Gorski 2000, King 2002, Brubaker et al. 2006). Loveman's (2001) account of race and nation-building in Brazil, for example, is informed by a broad comparative understanding of differing ways in which race has been understood and institutionalized in the Americas—a useful corrective to the tendency of some earlier work on Brazil to take U.S. understandings of race as the norm and to ask why “blacks” in Brazil have failed to pursue “their” interests (Loveman 1999a).

Second, the field is *global*. By global I do not mean that the field covers all world regions, although it does in fact do so. I mean rather that the field is increasingly informed by an understanding of the world as a single integrated social, economic, political, and cultural space. Varying configurations of ethnic, racial, and national classification, social organization, and national claims-making are increasingly understood to have been generated by structural and cultural transformations

that have been global in scope, though regionally differentiated in their effects. Structural transformations include the European colonization of the non-European world (van den Berghe 1981, chapter 5; Rex 1986, chapter 3); the Atlantic slave trade (Fredrickson 1981, Curtin 1998); the rise of the modern capitalist and industrial economy (Gellner 1983); the global circulation of labor, free, semifree, and coerced; the rise of the centralized territorial state, employing direct rather than indirect rule (Hobsbawm 1990, chapter 3; Breuilly 1993, Tilly 1996, Hechter 2000); and the replacement of colonial empires by putatively national post-colonial states (Geertz 1963, Wimmer & Min 2006).

In addition to analyzing these global structural transformations and their consequences, scholars have traced the global diffusion and local rearticulation of cultural understandings of ethnicity, race, and nation and of templates of organization and claims-making informed by these understandings. Diffusion and international cultural modeling have been particularly strong themes in the literature on nationalism, characterized by Calhoun (1997) as a quintessentially international discourse. Anderson's (1991, p. 81) argument about the “modular” manner in which nationalist models were “made available for pirating” has been particularly influential, though it was criticized by Chatterjee (1993) for downplaying the creative contributions of intellectuals to the articulation of distinctive national self-understandings (these contributions have been explored by Herzfeld 1982, Verdery 1991, Giesen 1998, Suny & Kennedy 1999, and Boyer & Lomnitz 2005; for a critical reformulation of the notion of modularity, see Goswami 2002). Work on religious nationalism has highlighted the diffusion and adaptation of motifs of chosenness and covenant (Gorski 2000, Smith 2003). New institutionalist work has offered a different take on the diffusion of powerfully authoritative models of nation-statehood (Meyer 1987, 1999). Another body of work has traced the origins and development of ideas of race (Banton 1977, 1987), including the process of

adaptation and rearticulation of racial and racist idioms in non-Western settings such as East Asia, through which cultural intermediaries “endowed foreign cultural repertoires with indigenous meanings” (Dikötter 1997, p. 6).

The global social, economic, political, and cultural transformations that have shaped configurations of ethnicity, race, and nationalism are of course ongoing. Recent transformations include the development of communications and transportation infrastructures that facilitate the establishment and maintenance of trans-border ties and thus encourage diasporic and transnational modes of identification and organization; the development and popularization of new forms of genetic self-understanding; the diffusion and institutionalization of notions of human rights and, more recently, multiculturalism, both of which impose limits on models of unitary and sovereign nation-statehood; and the diffusion of ideas of indigeneity and of associated models of organization and claims-making (Bowen 2000, Niezen 2000, Igoe 2006, Tsing 2007).

On some accounts, these ongoing structural and cultural transformations point in the direction of a postnational (Soysal 1994; Appadurai 1996, chapter 8), postethnic (Hollinger 1995), or postracial (Gilroy 2000, Foster & Sharp 2004) future. But the reconfiguration of ethnicity, race, and nation as idioms of cultural understanding, modes of social organization, and patterns of political claims-making is more plausible than their supersession. Thus scholars have analyzed the emergence of trans-border forms of nationhood and nationalism (Anderson 1998, chapter 3; Glick Schiller 2005; Joppke 2005; see also R. Brubaker & J. Kim, unpublished manuscript); multicultural forms of nationalism and national self-understanding (Brown 2005); diasporic forms of ethnicity, race, and nationhood (Clifford 1994, Tölölyan 1996, Brubaker 2005); and the “genetic reinscription of race” (El-Haj 2007).

Third, the field is *interdisciplinary*. This has both an institutional and an intellectual aspect. Institutionally, in this as in other fields, there has been a striking growth of interdisciplinary

journals, academic programs, research projects, and research centers, reflecting the weakening role of disciplines in organizing intellectual life, the changing intellectual horizons and orientations of scholars, and the shifting priorities and agendas of foundations and other funding agencies. In this as in other fields, to be sure, many ostensibly interdisciplinary undertakings involve parallel discipline-bound projects with little cross-disciplinary conversation or cross-fertilization. Yet there are also examples of sustained interdisciplinary collaboration (Friedland & Hecht 1998, Wodak et al. 1999, Brubaker et al. 2006) and of interdisciplinary work by individual scholars. It is not accidental that so many of the leading scholars in the field have moved easily across disciplinary boundaries, as exemplified in influential work by Deutsch (1953), Geertz (1963), Rothschild (1981), Gellner (1983), Verdery (1983), Horowitz (1985), Smith (1986), Hobsbawm (1990), Hirschfeld (1996), Calhoun (1997), Jenkins (1997), Laitin (1998), and Wimmer (2002).

In recent years, the range of interdisciplinary work has expanded. The borderlands between sociology, history, political science, anthropology, political theory, and psychology have been well traveled; but scholars must increasingly range further afield. Recent interdisciplinary work has involved forays into pharmacogenomics (Foster 2003); evolutionary psychology (James & Goetze 2001, McElreath et al. 2003); sociolinguistics (Gal 1989); archeology (Kohl 1998); cognitive neuroscience (Phelps & Thomas 2003); experimental economics (Bouckaert & Dhaene 2004); and biomedicine (Epstein 2007).

Fourth, the field is *multiparadigmatic*. This is a more incipient development than the others I have sketched; the characterization I offer here is therefore more tentative. By multiparadigmatic I do not mean simply that ethnicity, race, and nationalism are studied from a wide range of paradigmatic perspectives. This is of course true, but it is not new. And insofar as work is fragmented along paradigmatic lines—insofar as paradigmatic incommensurability leads

scholars committed to different paradigms to talk past one another or simply to ignore each other's work—then one cannot speak of an *integrated* multiparadigmatic field.

Still, one can discern the outlines of such an emerging field. It is based on the recognition (already noted by Weber 1978, pp. 394–95) of the enormous range and heterogeneous causal texture of the phenomena subsumed under the broad rubrics of race, ethnicity, and nationalism. Brubaker & Laitin (1998), for example, underscore the heterogeneity of the processes, mechanisms, and dynamics involved in what is often misleadingly labeled “ethnic violence”; Brubaker (2004a, p. 27; 2006, pp. 357–62) makes a similar argument about ethnicity and nationalism more generally. This heterogeneity requires the conjoint use of theoretical resources drawn from a variety of traditions and warrants skepticism about any project of constructing a single unified theory of ethnicity, race, and nationalism (for such skepticism, see inter alia Calhoun 1997, p. 8; Fenton 2003, pp. 179–180; Day & Thompson 2004, pp. 197–98). Anderson (1991) integrates culturalist, political-institutional, and economic perspectives in his account of the origins and spread of nationalism. Laitin (1998) draws on ethnographic portraits, large-N surveys, discourse analysis, a macrohistorical account of state formation, a sociolinguistic experiment, and game-theoretic modeling of individual choice in his account of processes of identity formation among Russian-speaking minorities in Soviet successor states. Brubaker et al. (2006) seek to integrate microinteractional, meso-institutional, and macropolitical perspectives in their account of nationalist politics and everyday ethnicity in a Transylvanian town. These authors (with the partial exception of Laitin 1998) do not attempt to subsume these multiple perspectives into a single higher-order theoretical framework; the perspectives or paradigms they seek to integrate retain their individuality and distinctiveness. The challenge, of course, is to go beyond a casual eclecticism toward an integrated division of explanatory labor by specifying the nature of the

interface between processes governed by differing logics or unfolding on different temporal or spatial scales.

Finally, the emerging field treats race, ethnicity, and nationalism as belonging to a *single integrated domain*. This remains a contested position, at least with respect to the integration of race and ethnicity. Some scholars continue to argue for the categorical distinctiveness of race and for studying race, racism (Mason 1994), “racialized social systems” (Bonilla-Silva 1997, p. 469; 1999, pp. 902–3), or “racial formations” (Omi & Winant 1994, Winant 2000) on their own as phenomena with their own structures and dynamics, sharply distinct from those of ethnicity and nationalism (see also Harrison 1995, Sanjek 1996).

Following the lead of such scholars as Geertz (1963, pp. 106–13), Wallman (1978, pp. 202–5), Rothschild (1981, pp. 86–96), and Horowitz (1985, pp. 41–51), however, the work I focus on here construes the field more broadly (Anthias 1992; Eriksen 1993, pp. 4–6; Jenkins 1997; Wade 1997, pp. 19–21; Cornell & Hartmann 1998; Loveman 1999b; Miles & Brown 2003; Brubaker 2004a; Wimmer 2008). Some of these scholars do distinguish between race and ethnicity (e.g., Jenkins 1997, pp. 23–24, 83; Cornell & Hartmann 1998, pp. 15–34; Miles & Brown 2003, chapter 4), but they do not treat the distinction as a hard and fast one; they emphasize rather the extensive overlapping and blurring between the two.

Distinctions between race and ethnicity tend to focus on the following elements, singly or in combination (as summarized by Banton 1983, pp. 9–10, 104; Jenkins 1997, pp. 21–24, 74–75, 80–82; and Bonilla-Silva 1999, pp. 902–3): Race is said to be involuntary, ethnicity voluntary; race to be a matter of external categorization, ethnicity of internal self-identification; race to be based on differences of phenotype or nature, ethnicity on differences of culture; race to be rigid, ethnicity flexible; race to involve super- and subordinate, ethnicity coordinate groups; race to arise from processes of exclusion, ethnicity from processes of inclusion; race to have grown out of the European colonial encounter

with the non-European world, ethnicity out of the history of nation-state formation.

As a number of scholars (Jenkins 1997, pp. 23, 74–82; Cornell & Hartmann 1998, pp. 31–34) have observed, however, none of these criteria allows a sharp, clean distinction between phenomena we ordinarily associate with race and ethnicity. People may voluntarily identify with ostensibly racial categories and resist attempts to downplay them; conversely, external categorization is central to what is ordinarily considered ethnicity in many settings. “Racial” differences are in some instances based on ancestry, way of life, or even class rather than on phenotype; conversely, phenotypical differences are often implicated in “ethnic” categorization. “Racial” categories are sometimes flexible, and “ethnic” categories sometimes rigid. “Racial” categories may be coordinate, “ethnic” categories super- and subordinate. “Racial” categories may be invoked in struggles for inclusion, “ethnic” categories in processes of exclusion. Some “racial” categories have histories largely independent of European colonial expansion (Dikötter 1997). As Loveman (1999b, pp. 894–95) has suggested, following Wacquant (1997), analytical distinctions between race and ethnicity are often weakened by being based on commonsense understandings prevalent at particular times in the United States.

The difficulty of distinguishing sharply between race and ethnicity does not mean that one should treat race, ethnicity, and nationalism as an undifferentiated domain. Distinctions can be drawn on a number of dimensions, but these do not map neatly onto conventional distinctions between race, ethnicity, and nation. A partial list of significant dimensions of variation would include the following, grouped for expository purposes into clusters focused on categorization and membership, social organization, and political action:

1. Categorization and membership

- Criteria and indicia of membership (Horowitz 1975, p. 119): What is the relative importance of ancestry, phenotype, dress and adornment,

language, culture, way of life, citizenship, or other factors as defining traits (criteria) or cues (indicia) of membership? And how are the features that are understood as constitutive or indicative of membership construed? What aspects of appearance or phenotype, for example, are selected as significant for membership?

- External categorization versus internal self-identification (Jenkins 1997, chapter 5): Is category membership grounded in categorization by powerful others (or by authoritative institutions), in self-identification, or both? Are external categorizations and self-identifications congruent or noncongruent?
- Identifiability, sharpness/fuzziness, fixedness/fluidity: To what extent and in what contexts are category members readily identifiable? Are the boundaries of category membership clear or blurred? How easily can one change one’s membership?
- Naturalization: To what degree and in what form are claims made for a putatively natural ground or basis of membership?
- Hierarchy, markedness, and stigmatization: To what extent, in what ways, and by whom is the category understood to be superordinate or subordinate to, rather than coordinate with, other categories in the relevant “category set”? Is the category marked or unmarked? To what extent, in what ways, and by whom, is membership in the category stigmatized? (Brubaker et al. 2006, chapter 7).
- Transmission and socialization: How is category membership acquired, and how are people socialized as members?

2. Social organization

- Boundaries: Is the category associated with a significant boundary, in

Barth's sense (1969, p. 15); that is, does it channel patterns of interaction in consequential ways?

- Groupness, salience, thickness: To what extent do members of this category constitute a bounded, self-conscious group? How salient (in various contexts) is membership in the category? To what extent is social life and collective action organized around membership in the category (what Cornell & Hartmann 1998, p. 73, call the "thickness" or "thinness" of an identity)?
- Territorial concentration or dispersion: To what degree and in what form are members of the category concentrated or dispersed, on global, statewide, and local scales?
- Economic differentiation and inequality: To what degree and in what form do we observe patterns of ethnic stratification, an ethnic division of labor, or ethnic occupational or entrepreneurial niches?
- Institutional separation or integration: To what extent do category members have their own network of institutions, resulting in "institutional duplication" (Van den Berghe (1978 [1967], p. 34) or "institutional completeness" (Breton 1964)? Is the institutional separation imposed or deliberately pursued?
- Reproduction: To what extent and through what mechanisms are boundaries sustained and reproduced over time (Laitin 1995)? To what extent are category members endogamously self-reproducing across generations? To what degree and through what mechanisms are rules of endogamy enforced?

3. Politics

- Identification and loyalty: To what degree do category members identify with the polity in which they

permanently reside? To what degree and in what form do they identify with another polity?

- Social closure: To what extent and in what contexts is category membership implicated in patterns of exclusion or social closure, that is, in the restriction of access to various material and ideal goods, including civil or political rights and other specifically political goods (Weber 1978, pp. 341–48; Rothschild 1981, chapter 3; Brubaker 1992, chapter 1; Wimmer 2002, pp. 52–64)?
- Organization and mobilization: To what degree and in what form are category members organized and mobilized for collective action?
- Political claims: What kinds of political claims—for resources, rights, recognition, representation, or self-government—are made in the name of the category? Are claims made for an autonomous polity (possibly but not necessarily an independent state) that would serve as the polity of and for that category?²

These multiple dimensions of differentiation do not map neatly onto any conventional distinction between race, ethnicity, and nation. And while some of these dimensions covary, many others do not. As Weber (1978, pp. 395, 925) remarked a century ago, race, ethnicity, nationhood are not precise analytical concepts; they are vague vernacular terms whose meaning varies considerably over place and time. Rather than seek to demarcate precisely their respective spheres, it may be more productive to focus

²This schematic rendering is of course enormously simplified. One could discuss at length the complexities associated with any one of these dimensions of variation. For all of these dimensions, moreover, one would want to specify changes over time; for many of them, it would be important to specify variations among persons belonging to the category. The dimensions of political variation, in particular, are sketched here in radically simplified form, for the complexities entailed by the dynamic, interactive unfolding of claims and counterclaims are impossible to present here.

on identifying and explaining patterns of variation on these and other dimensions, without worrying too much about where exactly race stops and ethnicity begins (for a recent effort along these lines, see Wimmer 2008).

BEYOND GROUPISM

A second recent trend is a set of diverse yet related efforts to go beyond the *substantialist* or *groupist* assumptions that continue to inform the study of ethnicity, race, and nation. These clusters of work have in common an aspiration to study the way ethnicity, race, and nation work in social, cultural, and political life without treating ethnic groups, races, or nations as substantial entities, or even taking such groups as units of analysis at all (Brubaker 2004a).

This is *not* simply a matter of not taking groups as fixed or given. Today, few if any scholars would argue that ethnic groups or races or nations are fixed or given; virtually everyone agrees that they are historically emergent and in some respects mutable. This holds even for those who, drawing on evolutionary and cognitive psychology, have sought to revive and re-specify the primordialist position by explaining the deep roots of essentialist or primordialist thinking in everyday life (Hirschfeld 1996). In this sense, we are all constructivists now.

Despite this broad endorsement of constructivist premises, much work on ethnicity, race, and nationalism continues to be informed by what Brubaker (1998, 2004a; see also 1994) has called “groupism”: the tendency to treat various categories of people as if they were internally homogeneous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common purposes; and to take ethnic and racial groups and nations as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis.³ Grounded in what Bourdieu identified as “our

primary inclination to think the social world in a substantialist manner” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 228), this tendency has proved surprisingly robust. The groupist social ontology that underlies and informs much writing about ethnicity, race, and nationhood has managed to withstand several decades of constructivist theorizing, including now familiar critiques of reification and essentialism from feminist, post-structuralist, postmodernist, and other theorists. Despite these and other developments, ethnically, racially, and nationally named populations continue to be construed as entities and cast as actors. What Wimmer (2007) has called the Herderian legacy remains strongly entrenched, in part because of its conceptual economy and flexibility (Baumann 1996, pp. 22ff) and also because of anxieties about the political consequences of a more consistent constructivism (see, for example, Linnekin 1991).

Yet in recent decades, a growing body of work has developed ways of studying ethnicity, race, and nationalism that do not rest on such substantialist assumptions, and indeed directly challenge them. Such challenges are not, of course, radically new. One can read Weber’s tantalizingly brief but remarkably rich discussion of race, ethnicity, and nation (Weber 1978, pp. 385–98, 922–26) as posing such a challenge, and critiques of the idea that humanity is partitioned into distinct, stable, sharply bounded races have been common since the influential work of Weber’s contemporary, the anthropologist Franz Boas. But Weber’s contribution was largely ignored until recently; for Anglophone readers, moreover, the force of his critique has been blunted by translation problems. And while the Boasian critique helped undermine the legitimacy of scientific racism, it had little effect on the commonsense groupism with which scholars continued to speak of “social races.”

I sketch below several clusters of work that have contributed, in differing though sometimes overlapping ways, to developing ways of studying ethnicity without focusing on bounded groups. For expository convenience, I

³Here, ethnic, racial, and national categories are at issue, but the tendency to treat categories as groups is a far more general one.

group these into two larger clusters, the first focusing on dynamic and processual perspectives, the second on cognitive perspectives, broadly understood.

A Dynamic and Processual Understanding

A first family of tendencies has involved a shift toward a more dynamic and processual understanding of ethnicity, race, and nation. One indicator of this involves a seemingly small yet significant change in definitional practices. It has long been conventional to introduce discussions of ethnicity, race, or nationalism with the question “what is an ethnic (or racial) group?” (Schermerhorn 1970, p. 12; Cornell & Hartmann 1998, pp. 19, 21, 24) or “what is a nation?” (Stalin 1942 [1913]; Gellner 1983, pp. 53ff; Smith 1991, p. 14; Renan 1996). But this way of putting preliminary definitional questions presupposes the existence of a bounded entity and invites us to think about that entity in substantialist terms. Although such group-focused definitions remain very common, a number of recent works eschew them in favor of process-focused definitions of ethnicity (Cohen 1978, pp. 386–87; Jenkins 1997, pp. 13–14; Brubaker 2004a, p. 11; Malesevic 2006, pp. 25ff; Wimmer 2008, p. 973f); race (Omi & Winant 1994, p. 55; Sanjek 1996, p. 1; Wacquant 1997, p. 229; American Anthropological Association 1998; Boxill 2001, p. 1); or nationhood or nationalism (Verdery 1993; Calhoun 1997, pp. 4–5; Brubaker 2004b). This marks a shift from attempts to specify what an ethnic or racial group or nation *is* to attempts to specify how ethnicity, race, and nation *work*.

An early and enduringly influential work that promoted this shift was Barth’s (1969) introduction to the collection *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Barth was reacting against the static objectivism of then prevailing approaches to ethnicity, which sought to ground ethnicity in stable, objectively observable patterns of shared culture. Instead of focusing on shared culture—on the “cultural stuff,” as he put it—Barth urged analysts to attend to the dynamics

of ethnic boundaries. Such boundaries could not be discerned from any inventory of cultural traits [not least because the distributions of different cultural traits—language, customs, way of life, etc.—need not coincide (Moerman 1965)]. Ethnic boundaries emerged, rather, in and through categorical we-they distinctions drawn by actors themselves and through the channeling of interaction through sets of prescriptions and proscriptions about who can interact with whom in what sorts of social relationships. Out of the large universe of potentially relevant cultural differentiae, only a few—and not necessarily those most salient to an outsider—are selected by actors as diacritical markers, signs or emblems of ethnic difference; other cultural markers are simply not relevant to ethnicity. Ethnic boundaries could be maintained in the absence of major cultural distinctions; conversely, substantial cultural heterogeneity was perfectly compatible with ethnic commonality. Moreover, boundaries could persist despite the flow of personnel across them.

This paper, along with Barth’s (1966) more general “transactional” model of social life, signaled an important shift toward an expressly dynamic and processual understanding of ethnicity. As some critics (Handelman 1977, p. 187; Cohen 1978, pp. 386–87; Jenkins 1997, pp. 20–21) have observed, however, Barth equates the drawing of ascriptive distinctions, and the channeling of certain actions in line with such distinctions, with the existence of bounded ethnic groups and thereby contributes, against his own intentions, to the reification of groups. The very metaphor of boundary, with its spatial connotations, can work in the same direction (Jenkins 1997, p. 21). A focus on bounded groups, these and other authors have suggested, can impede a more fully dynamic and processual understanding of ethnicity. Observing that “we tend to seek the embodiment of ethnicity in overly corporate forms,” Vincent (1974, p. 376) notes that this can prevent us from grasping ethnicity as something that “happens,” as E.P. Thompson famously said about class, as “a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and

anatomize its structure” (Thompson 1963, p. 9). Handelman (1977, p. 188), while recognizing that ethnicity is sometimes embodied and expressed in “highly organized and integrated group formations,” notes that the focus on groups obscures “the organization and expression of ethnicity among persons more loosely joined.” To capture this variation in the “degree of [organizational] incorporation” of ethnicity, Handelman distinguishes ethnic category, ethnic network, ethnic association, and ethnicity community. Brubaker (2004a, pp. 3–4; Brubaker et al. 2006, pp. 358–64) suggests that ethnicity works not only, or even especially, in and through bounded groups, but in and through categories, schemas, common-sense knowledge, symbols, elite and vernacular discourse, institutional forms, organizational routines, public ceremonies, and private interactions. “Groupness” (Brubaker 1996, 2004a, borrowing the term from Tilly 1978, pp. 62ff; see also Jenkins 1997, p. 20; Fierman 2005; Yans 2006) is a variable, not a constant; it cannot be presupposed. It varies not only across putative groups, but within them. Bounded and solidary groups are one important modality of ethnicity (and of social organization more generally), but they are only one modality.

Scholars have long recognized that the strength, salience, content, and consequences of ethnic, racial, and national identifications are variable across time, contexts, and persons (an early statement is found in Weber 1978, pp. 924–25). But only recently has this variability become a central focus of concern. In part this is a matter of the shifting scale and scope of inquiry. The major works that defined the axes of debate on nationalism in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, were resolutely macroanalytic, tracing the long-term emergence and spread of nations and nationalism (Gellner 1983, Smith 1986, Anderson 1991). In this “developmentalist” temporal register (Brubaker 1996, p. 19), the long-term formation of nations involves profound socioeconomic, political, and cultural transformations; but once formed, nations are treated as static, substantial entities. A *longue durée*

perspective and broad canvas require Smith (1986, p. 3), as he readily concedes, to “endow nations and ethnic communities with more static ‘solidity’ than closer investigation at any point in time might warrant.” And while Gellner (1983) delights in subverting nationalist ontology, he too treats nations, once formed in the crucible of modernity, as static, bounded, homogeneous entities. Even Anderson (1991, p. 141) takes for granted the powerful attachment and “often profoundly self-sacrificing love” inspired by nations, communities no less real or powerful for being “imagined.”

Recent work has given more attention to dynamic processes unfolding over much shorter spans of time. In part, this reflects a keen interest in ethnic, racial, and nationalist violence. Though long-term structural or cultural patterns and processes may of course significantly shape such violence, they do not suffice to explain it. The specific dynamics of violence are not reducible to those that govern ethnic, racial, or nationalist stratification, marginalization, antipathy, or even conflict (Brubaker & Laitin 1998, pp. 426–27). In the case of riots, for example, the specific dynamics of violence involve the circulation of rumors, triggering events, and the volatile and disinhibiting dynamics of crowds (Tambiah 1996, chapters 10 and 11; Horowitz 2001); other forms of ethnic, racial, and nationalist violence—including violent protests, pogroms, feuds, lynchings, genocides, terrorist attacks, gang assaults, ethnic fights, and various hybrid forms (Horowitz 2001, pp. 17–28)—have their own specific dynamics as well.

Apart from the specific interest in violence, there has been a more general interest in the dynamics of relatively rapid changes in degrees of ethnic, racial, or national groupness. Three lines of work can be distinguished. One has been inspired by Schelling’s (1978) “tipping” and critical mass models and by his broader interest in theorizing forms of interdependent action in which the probability of one person’s doing something depends on the number or proportion of others doing it, and in which the threshold number or proportion varies across

individuals in a population. Schelling shows that such models can help explain, *inter alia*, rapid changes in the ethnic or racial composition of neighborhoods and that an integrated neighborhood can quickly become highly segregated even in the absence of any widespread preference for segregation. Kuran (1998) shows how a “reputational cascade”—triggered by some exogenous event and sustained through a chain reaction—can lead quickly to high levels of “ethnification”; this may not reflect individuals’ intrinsic preferences at all, but rather their concern to protect their reputations by signaling their ethnic affiliation in a dynamic environment in which increasing numbers of others are doing so. In this self-sustaining model, individuals’ attempts to accommodate perceived pressures for ethnic display or alignment, undertaken so as to avoid being stigmatized as ethnically disloyal, in turn increase the perceived pressures on others for such display or alignment. Laitin (1998, pp. 21–29; 2007, chapter 2) has adapted Schelling’s tipping model to theorize “identity cascades” through which rapid shifts may occur from one ethnic, national, or linguistic equilibrium to another. Without using a tipping model *per se*, de Swaan (1998) has examined the dynamics of language shift. Treating language as a “hypercollective good,” the utility of which actually *increases* as the number of speakers increases, de Swaan shows how “stampedes” may occur, involving either the cumulative desertion (and eventual extinction) of a language, or a self-reinforcing movement toward a particular language.

A second, more recent line of work, also inspired in part by Schelling, uses simulation and agent-based modeling to capture the dynamic aspects of neighborhood segregation (Fossett 2006), ethnic mobilization (Srblijinovic et al. 2003), the macrohistorical dynamics of nation-formation (Cederman 2002), and collective identities generally (Lustick 2000). Agent-based models attempt to show how complex patterns can emerge from the self-organizing, path-dependent actions of locally situated, adaptive agents, who are capable of learning from their experience (for

a sociological overview, see Macy & Willer 2002).

A third line of work, inspired by Sewell (1996), has been concerned with the dynamics of transformative events. Brubaker’s call for an “eventful” perspective on nationhood and nationalism (1996, pp. 19–21; cf. Brubaker et al. 2006, p. 361) has been taken up by Beissinger’s (2002, pp. 11ff) study of nationalist mobilization in the late Soviet context, Lohr’s (2003, pp. 8–9) analysis of the Russian campaign against suspect minorities during the First World War, and Zubrzycki’s (2006, pp. 24–25, 217–18) study of the controversy over the installation of crosses at Auschwitz.

Other work has focused on variability across context rather than, or in addition to, variability over time. Sensitivity to the teeming multiplicity of available identifications, ethnic and nonethnic, some of them “nested” (Cohen 1978, p. 395), others cross-cutting, has led a number of scholars to highlight contextual or situational variability in the salience, scope, and content of ethnic identifications (Moerman 1965; Vincent 1974; Handelsman 1977; Cohen 1978, pp. 387–89; Okamura 1981; Rothschild 1981, pp. 96–99; Chandra 2008).⁴ Although work in this tradition has emphasized individual choice of identifications (as does Waters’s 1990 study of the “ethnic options” of third- and fourth-generation “white ethnics” in the United States), it is at the same time sensitive to constraints deriving from structural features of wider settings that can limit the scope or significance of that choice. Wimmer (2008), for example, proposes a multilevel process model to capture how institutional environments, the distribution of power, and networks of political alliances shape variation in strategies of ethnic boundary-making—expansion, contraction, hierarchical reordering, crossing, and blurring—as well as variation in the outcomes of those

⁴As Chandra (2005) has observed, it is not only ethnic and nonethnic identifications that may be cross-cutting; various ethnic identifications, broadly understood, may be cross-cutting as well, as are caste, ethnoreligious, and ethnolinguistic identifications in India.

strategies and in the political salience, social closure, cultural differentiation, and historical stability of ethnic boundaries.

A final cluster of research has addressed deliberate projects of group-making (Brubaker & Laitin 1998, pp. 433–35; Loveman 1999b, pp. 896–97; Fearon & Laitin 2000; Brubaker 2004a, pp. 13–14). This work differs from the nation-building literature of the postwar decades in emphasizing the discursive, rhetorical, and cultural aspects of group-making (Foster 1995; Brubaker 1996, chapter 4, 2007; Martin 2001; Suny & Martin 2001). Much of this work has drawn on the “invention of tradition” perspective of Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983). Another resource for accounts of group-making is Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power, in particular by his emphasis (adapted from speech act theory) on the performative aspects of political entrepreneurship (Bourdieu 1991, Part III). By invoking groups, and representing them as always already there, Bourdieu suggests, political entrepreneurs can “contribute to producing what they apparently describe or designate” (1991, p. 220). More generally, Bourdieu shows that the existence of groups is one of the key stakes in the chronic symbolic struggles over representations of the social world. To be sure, not all invented traditions take root, and invoking groups is not sufficient to call them into being (on the limits to construction and invention, see, for example, Smith 1986, pp. 18, 177–79, 214). Group-making projects are variable in their success across time, context, and targeted constituents.

The Cognitive Turn

A second family of tendencies involves a broad cognitive turn in the study of ethnicity, race, and nationalism.⁵ From a cognitive perspective, ethnicity, race, and nationhood are not things *in* the world, but perspectives *on* the world

(Brubaker et al. 2004, p. 45). These include ways of identifying oneself and others, constructing situations, explaining behavior, imputing interests, framing complaints, telling stories, etc., in ethnic rather than other terms. They include systems of classification, categorization, and identification, formal and informal. And they include basic schemas and 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 marked or meaningful.

A cognitive approach to ethnicity does *not* depend narrowly on what cognitive anthropology, psychology, or neuroscience tells us about how the mind or brain works to store and process information. Work in these fields—on categorization (Rosch 1978, Tajfel & Turner 1986, Lakoff 1987, Hogg & Abrams 1988); stereotypes (Devine 1989, Hamilton & Sherman 1994); schemas (Rumelhart 1980; Casson 1983; Markus & Zajonc 1985; D’Andrade 1995, chapter 6; Strauss & Quinn 1997, chapter 3); and the deep-seated tendency to naturalize social categories (Hirschfeld 1996, Gil-White 2001)—does indeed have important implications for the study of ethnicity, race, and nationalism (reviewed in Brubaker et al. 2004; see also Levine 1999, Hale 2004). But the cognitive turn, as I understand it here, is concerned not only with ways of seeing and thinking determined by universal features of our cognitive architecture, but with culturally specific ways in which persons, institutions, organizations, and discourses make sense of experience and interpret the social world. It is concerned with ethnicity, race, and nation as basic “principles of vision and division” of the social world, in Bourdieu’s terms (1991, p. 232).

Much work in this broader tradition has focused on categorization and classification, not in experimental or laboratory settings, but in the official practices of states and other organizations on the one hand, and in the ebb and flow of everyday social experience on the other. Categorization and classification in these

⁵This is part of a broader cognitive turn in the social sciences; for overviews, see DiMaggio & Powell (1991), D’Andrade (1995), DiMaggio (1997), Zerubavel (1997).

formal and informal settings are increasingly seen as not only central to but as *constitutive* of ethnicity, race, and nationhood (see e.g., Barth 1969; Verdery 1993; Jenkins 1997, chapter 5; Wacquant 1997; American Anthropological Association 1998; Levine 1999, p. 168; Boxill 2001; Brubaker et al. 2004, 2006, pp. 207–8).

Work on state categorization practices, influenced by Foucault's account of governmentality (Burchell et al. 1991) and Bourdieu's (1991, Part III) notion of the symbolic, group-making power of the state, has shown how official practices of naming, counting, and classifying and otherwise "seeing like a state" (Scott 1998) have transformed the self-understandings, social organization, and political claims of the populations thus classified. Colonial and postcolonial societies have been particularly rich sites for such studies (Hirschman 1986; Cohn 1987; Anderson 1991 [1983], chapter 10; Jackson & Maddox 1993; Appadurai 1996, chapter 6; Jackson 1999; Dirks 2001). Many studies in these and other settings have focused on censuses and other official statistics, showing how they have helped to *construct* and *constitute* the groups they ostensibly *describe* (Petersen 1987, 1997; Starr 1987; Nagel 1995; Loveman 2001; Kertzer & Arel 2002; Brubaker et al. 2006, pp. 151–59). Especially when they are linked through public policy to tangible benefits, official categories can contribute to "making up people" (Hacking 1986) or "nominating into existence" new kinds of persons (Goldberg 1997, pp. 29–30). Conversely, a policy of *not* classifying or counting by ethnicity or race can impede group formation (on the recent French controversy over this, see Simon 2008, Blum & Guérin-Pace 2008). Another cluster of research has addressed controversies about the use of race as a category in biomedical research (Hacking 2005; Epstein 2007, chapters 7, 10).

Censuses, in principle at least, classify people anonymously and fleetingly. Other forms of state categorization, however, impose enduring, legally consequential identities on people (Jenkins 1997, p. 69). The most notorious cases are the official schemes of racial

classification and identification employed by Nazi Germany (Burleigh & Wipperman 1991) and South Africa (Bowker & Star 1999, chapter 6). Official ethnic identities, specified in formal identity documents, were implicated in the Rwandan genocide (Fussell 2001, Longman 2001). Research has addressed not only these notorious cases but the controversies, complexities, and ironies involved in the use of ethnic, racial, and national categories in preferential treatment programs in the Soviet Union (Slezkine 1994; Brubaker 1996, chapter 2; Martin 2001), India (de Zwart 2000), and the United States (Ford 1994, Skrentny 1996).

Research on informal, everyday classification and categorization practices demonstrates great complexity and variability in the categories actually used. An extreme example is the very large number of race and color categories used in Brazil (Harris 1970, Sanjek 1971), but complex and variable categorization practices have been documented in many other settings (see e.g., Leach 1954, Moerman 1965, Kunstadter 1979, Sanjek 1981). A common thread in studies of everyday classification is the recognition that ordinary actors usually have considerable room for maneuver in how they use even highly institutionalized and powerfully sanctioned categories (Sanjek 1981; Domínguez 1986; Levine 1987; Brubaker et al. 2006, chapters 6, 7, 10). Another cluster of work, drawing inspiration from ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Sacks 1995, Schegloff 2007), treats ethnicity as a skilled practical accomplishment, as something that happens when ethnic categories are made relevant to participants in the course of a particular interactional trajectory (Moerman 1974, Day 1998). For example, Brubaker et al. (2006, chapter 7) show how people invoke ethnic categories in everyday interaction to account for actions, stances, or opinions; to hold others accountable for their actions or stances; and to police, mark, or qualify membership status.

The reproduction of ethnic, racial, and national ways of experiencing and interpreting the world does not depend on the explicit invocation of ethnic, racial, or national categories.

Billig's (1995, chapter 5) analysis of "banal nationalism" points to the many unobtrusive ways in which nationhood is continually "flagged," for example through the "homeland deixis" through which the routine, unmarked use of words like "we" in the media and in political discourse serves to place us firmly in a national context. Bentley's (1987) interpretation of ethnic affinity and difference in terms of Bourdieu's notion of habitus focuses on tacit, preconscious, embodied schemas of understanding and appreciation. A growing literature on popular culture and other aspects of everyday life (Eley & Suny 1996b, Edensor 2002, Fox & Miller-Idriss 2008) has shown how national ways of understanding the world are encoded in mundane environments and reproduced through everyday activities.

Cognitive perspectives, intended here in a broad sense, provide resources for avoiding analytical groupism while helping to explain the tenacious hold of groupist, even primordialist ways of thinking in everyday life. Instead of conceptualizing the social world in substantialist terms as a composite of racial, ethnic, and national groups, cognitive perspectives address the social and mental processes that sustain the interpretation of the social world in racial, ethnic, or national terms. Extending experimental findings regarding a general disposition toward essentialist modes of thinking (Medin & Ortony 1989, Gelman & Wellman 1991, Rothbart & Taylor 1992), Hirschfeld (1996) and Gil-White (2001) posit a deep-seated cognitive disposition to perceive human beings as members of "natural kinds" with inherited and immutable "essences." Drawing on experiments with three- and four-year-olds, Hirschfeld (1996) argues that humans have a special-purpose cognitive device for partitioning the social world into what he calls "intrinsic kinds" based on "shared essences." This provides the cognitive foundations for what Hirschfeld (1996, p. 20) calls "folk sociology," which he characterizes as the "commonsense partitive logic or social ontology that picks out the 'natural' kinds of people that exist in the world." Hirschfeld emphasizes

the presence worldwide of a similar deep classificatory logic underlying what are on the surface strikingly different systems of racial, ethnic, and national classification. Kurzman et al. (2001) argue, however, that racial encoding is a contingent byproduct of more fundamental cognitive processes evolved to detect coalitional affiliations and alliances.

If racial, ethnic, and national categories are "easy to think" (Hirschfeld 1996, p. x), this does not mean that they are universally active or salient. Cognitive perspectives suggest that one way to study the varying salience of ethnicity is to study not only the content of ethnic schemas and representations but also the *distribution* of such representations within a population, their accessibility or ease of activation, their relative salience once activated, and the relative ease with which they "slot" into or "interlock" with other key cultural representations (Sperber 1985, DiMaggio 1997). This last is the cognitive counterpart to the elusive but important notion of "resonance" in the social movement literature on framing.

What cognitive perspectives suggest, in short, is that race, ethnicity, and nation are ways of making sense of the world. They are ways of understanding and identifying oneself, interpreting one's problems and predicaments, and identifying one's interests. They are ways—both institutionalized and informal—of recognizing, identifying, and classifying other people, of construing sameness and difference, and of "coding" and making sense of their actions. They are templates for representing and organizing social knowledge, frames for articulating social comparisons and explanations, and filters that govern what is noticed or unnoticed. Race, ethnicity, and nationality exist and are reproduced from day to day in and through such perceptions, interpretations, representations, classifications, categorizations, and identifications.

CONCLUSION

The field of inquiry sketched above is not sharply bounded. The processes, mechanisms,

and structures on which inquiry has focused are for the most part not specific to ethnicity, race, and nationalism. Classification, categorization, identification, we-they distinctions, marked and unmarked categories, boundary maintenance and boundary crossing, endogamy and exogamy, assimilation and differentiation, territorial concentration and dispersion, social closure, group-making projects, cascades, uneven development, institutional duplication, imagined communities, invented traditions, tendencies to naturalize and essentialize, and symbolic struggles over the basic principles of vision and division of the social world are all very general social phenomena, the

significance of which goes far beyond ethnicity, race, and nationalism. The field has profited in recent decades not only by becoming a more comparative, global, interdisciplinary, and multiparadigmatic enterprise and by overcoming internal boundaries between the study of ethnicity, race, and nationalism, but also by bridging external boundaries and becoming more closely integrated with other fields of social scientific inquiry. A key strength of the field, paradoxically, is not insisting too much on its distinct, bounded, and autonomous “fieldness.” This engagement with wider developments in the social sciences is likely to be even more important in the future.

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