Grounds for Difference

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To appear with Harvard University Press, winter 2015

Introduction

Grounds for Difference is a sequel of sorts to my *Ethnicity without Groups.* Like that volume, this one seeks to develop fresh perspectives on the social organization and political expression of cultural difference. But it does so in quite different ways that reflect new directions in my work.

Ethnicity without Groups was written in analytical counterpoint to sustained ethnographic research. It was informed by a shift from the "big structures, large processes, [and] huge comparisons" (Tilly 1984) addressed in my two previous books (1992, 1996) to the smaller scale, more finely observed processes and dynamics that were the primary focus of *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Brubaker et al. 2006). *Ethnicity without Groups* was also informed by a twofold critical impulse, directed against prevailing "groupist" idioms in the study of ethnicity and against complacent and clichéd forms of constructivism, the most readily available alternative to such groupism. This critical engagement gave the book a rather programmatic cast, expressed in the proposal to analyze ethnicity "without groups," to go "beyond identity," and to conceive of ethnicity as a perspective on the world, rather than a thing in the world.

The present volume is less programmatic and more substantive, less focused on conceptual critique than on theoretical and empirical analysis, and less concerned with analytical disaggregation than with analytical synthesis. After the microanalytic turn of my recent books, the present volume also returns to meso- and macroanalytic levels of analysis.

Grounds for Difference emerged from three new lines of work, engaging three increasingly salient contexts for the contemporary politics of difference: the *return of inequality,* the *return of biology,* and the *return of the sacred.*

The dramatic intensification of inequality in the United States and elsewhere in recent decades and, more recently still, the quiet devastation wreaked by the Great Recession have focused renewed public and academic attention on inequality. The Occupy movement galvanized and dramatized, if only briefly, concern with inequality. President Obama—quoting Pope Francis's denunciation of economic exclusion and inequality in his encyclical "Evangelii

Gaudium"—called increasing economic inequality the "defining challenge of our time."[1] Serious journalistic analyses of inequality have proliferated in the past few years, along with books and papers written by scholars for broad public audiences, as well as more strictly scholarly research.[2] And Thomas Piketty's 685-page *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) became an unlikely best-seller.

Inequality has of course been a perennial theme in the social sciences; it never disappeared as an object of social theory and social research. But work influenced by the cultural and discursive turn focused more attention on identity and difference than on inequality, and more attention on inequalities in recognition than in resources. As students of race, ethnicity, and gender followed the cultural turn, they lost traction on structural forms of inequality grounded in the division of labor, the organization of production, or control over the means of coercion.[3]

In the past decade or so, the cultural and discursive turn in the study of difference seems to have run its course. In a context of economic crisis and exacerbated inequality, this has prompted efforts to reconnect structural sources of inequality with cultural dimensions of difference.[4] Chapter 1 contributes to this undertaking by analyzing how categories of difference are implicated in the production and reproduction of inequality. Taking as its point of departure a critical engagement with Charles Tilly's influential theory of categorical inequality, the chapter considers the very different ways in which citizenship, gender, and ethnicity (broadly understood to include race as well as certain forms of religion) work to generate and sustain inequality. It then goes on to outline—as an alternative to Tilly's exploitation and opportunity hoarding—three general processes through which categories of difference enter into the making and remaking of

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[1] White House, "Remarks by the President on Economic Mobility," December 4, 2013, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/12/04/remarks-president-economic-mobility.

[2] Wide-ranging recent accounts include Noah 2012; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Stiglitz 2012; Grusky 2012; Saez 2013; Jenkins and Micklewright 2007; Neckerman and Torche 2007; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; Weeden and Grusky 2012; DiMaggio and Garip 2012.

[3] Fraser (1995) offered an influential early diagnosis of the shift.

[4] See, for example, Wimmer 2013; Lamont et al. 2014; Emirbayer and Desmond forthcoming. Not coincidentally, Bourdieu is an important inspiration for all three works; on Bourdieu see Wacquant 2013.

inequality: the allocation of persons to positions, the social production of persons, and the social definition of positions.

The second crucial context for the contemporary politics of difference is the *return of biology.* Of course biologically informed ways of construing sameness and difference did not disappear with the decline of scientific racism in the middle of the twentieth century. But biological (and notably genetic) discourse came to focus more on individuals and families than on group differences (Skinner 2006: 475; Condit 1999), while the social sciences came to construe diversity through the prism of culture rather than nature. A reflexive antibiologism became central to the disciplinary identity of sociologists in particular. Most sociologists have been uninterested in the interface between the social and the biological, and many have been hostile to any attempt to show the bearing of biology on social life, seeing "biology" and "the social" as "locked in an explanatory zero-sum game" (Freese et al. 2003: 234). Yet this has begun to change. In the past decade or so, a number of prominent sociologists (including Douglas Massey [2002] in his presidential address to the American Sociological Association) have argued that a principled antipathy to the biological is both intellectually narrow-minded and professionally self-defeating, threatening to make sociology irrelevant in an intellectual and social context in which the biological sciences are increasingly powerful and prestigious.

The return of biology has been particularly striking—but also particularly fraught, contested, and even paradoxical—in the study of race and ethnicity. Academic understandings of race and ethnicity—if not popular understandings—had moved decisively "beyond biology" in the final decades of the twentieth century. The triumph of constructivist understandings seemed to make biology irrelevant. While *myths* of descent were central to ethnicity, *actual* descent was irrelevant; and while the *classification* of bodies was central to race, the *bodies themselves* were not. Race was "only skin deep"; it had no deeper biological reality.

This has changed dramatically in the past fifteen years. The Human Genome Project was celebrated for highlighting species-wide genetic *commonality,* but the subsequent flood of relatively inexpensive genomic data has occasioned intensified exploration of between-group genetic *differences.* These differences have been explicitly linked to folk understandings of race, giving new respectability to the claim that social understandings of race have a biological foundation. The cultural authority of genomics has transformed understandings and practices of race and ethnicity in biomedical research, forensic investigation, and ancestry testing; it has

informed new kinds of political claims; and it has challenged seemingly settled constructivist theories of race and ethnicity.

Genetically informed accounts of difference have deeply ambivalent implications for understandings of race and ethnicity. They risk reinforcing essentialist folk understandings of identity; yet they can also serve to undermine notions of "pure" or sharply bounded groups, highlighting instead the inextricable mixedness of all human populations and the genetic uniqueness of every individual. Chapter 2 explores the complex and ambivalent implications of the "return of biology" for the theory and practice of ethnicity, race, and nationhood. It surveys developments in biomedicine, forensics, genetic genealogy, and identity politics, and it concludes by outlining a constructivist response to the new objectivist and naturalist accounts of race and ethnicity.

The third undertheorized context for the contemporary politics of difference is the *return of the sacred.* The idea of secularization has figured centrally in accounts of modernity, and it has been the primary organizing paradigm of the sociology of religion. Developments of recent decades—the resurgence of political Islam, the spectacular global spread of Pentecostalism, and the renewed vitality of Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim fundamentalisms—have made simplistic versions of secularization theory ripe for criticism. Some theorists have spoken of "desecularization" (Berger 1999) or of "post-secular society" (Habermas 2008). But as other leading sociologists of religion have argued (Casanova 1994; Gorski and Altinordu 2008), secularization theory is more complex, interesting, and robust than many critics suggest.

Secularization has been understood in different ways by different theorists, but it generally designates one or more of three distinct processes: the *differentiation* of religion from other spheres of social life; the *decline* of religious belief or practice; or the *privatization* of religion. As José Casanova (1994) has argued, there is strong evidence for differentiation but only weak evidence (outside Europe) for decline. About the privatization thesis, the evidence is interestingly mixed. Religion (or its close cousin, spirituality) *has* become for many (especially but not exclusively in the West) an increasingly individual, subjective, and private matter—an affair of the heart, with little relevance for the public square. Yet recent decades have witnessed a striking resurgence of what Casanova calls "public religion." Against the expectations of the secularization theory of a generation ago, religion has refused to remain safely cantoned within a depoliticized private realm; it has insisted on entering the public sphere and making claims about the organization of public life.

The resurgence of public religion has major implications for how we understand diversity, multiculturalism, and the politics of difference. *That* societies worldwide are becoming more diverse and pluralistic is a truism, but *how* they are becoming more diverse is seldom examined. Discussions of diversity—academic debates as well as broader public discussions—often proceed in striking indifference to religion, as if the diversity that mattered were exhausted by race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Yet the most vexed and contentious forms of diversity— what some political theorists have called "deep diversity"—are increasingly, and fundamentally, grounded in religious worldviews and ways of life.

The study of religion and the study of ethnicity, race, and nationalism have been largely separate domains of inquiry, with relatively little cross-fertilization between them. This mutual isolation has been detrimental to both fields. Two chapters in the present volume seek to remedy this by integrating religion more closely into the study of ethnicity and nationalism. Chapter 3 does so by way of a sustained comparison between religion and language as domains of group-forming cultural practice. Both religion and language are ways of identifying oneself and others, and of construing sameness and difference. In the language of Pierre Bourdieu, both are basic principles of vision and division of the social world. Both divide the world, in popular understandings, into bounded and largely self-reproducing communities. And claims are made in the name of both kinds of communities for recognition, resources, and reproduction. In all these respects, language and religion are both *similar* to ethnicity and nationalism and *similarly intertwined* with them. Language or religion or both together are central to most ethnic and national identifications, and they frequently serve as key emblems or symbols of such identifications.

Yet religion and language differ in key ways that have major implications for the political accommodation of cultural difference. Language is an inescapable medium of public as well as private life; religion is not. The state must privilege a particular language or set of languages, but it need not privilege a particular religion. The expansion of state employment, the introduction of universal schooling, and the increasingly "semantic" nature of work in an urban, mobile, and literate society have made language a crucial form of cultural capital. For all these reasons, language is chronically and pervasively politicized in the modern world, while much of religion has become privatized and depoliticized. On the other hand, religious pluralism tends to be more intergenerationally robust and more deeply institutionalized than linguistic pluralism in contemporary liberal societies. It also entails deeper and more divisive forms of diversity.

Language is a medium of communication and a symbol of identity; it is not a structure of authority. But religion often involves an authoritative, binding, and comprehensive set of norms. These do not simply regulate private behavior; they reach into the public realm, addressing such matters as gender, sexuality, family life, education, and social policy. Conflicts over these matters often involve deep conflicts of principle and fundamental differences of worldview.

On a time scale of centuries, religion has become much *less* central to public life and political contestation in the West, while language—with the growth of democracy, mass education, urban commercial society, and the modern state—has become much *more* central. Yet in recent decades, conflicts over language have eased in liberal polities, while conflicts over religion have intensified, driven by the resurgence of public religion. The upshot is that religion has tended to displace language as the most heatedly contested terrain of the politics of cultural difference.

Chapter 4 addresses the relation between religion and nationalism. Two antithetical views have long structured discussions of this relation. One sees nationalism as intrinsically secular and links the rise of nationalism to the decline of religion. The other sees nationalism as intrinsically religious, as a "political religion" or a "cult of the nation" that sacralizes the collectivity and mobilizes religious emotion. While both views capture something important, neither is particularly nuanced, and a small but growing literature has begun to develop a variety of more complex accounts. Building on these accounts, this chapter identifies and critically analyzes four ways of studying the relation between religion and nationalism. The first is to treat religion and nationalism, along with ethnicity and race, as *analogous* phenomena. The second is to specify ways in which religion helps *explain* things about nationalism: its origin, its power, or its distinctive character in particular cases. The third is to treat religion as *part* of nationalism and to specify modes of interpenetration and intertwining. And the fourth is to posit a distinctively religious *form* of nationalism.

The chapter concludes by reconsidering—and, with qualifications, affirming—the much-criticized understanding of nationalism as a distinctively secular phenomenon. Nationalism and religion are often closely intertwined. But even when the idioms of religion and nation are intertwined, the fundamental ontologies and structures of justification differ. Nationalist politics presupposes and pivots on a shared public understanding of "the nation." On this understanding, nations are entitled to "their own" polities, and authority is legitimate only if it arises from "the nation." The development and diffusion of this structure of political argument and cultural

understanding were made possible, in part, by a process of secularization. *Not*, to be sure, by the decline of religion: early forms of nationalist politics and national consciousness emerged in a period of intensified rather than declining religiosity. But another aspect of secularization—the emergence of understandings of economy, society, and polity as autonomous realms, differentiated from the religious sphere and governed by their own laws—did facilitate the development of the social and political imaginary that underwrites and informs modern nationalism.

The remaining three chapters address in different ways the *transnational and global dimensions* of ethnicity and nationalism. In the past two decades, a number of scholars have posited a fundamental shift toward a transnational or postnational world. They have argued that new communications and transportation infrastructures strengthen transborder ties and erode the capacities of nation-states to control cross-border flows of people, goods, messages, images, ideas, and cultural products. This, they suggest, has realigned the relation between politics and culture by detaching identities, loyalties, and subjectivities from the territorial and institutional frame of the nation-state.

The category *diaspora* figures centrally in attempts to theorize the social organization and political expression of cultural difference in this putatively postnational world. Diaspora-talk has exploded in recent decades, inside and outside the academy. But as the category has proliferated, its meaning has been stretched in various directions. Chapter 5 critically engages this burgeoning literature. It traces the dispersion of the term in semantic, conceptual, and disciplinary space; analyzes three core elements that continue to be understood as constitutive of diaspora; and proposes to treat diaspora not as a bounded entity but as an idiom, stance, and claim.

The chapter also skeptically assesses the claim that recent decades have witnessed an epochal shift in the organization of belonging. Notwithstanding repeated assertions of its obsolescence, the nation-state remains the decisive instance of belonging even in a rapidly globalizing world; and struggles over belonging *in* and *to* the nation-state remain the most consequential form of membership politics. The powers of the nation-state are in some respects increasing rather than declining. Far from escaping the control of the state, for example, migration is subjected to ever more sophisticated technologies of regulation and control. This does not mean, of course, that borders are hermetically sealed; but there is no indication that states (or the Schengen zone) have been losing their capacity to regulate the flow of persons across their borders.

The diaspora and transnationalism literatures are right to highlight the ways loyalties, identities, and subjectivities cut across territorial frontiers. But this does not entail a shift from a national to a postnational mode of membership politics or, still less, a shift from a state-centered to a nonstate mode of organizing migration and membership. States' ties to transborder populations—and transborder populations' claims on "homeland" states—are expanding and strengthening. But these new forms of external membership are neither trans-state nor transnational; they are forms of transborder nationalism. As such, they represent an extension and adaptation of the nation-state model, not its transcendence (Brubaker and Kim 2011: 21–22).

Chapter 6 places these new forms of transborder nationalism in the broader context of the politics of membership and belonging in the nation-state. It distinguishes internal and external dimensions of the politics of belonging. The internal dimension concerns people who are durably situated within the territorial ambit of the state but who are not—or not fully—members of that state. The external dimension concerns those who are durably situated outside the territorial ambit and jurisdiction of the state yet who claim—or are claimed—to belong, in some sense, to the state or to "its" nation. The chapter identifies four sources of the internal and external politics of belonging: the movement of people over borders, the movement of borders over people, deep and enduring inequalities between mainstream and minority populations, and the persisting legacies of empire.

The global diffusion and institutionalization of "diaspora" as a category of self-understanding and claims-making is one instance of a broader process of the diffusion and institutionalization of a set of basic categories of social and political understanding. The set includes nation, ethnicity, race, religion, indigeneity, and minorityhood, all of which have been institutionalized worldwide, in differing forms and to differing degrees, as ways of conceptualizing, organizing, and constituting diverse populations (Brubaker 2012). Together these comprise part of what might be called—at the risk of putting too grand a label on it—the "categorical infrastructure of modernity."

In recent decades, a vigorous literature on "multiple modernities" (Eisenstadt 2000; Spohn 2003) has challenged the idea of convergence around a single, originally Western pattern of institutions and cultural understandings; this literature has emphasized instead the irreducible multiplicity of institutional patterns and cultural and political programs and models. While fully acknowledging enduring institutional and cultural diversity, Chapter 7 makes the case for a "single modernity" perspective on ethnicity and nationalism. Such a perspective brings into

focus the global, interconnected nature of the processes—socioeconomic, political, and cultural—that have generated and sustained nationalism, ethnicity, race, and related categories as basic forms of cultural understanding, social organization, and political claims-making. And it highlights the worldwide diffusion of a set of rhetorical idioms, organizational forms, and political templates that provide the cultural and institutional materials for various forms of nationalism and politicized ethnicity.

Nationalism, for example, was from the beginning an internationally circulating discourse. As it was taken up in new settings, it was of course adapted to local circumstances and blended with indigenous idioms. Yet the linked ideas and ideals of nation, state, citizenship, and popular sovereignty form a distinctive cultural, ideological, and organizational "package" that has diffused worldwide in the past two centuries.

The intertwined idioms of nationhood, peoplehood, and citizenship—like the idioms of race, religion, rights, and revolution—are eminently flexible and adaptable. They can be used to legitimize a polity but also to challenge its legitimacy, to demand a new polity, or to claim autonomy or resources within an existing polity. And the abstract category of nationhood or peoplehood can be imagined in a variety of ways: the nation can be understood to be grounded in citizenship, history, language, descent, race, religion, way of life, or shared political experience. A "single modernity" perspective can make sense of both the core elements of the "package" and the flexible adaptability and chronic contestation of its component ideas and organizational forms.

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