The variability of belonging

A reply to Rogers Brubaker

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Rogers Brubaker's generous response clarifies much, but raises an intellectual puzzle: just what is it we disagree about? Like him, I suspect we are mostly in accord – and more in accord with each other than with most others in the field. While this is good news – I would rather play on the same team as Brubaker – it also makes me worry that my representation of his work was unfair. I hope not, but let me try to clarify what is at stake, where we agree, and where I may wish to claim something different from (though not necessarily contradictory to) Brubaker. At the same time, encouraged by the editors, I will expand a bit on some aspects of this related to the importance of ethnicities.

What is at stake for me is understanding social solidarities, especially those formed at levels between what were once called 'primary groups' (immediate families and close friends) and humanity as a whole. This entails grasping the ways in which the social is co-equal to the personal, constitutive of it, and therefore not merely legitimate, but necessary and important. The converse is also true: that persons constitute the social through their actions, and that though these actions are never entirely free of social determinants they do offer us at least a little chance to shape social reality as well as our own place within the social world.

In other words, as human beings we make our histories, but we do so both under conditions not of our own choosing and also in ways that are not independently individual. Each of us is 'social' as we pursue our individual ends, as well as on those occasions when we consciously pursue collective ends. Being 'social' involves being inescapably determined by, dependent on, and committed to other people, patterns of social organization, and culture. We may recognize none of these determinations, dependencies, or commitments – or only recognize them in distorted ways; even if we recognize them more or less accurately we may complain of them rather than honoring them. But they are real, both 'objectively' as phenomena in the world and 'subjectively' as conditions of our own action. Of course, their reality can be grasped dynamically and processually, not only in problematically substantialist ways.

My guess is that Brubaker would agree with all of this. But my worry is that in his generally salutary critique of 'groupism' (Brubaker, 2002) he both underestimates the importance of particular collectivities and adopts language that obscures the necessity and some of the importance of the social. I do not mean to imply that Brubaker advocates an asocial

individualism (and if my original phrasing implied this, I apologize). Nor do I think that most other advocates of cosmopolitan democracy intend this, but I do fear that their arguments and Brubaker's may encourage such a view. Likewise, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) clearly recognize that particularity is important. But I think too much gets tossed out along with the genuinely specious notion that ethnicities, nations, or other social groups are internally homogeneous, sharply bounded, and self-subsistent.

Specifically, I think Brubaker underestimates the constitutive role of culture and the ways in which the general phenomenon of human embeddedness in social relations also necessarily, but unequally, takes the specific form of embeddedness in particular collectivities.

Culture plays a necessary role in making persons – that is, enabling biological humans to be psychological and sociological humans. It also enables our access to each other and to the rest of the world, not least, but not only, through language, and in doing so shapes this access and the people who participate in it. This means not only that culture is in itself an important topic of study, but that it is inherently productive of groupings of those who share more of a common access. I say 'groupings' to avoid for the moment the implications of 'groups' in the strong sense which Brubaker rightly challenges. Cultural differences and commonalties generally do not admit to sharp boundaries. New differences are continually produced within otherwise common cultures, and of course the extent to which reproduction is achieved or innovation encouraged also varies.

What is meant by common culture could of course be unpacked – language, norms, beliefs, and tacit assumptions all matter and are linked but not sharply coupled to each other. I have in mind Raymond Williams' (1989[1968]: 38) stress on the ways in which people marked by class inequalities and domination may nonetheless join in a 'common process of participation in the creation of meanings and values'. E.P. Thompson's (1993) account of 'customs in common' is similar. Common culture is at work in each of the three analytic dimensions Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 17) propose as alternatives to identity: greater or lesser cultural commonalty is thus one of the variables contributing to groupness; culture shapes processes of identification and categorization, and culture informs self-understanding. But culture is not simply always already there as though external, but produced and reproduced in a shared process of practical action. Moreover, common culture not only contributes to 'groupness', it contributes to the extent to which groups appear to their members (and sometimes others) as natural and necessary rather than arbitrary and optional. And this is not merely a folk understanding to be supplanted by an academic one.

Brubaker draws on Bourdieu's (1990) account of a practical sense that people have of themselves and their social world. Part of what Bourdieu draws attention to in his analyses of *le sens pratique* is, however, the

intuitive sense people have of what is possible or not possible for them. This helps to shape the direction of their activity (as the dual meaning of '*sens*' suggests). It shapes the ways working-class youth collude in their own academic failures, the reasons Béarnaise peasants fail to find wives and account for their own celibacy, and the fatalism with which Kabyle labor migrants accept the inequalities they face. It also shapes, conversely, the ways in which the privileged and consecrated feel the world is open to them, its prizes theirs for the taking, success the result of a meritocratic competition.

All of these examples involve people located in social space and actions shaped by social relations. But it is important that some of them create experiences of individual empowerment while others create experiences of individual incapacity. The privileged feel free as individuals precisely because their habituses are well attuned to the dominant socio-cultural organization. But the less privileged experience a mismatch between their embodied capacities to generate action and some of the fields in which they are forced to act – notably those of economy and state. These contradictions are especially profound and problematic when people with 'habituses' formed in one social setting are confronted with the necessity to try to act on a larger stage, as Bourdieu (1976, 1977, 2002; Bourdieu and Sayad, 1964) saw most strikingly in the transformation of Algeria in the 1950s (but also in contemporary France). This systematic disempowerment has the effect also of binding them to others who share was of seeing and taking hold of the world. In some settings – schools, marriage markets in which girls have new options and urban tastes, broader market economies – their capacities for taking hold of the world and organizing effective action are undermined. They are like rugby players trying to play soccer – and being consistently called for fouls. They are more effective with others who play the same game.

Ethnicity is often like this. It is not merely an attribute of individuals, nor is it any specific attribute shared by all members of one set of people and no others. It is a commonality of understanding, access to the world, and mode of action that facilitates the construction of social relationships and provides a common rhetoric even to competition and quarrels. In one sense it is helpful to say something like people *participate* to varying degrees in ethnicity, rather than that they simply are or are not members of ethnic groups. It is indeed a relational phenomenon not simply a substance. But it is also reproduced in ways that bind people into certain relationships and not others. That ethnicity is not a substance, thus, does not mean it is not productive of groupness. It is, and especially in settings of ethnic diversity and among those who are least empowered as individuals, within the dominant field of social organization and competition. Of course the rich and powerful also benefit from habits that make their interactions with each other smoother. But these tend to be shared more narrowly than with what

are usually called nations and ethnic groups. In any case, objections to this reinforcement of privilege do not necessarily apply to the practical 'groupism' of the subaltern. And ascription and discrimination reinforce this.

Take Islamic identity politics in Algeria. Bourdieu insisted that Islam should not be seen as simply an a priori identity that created political projects or divisions. He stressed the ways in which colonialism, the secular state and, above all, the economic situation led to the production of Islamism. Already in the 1950s he had analyzed increased wearing of the veil as a response to colonialism. In showing that it was not simply a *reflection* of identity, he did indeed stress the larger field of relations. But the same analysis (as well as subsequent cultural-political history) shows that the newly produced or refashioned identity was highly efficacious. Statically presented prior identities explain little in social analysis and mislead us about how the world works, but the projects of establishing identity are crucial to social and political life. They are often contentious. The projects may achieve only minimal success, with loose markers of 'identities' that actors may regard as optional. But they may also produce identities which deeply enough shape actors' self-understandings and understandings of how the world itself is organized that they feel compulsory and are powerful variables in social analysis.

Something of the same problem has long been apparent in studies of nationalism. Author after author has slipped from showing the artificially constructed and sometimes false character of national self-understandings and histories into suggesting that nations are somehow not real. Traditions may be no less real for being invented, however, or even for incorporating falsehoods. The critique of these claimed histories – and especially claims that they justify contemporary violence – is important. But it is a sociological misunderstanding to think that the reality of nations depends on the accuracy of their collective self-representations (Calhoun, 1997).

Brubaker and Cooper put forward several terms as alternatives to 'identity'. 'Identification' and 'self-understanding' distinguish two of the many processes that may be confused if only the omnibus term 'identity' is used; 'groupness' emphasizes the variability of outcomes. But even together these don't adequately get at the ways in which common culture enables some people to work more effectively in relation to specific others than to the world at large. They don't get at the extent to which cultural reproduction is organized inside such commonalties. And accordingly they turn our attention away from the ways in which people are disadvantaged when these commonalties are undermined. Threats to such 'commonalties' of culture and the social practices and relationships they help to make possible produce greater self-consciousness about the scope of their operation. Put another way, challenges to the reproduction of cultural patterns engender efforts to defend them that may contribute to making them sharper

identities. It is not only the categorizations of outsiders that have this effect. Brubaker and Cooper are right to point out how much governing institutions are responsible for substantialist views of ethnicity, thus, but this is not the whole story. People often label the groupings within which they feel most at home and actively defend these.

I agree with Brubaker that for most research purposes it makes sense to treat groups less as fixed entities than as variables. Indeed, 'the tendency to take sharply bounded, putatively homogenous groups as basic constituents of social life' is truly troubling. As it happens, I think that the contrasting tendency – to see individuals as ontologically primary and groups and social relations as secondary or derivative – is even more ingrained in contemporary social science and indeed the modern world. This was the tendency against which I argued in the article published here because of the way in which it informs much cosmopolitanism. But both positions are problematic and I have argued in a variety of places against the versions of the 'groupist' tendency (from Calhoun, 1980 to Calhoun, 1999). Nonetheless, Brubaker may be right that I should have made more of the problem, not just mentioning it in passing as a 'slip' towards which communitarians tend (though it is by no means restricted to them).

For what it is worth, not all who praise community and culture claim that these are sharply bounded or internally homogeneous. For Charles Taylor, thus, to speak of 'the' culture or 'the' community is truly a *lapse* not a consistent commitment to 'groupism'. He has elsewhere made clear that he recognizes not just fuzziness at the boundaries and internal heterogeneity but the interrelationship of a variety of cultural traditions and influences that overlap each other only partially. I stress this because I think communitarian arguments have been taken somewhat unreasonably as exemplars of negative 'groupism' by self-declared cosmopolitans. And in this regard, Brubaker is right to note that individualists are just as prone to substantialist presumptions as groupists.

In any case, as I suggest in the present paper, it is important to pay attention not only to variation in the extent of 'groupness' but also in its form. Whether it is more a matter of networks, of categorical similarities, or of functional interdependence matters a good deal. Likewise, I agree with Brubaker about the value of relational analyses (such as those of Pierre Bourdieu) in trying to overcome the hypostatization of both individuals and groups as self-subsisting entities. But I would stress more than Brubaker and Cooper do that what should be overcome is hypostatization and notions of self-subsistence, not all reference to identity or solidary groups. The problems lie not in the terms 'group', or even 'identity', but in certain tendencies of usage. I agree that the terms are not analytically precise, but they are useful signifiers of analytic issues.

Groups should not be presumed to be sharply bounded or internally homogeneous; they should be seen as variably solidary, salient, and stable.

They should not be presumed by sociologists to be the self-subsistent building blocks of society. But it should be recognized that, from the point of view of actors at least, some of them may appear as always already there, more or less immutable, and powerfully coercive over individuals. It would be a mistake to confuse this with historical priority, but it should be apparent that the (always variable) formation of groups is inherent to social life.

Likewise, collective identities should not be assumed to be attributes common to clearly demarcated collectivities, let alone definitive of the persons in those collectivities. We should be wary of an 'idiom of identity' that leaves us with a 'blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary' (Brubaker and Cooper 2003: 2). But we should also recognize the cultural commonality that encourages 'identification', similar 'self-understandings', and 'groupness'. And even if we reject the facile notions of self-discovery and claims to identity we should see the importance of claims about being distinct from doing – who I am, which is a crucial basis for what I should do.

This is evident, I think, in Bourdieu's (1976) account of the Kabyle peasant guided by the pursuit of honor. The fundamental principle of '*nif*' is precisely one of identity – as a man of honor (and it is a male principle). Honor accrues to the man who does what is right in itself (not strategically effective). One may manifest *nif* to greater or lesser degree, but central to Bourdieu's contrast of traditional Kabyle society (as he reconstructs it) to colonial Algeria and modern France is the extent to which the Kabyle hierarchy is based on inequalities that are truly personal rather than inherited. The institutions of modern society he shows to be reproducers of an unequal accumulation of social capital (in its various forms) which is bestowed on certain persons for reasons other than their own character and actions.

In all settings, people find themselves in, and actively work to situate themselves in, groups. These groups are composed of relationships that are more or less bounded, more or less dense, more or less richly multiplex (rather than single-purpose), and more or less systematic. They may be of trivial significance, mere demonstrations of human propensities to construct 'us' and 'them' distinctions (as in Tajfel's 1970 classroom experiments). Or they may be profoundly meaningful to the persons involved, or profoundly consequential. Let me revisit one of Brubaker's and Cooper's (2000) examples.

In his famous study of the Nuer, Evans-Pritchard (1940) laid out a brilliantly concise model of a segmentary lineage system. Brubaker and Cooper rightly recognize that such a system constructs the social world in terms of degrees of connectedness and difference, and that affiliation along a 'sliding scale' is a common pattern. Indeed, 'in almost all societies, kinship concepts are symbolic and ideological resources, yet while they shape norms,

self-understandings, and perceptions of affinity, they do not necessarily produce kinship "groups" ' (2000: 24). As others have emphasized, identities may be situational. Lineage segments don't exist in and of themselves; while people identify with them under some circumstances they are insignificant in others. What scale of 'identification' is significant varies with the social relationships in play in a particular situation.

Brubaker and Cooper (2000) stress the evanescent character of lineage segments in the 'sliding scale' of identity. But there is another side to this. Lineages and clans are sometimes the units of struggle or competition in a feud. Feuds seldom involve the organization of collective action precisely at the scale of clan or lineage segment; raids are carried out rather by individuals and smaller groups. So in one sense, 'groupness' looks low. At the same time, all members (or at least all male members) of the relevant category share both liability to attack and responsibility for avenging the honor of the clan or lineage. Brothers and more or less distant cousins are fair game until a balance is achieved. In another sense, thus, there is a high level of groupness. Collective responsibility also translates into an incentive for members of the group to exercise social control over their fellows – since each may be affected by the actions of others. And in these cases, at least, it works with a fairly high level of boundedness and equivalence among members of the group (even though this does not amount to homogeneity on other dimensions). This is what anthropologists have meant by speaking of the 'corporate' character of such descent groups (Smith, 1956; Moore, 1972). And of course it is almost always descent and not affinal ties that organize such groups.

The significance of collective responsibility is not limited to lineage-based societies. This version of it is distinctive because of the logic of honor that binds members of the group. We see this, as Bourdieu (2001) noted, in the concern for purity of the lineage that structures male-dominance among the Kabyle; it also structures loyalties and collective responsibilities of lineage members. But we also see this in the tit-for-tat murders frequent in ethnic conflicts. And while the escalation into genocide reflects the loss of any traditional notion of balance, it still reflects a logic of collective liability. Stories of prior atrocities would circulate and encourage killing of Muslims in Bosnia or Tutsi in Rwanda. These categories were artificially constructed and not precisely bounded, and thus Brubaker's and Cooper's argument about the problems of simply blaming ethnic struggles on identities is on target. But, once called into action as units of collective liability, the categories also gave members compelling reasons to join together in mutual solidarity and defense, and thus to make what had been previously a more abstract groupness more real.

Colonial rule, Brubaker and Cooper note, attempted to impose a more fixed, more sharply bounded, one-to-one mapping of peoples to territories and, in the process, of individuals to groups. One of the products of this was

treating the Nuer as a singular, bounded 'tribe' and failing to recognize that the boundaries of 'Nuer' were fuzzy, situational, and negotiable – much like those of segments within Nuer lineages. Brubaker and Cooper cite Hutchinson's (1995) study of the Nuer in the midst of later civil war, and its refusal 'to reduce the conflict to one of cultural or religious difference between the warring parties and insists instead on a deep analysis of political relationships, struggles for economic resources, and spatial connections'. On this basis they suggest that 'it becomes difficult to see Nuerness as an identity'.

This seems to set a very high standard for recognizing identity – only perfectly bounded, fixed, and internally homogenous categories share identity; family resemblances are not accepted. I would rather say that Nuerness is clearly an identity – but perhaps not a clear one. It is mobilized by some, evaded by others, used, perhaps abused, lacking in clear boundaries and shifting over time and with contexts. It is not a trump card against other identities. What Brubaker and Cooper show is that it is not sharply bounded, fixed, and prior to the relationships and struggles of social life. The Sudanese civil war didn't result from differences among internally homogenous groups, and it certainly can't be reduced to that. Reasoning about ethnic conflict often makes precisely this error – and not just in the Sudan but in the former Yugoslavia and USSR, in Indonesia, and in the Middle East. And in rejecting this I am completely in accord with Brubaker, Cooper, and Hutchinson. Yet it is cold comfort to those shot because they are on the wrong side, those whose children starve because the government blocks the delivery of food aid, or those who wonder whether their way of life and indeed their lineage(s) can survive.

The Sudanese civil war – it still drags on – is about region as well as ethnicity, and about economic resources, language, and religion – and each of these in ways influenced by international actors as well as competing national projects in the Sudan. Chevron developed the oil fields near Bentiu, Arabicization of the Sudanese educational system was bankrolled by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, and the resurgent Islamism that helped to reopen conflict and intensify some of its latest phases was stimulated by the Iranian Revolution and participates in a far-reaching network of teachings, contests over orthodoxy, and political struggles. So the civil war certainly can't be reduced to a priori tensions among ethnic groups defined on the basis of hard and fast identities. Against this target Brubaker and Cooper are in the right and deserve every success.

But this doesn't entail quite so much criticism of 'identity' as they level at it. First, we should note that 'Nuer' means one thing in the Rubkona or Ruweng countryside, another thing in Juba (the main regional city), and still another thing in Khartoum. It is a fluid identifier, or 'identification', thus, and Brubaker and Cooper are right that Evans-Pritchard's account probably made it too self-contained. But part of the difference among the

three settings I mentioned is that Nuer make up less of the social universe as one moves from countryside to small city to capital. In Khartoum, during the lull between the two main phases of the civil war, Nuer migrants were much in evidence – partly because of a distinctive occupational niche. A bit like the Iroquois in some US cities in a different era, they were heavily over-represented in construction work and especially up on the beams and scaffolds. They stood out all the more for their thinness, height, and the elegance of their movements. Dinka, the traditional enemies of the Nuer (but also distinguished by a much fuzzier boundary than Evans-Pritchard had suggested) were more apt to show up in jobs requiring a modicum of education and a more 'western' presentation of self – as doormen at inter-national hotels, for example, or public officials (not to mention basketball stars).

Ethnicity isn't simply something Nuer 'have' which always and indelibly marks them (though in southern Sudan one ought not to ignore physical markings like scarification and tooth removal). Such an implication is part of what bothers Brubaker and Cooper in many uses of 'identity'. Certainly ethnicity was attributed to the Nuer by the British colonial state, and both the colonial and the new Sudanese states reified boundaries like that between Nuer and Dinka. But ethnicity is also constructed out of the juxta-position of Nuer to others in a social field expanded by state-making, market economies, and migration to cities. Ethnicity becomes significant largely because the relational identities of the kinship system do somewhat less work. They don't disappear, and they still organize a good deal of Nuer life. The categorical identities of clanship are also potent. But the larger categorical identity – Nuer – becomes newly salient. Rather than simply a sliding scale of connectedness, what Granovetter (1973) called 'the strength of weak ties' becomes operative. Now, to be sure, Granovetter identified strong ties as 'in-group' and weak ties as those of mere acquaintanceship often outside primary groups (thus perhaps participating in Brubaker's 'groupism' even though he is clearly a relational analyst). But the relevant point is that scattered ties, those not reinforced by being knit into dense networks or accompanied by distinctively strong normative constructions, play a significant role in organizing relationships. In Khartoum, thus, the ethnic (or 'tribal') identity organizes relationships among Nuer who are genealogically distant (or would seem so back in the grazing lands). Being Nuer thus matters in a new way in the cities.

If this involves a dilution of the kinship system, it also commonly brings a sharpening of categorical boundaries and identity pressures within them. Sharing ethnicity does not automatically make the Nuer a strong group. It yields a category of relatively similar people. Within such a category, there may be pockets like families or neighborhoods in which ties are denser and more binding. And of course what counts as ethnicity is subject to manipu-lation and the claims of some to represent others. The Nuer have very little

capacity for organized collective action on the scale of the whole ethnic category, though various subgroups and leaders may claim to speak for all.

There are a variety of stakes in ethnicity; strong collective liability is extreme and capacity for collective action at the level of the group as a whole rare to the point of non-existence. But mild versions of collective responsibility structure relationships as people help their co-ethnics and feel implicated in the actions of others. The behavior of each Nuer – or each Sikh in Toronto or Korean in New York – reflects on the larger ethnic group in ways other members can't easily escape. One may make more or less of ethnicity, both as a collection of cultural contents and as a predisposition to certain relationships. As in the main example of the strength of weak ties, ethnicity can help one get a job. But one may also 'pass' as a member of a different group (or simply as someone not marked by a stigmatized identity). Indeed, the example of passing suggests some of the purchase the notion of identity retains (even if, as Brubaker and Cooper suggest, it is imprecise and overworked). With its implications of a 'real' identity foresworn, the idea of passing is clearly ideologically loaded, different from the simpler notion of changing group affiliation (which, of course, is also possible, though usually difficult in the case of ethnic groups).

It is common to speak of 'discovering' one's identity – in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, or more individual definitions. This is, of course, misleading. It involves misrecognizing as natural that which is socio-culturally produced, and as always already there that which is at least in part the product of action. Nonetheless, the common usage reveals the extent to which 'self-understanding' can be experienced as a matter of gaining a 'substantive' right answer to the question of 'who I am', or as a matter of recognition not construction, compulsory not optional. Ethnicity is neither clearly bounded, nor fixed, nor always already there. Brubaker is quite right about this. But in debunking substantivist illusions about groups, we ought not to lose sight of the reasons why ethnicity may *feel* binding, may be not only an effect of social relations but itself part of the organization of practical action, and may predispose people to form and value groups – even if these are not perfectly bounded, internally homogenous, or the a priori building blocks of social structure.

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