

# REVIEWS

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## A Much-awaited Book

Rogers Brubaker, Margit Feischmidt, Jon Fox,  
Liana Grancea: *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity  
in a Transylvanian Town*.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

There will be no understatement in saying that *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* is a long-awaited book. Over the last decade Brubaker has been one of the most influential researchers of ethnicity and nationalism, and his analytical contribution has shaped a large part of this academic field. In the early 1990s Brubaker<sup>1</sup> (1994) denounced the reification of nations and ethnic groups and suggested that the analytical focus of the scholars of ethnicity should explore the ‘work’ done by the nation “as practical category, as classificatory scheme, as cognitive frame.” Moving a few steps further, in *Ethnicity without Groups*<sup>2</sup> Brubaker advanced a new perspective for nationalism studies, one built upon the new “cognitive turn” in psychology and cultural anthropology. To me, this means exploring the salience of ethnicity for the everyman in the everyday life, and uncovering the mechanisms through which we act or (more often) do not act ‘ethnic’. This is precisely what Brubaker, Feischmidt, Fox, and Grancea accomplish in *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*.

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<sup>1</sup> Brubaker, Rogers: Rethinking Nationhood: nation as an institutionalized form, practical category, contingent event. *Contention*. Vol. 4, Nr. 1, 1994. 3–14.

<sup>2</sup> Brubaker, Rogers: *Ethnicity without Groups*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. (Note of the editor: See the review of *Ethnicity without Groups* by Călin Goina in *Regio*, Vol. VIII. 2005. <http://www.regiofolyoirat.hu/newspaper/2005/2005eng.pdf>)

The book is essentially a case-study of a Transylvanian city seen from a double perspective: the top-down gaze allowed by the study of nationalist politics, and the view from below offered by the ethnographic immersion in the world of the inhabitants of Cluj, Romania. Though this is not the first book to analyze nationalism through ethnographic lenses, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* is surely the most extensive and sustained analysis using this approach.

Researching “nationalism from below” by studying a single Transylvanian town in late 1990s is a potentially hazardous enterprise. The noted Oxford sociologist, John H. Goldthorpe, claims that practitioners of ethnographic method focusing on single case-studies do not obey “the same underlying rules of the game as survey-based, and indeed other, methods of sociological research.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, for him, fieldwork fails to solve (among others) ‘the problem of variation across locales’:

“If research is undertaken within, say, industrial work group, or isolated villages, or inner-city schools, how is the ethnographer to know how much and what part of what he or she observes is indeed recurrent across work groups, villages, or schools of the kind in question or is limited only to the particular locales that happen to have been picked-up?”<sup>4</sup>

This question points to a crucial dimension of the participant observation, which was addressed from within as well as from outside of ethnography. Indeed, what can we find, following Goldthorpe, from a single case-study, and how can we generalize useful scientific statements out of it?

Already in *Beyond Comparativism*<sup>5</sup> Brubaker sketches an answer. According to him an  $N = 1$  project is “not a *case study*, but a *place study*, not as a *unit of analysis* studied in isolation from [...] other coordinate units.” A case might be seen as “rather a *strategic research site* for studying processes that are of more general theoretical interest” on the grounds of the “*vernacular explanatory schemas*” without imposing our own “*analytical*

<sup>3</sup> Goldthorpe, John H.: *On Sociology: Numbers, Narratives and the Integration of Research and Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 93.

<sup>4</sup> Goldthorpe, 80.

<sup>5</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, *Beyond Comparativism*, paper posted at the *eScholarship Repository*, University of California, <http://repositories.cdlib.org/uclasc/trcsa/1>. 2006.

*explanatory schemas.*” It is the virtue of ethnographic study which enables us to *discover* the relevant vernacular categories of comparison. Fieldwork provides us with knowledge on the elements of social reality – apprehended under the assumption of subtle realism as they are constructed and shared by the members.

In *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Life Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* the authors faced the daunting task of showing that what they advocate is possible, that one can uncover the “vernacular explanatory schemas” in a way that keeps them uncontaminated by the analytical schemas already available in the researcher’s perspective over the world. This is accomplished while providing the reader not with an essentially arid and dated description of a single place, but with concepts and categories of a more general theoretical interest. In my reading the book succeeds in both of these two endeavors.

In order to do so, the authors proceed to a sociological *tour de force*: not only ethnography, but also historical macro-sociology, ethnography, ethnomethodology as well as elements of demography and quantitative analysis are deployed. A large variety of historical sources, archive materials, newspaper articles, oral histories, life trajectories and instruments pertaining to conversational analysis are added to a sustained period of field-work and participant observation. One of the many features of this book that deserves mentioning is its photographic portfolio, which can be seen as a short study in itself.

The first part book opens with a ‘classical’ overview of the national question in East Central Europe in the modern era, zooming in, as the reader advances, over the historical evolution of the region (Transylvania) and of the site itself (Cluj) from the Middle Ages to the agitated local politics of the 1990s. This side of the story is told in the current historical vocabulary, so that the authors need to remind us in a footnote that when the talk about “the Slovaks” or “the Croats” this does not imply that these are seen or considered as collective actors.

It is already a truism that any historical reconstruction of the past involves choices and criteria that are to be made in the present. The history of Transylvania, or of Cluj, sounds different when told by Hungarian or Romanian historians and even more different when told by some Hungarian or Romanian grandfathers. In fact, the presentation of the ‘historical facts’ necessary in any introduction to Transylvania’s past would most probably make some of the readers from the region regard the presentation

as either pro-Romanian or pro-Hungarian. This unfair (but not unlikely) reading would illustrate even more the point of the book.

In the organization of the book, the first part serves a dual role: on the one hand, it introduces the reader to the historical, ecological and economic dimensions of the site of the ethnographic research. On the other hand, it does illustrate the story of “nationalism from above,” so well-known in the literature, in order to provide a counterpart to the following pages focusing on the “nationalism from below,” on the assumptions, needs, longings and interests of the ordinary people.

In the second part we are offered a completely different perspective, focusing on the analytical results of an extended period of fieldwork (1995–2001) in Cluj. If the previous section of the book was somehow reminiscent of *Nationalism Reframed*,<sup>6</sup> the second is made from an entirely new fabric.

The most innovative dimension in the book, to my mind, consists in the ‘oblique’ manner way in which the research project was conceived. Instead of relying on a clear-cut, ‘professional’ research plan, the authors tried to discover ethnicity in practice, exploring Cluj with the hope that under their eyes ethnicity will emerge, rather than trying to impose it on their material. Consequently, the four researchers cast their nets and hoped for the best. The rest of the book consists in a systematization of an analytic vocabulary developed in order to make sense of what the nets brought in.

First, we are introduced to six inhabitants of Cluj and their families so that we may begin to grasp what living in post-socialist Eastern Europe feel like. The sustained interaction with these life-trajectories allows the authors to explore in the following chapter how, *and shows/demonstrates how little* (it turns out) ethnicity matters for these individuals and families. We see most of them preoccupied “with getting by; the more ambitious and favorably situated, with getting ahead; and many, especially young people, with getting out” (p.169). These findings lead the book into one of its most substantial chapters, *Categories*. If, together with Brubaker, we agree that ethnicity is not a thing in the world, but a modality of experiencing it, it is worth exploring and selecting among

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<sup>6</sup> Brubaker, Rogers: *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

the countless, ubiquitous acts of categorization, those that are guided by ethnicity. The chapter proceeds from the distinction between the general (context-independent) nominal characterization of someone as a Romanian or a Hungarian, and his or her (context-specific), experiential characterization, in cases when someone's ethnicity become salient in practice. Thus, we are introduced to the major asymmetries between the 'Hungarian' and 'Romanian' categories in Cluj (such as the asymmetry between the marked and the unmarked category, or between the salience of these categories). The next section explores the cues hinting at the ethnic category: issues pertaining to embodied ethnicity, language, names. Further on we are reminded that we are also "doing things with categories:" we may account for a stances, invoke insider status, mark (or unmark) membership, or control category membership.

In the same vein, the next chapters explore in detail the patterned ways in which language practices 'do' ethnicity in everyday interaction, and explore furthermore the institutional production and re-production of a separate Hungarian world, an "ethno-civic society"<sup>7</sup> in Transylvania, and the intermittent moments when relationships between people *become* ethnic. The last chapter, *Politics*, closes the circle, bringing us back to the issues covered in the first part, but this time focusing on how the ethnically-motivated political struggles are experienced and seen by the ordinary inhabitants of Cluj.

The work is impressive both in its detailed ethnographic survey of a world in transition, as well as in its analytic acumen, bringing in concepts that illuminate its empirical findings from fields such as linguistics, cognitive psychology, ethnomethodology and conversational analysis, to name only a few. The authors try to make good on their promise: to show that one can do in practice what he advocated in more theory-oriented contributions, such as *Ethnicity without Groups*.

Nevertheless, going through the successive chapters of the second part I felt that, at times, the authors were too focused on structuring and accounting of the fieldwork material, and that this effort took over the concern for building a clear and major central argument.

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<sup>7</sup> Kántor, Zoltán: Nationalizing Minorities and Homeland Politics: The Case of the Hungarians in Romania. in Trencsényi, Balázs at al. (eds): *Nation-Building and Contested Identities: Romanian and Hungarian Case Studies*. Budapest: Regio Books – Iași: Polirom, 2001.

Summing up, the book offers a new, complementary way of studying nationalism and it develops a new analytical vocabulary suitable for the task. While not all students of nationalism would (or should) feel compelled to follow the track opened by Brubaker, Feischmidt, Fox and Grancea, the book does provide a new perspective, as well as a series of analytical resources previously unknown or neglected. I am certain that *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* will become, if it isn't already, a must for any bibliography on nationalism and ethnicity.