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

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INTRODUCTION

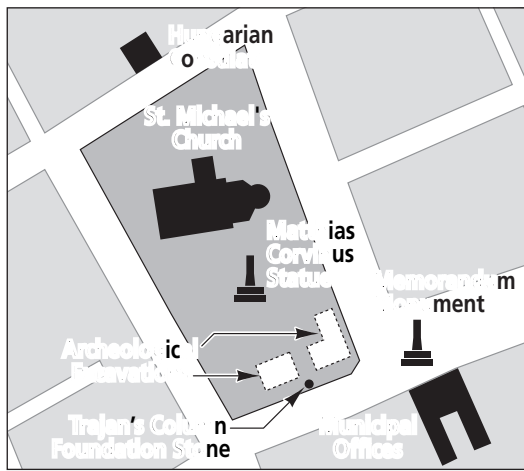
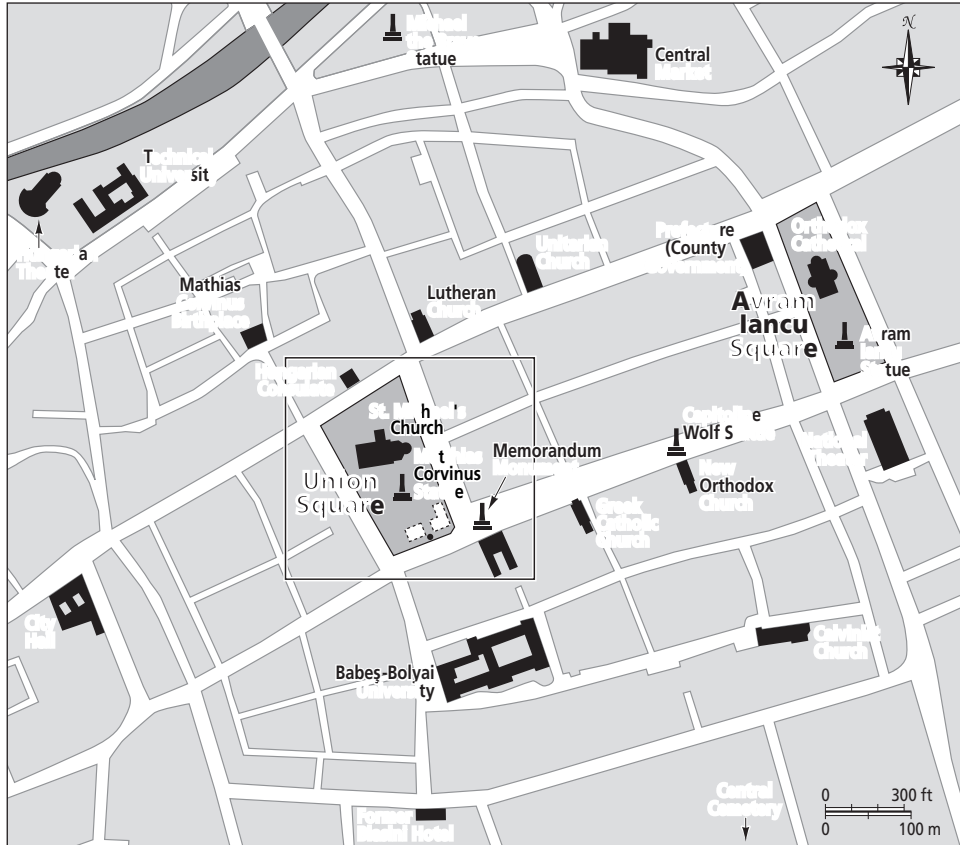
SHORTLY AFTER ten o'clock one morning in July 1997, a small truck pulled up in front of the Hungarian Consulate in the Transylvanian town of Cluj, Romania's fifth-largest city and Transylvania's unofficial capital. Between the third-story windows of the Consulate flew a red, white, and green Hungarian flag.

Two days earlier, the Consulate had reopened for business after a nine-year hiatus. It had been shut down by the Romanian government in 1988 in response to growing public criticism, in gradually liberalizing late-communist Hungary, of the Ceaușescu dictatorship and its treatment of the country's ethnoculturally Hungarian minority—one of the largest minorities in Eastern Europe, some 1.6 million people according to the census that was conducted in 1992, accounting for about 7 percent of the population of Romania and 20 percent of the population of Transylvania.¹ Diplomatic relations had remained strained after the fall of Ceaușescu in December 1989, largely because of continuing frictions concerning the status of the Hungarian minority. But relations improved markedly in 1996: a liberal, pro-Western coalition government replaced a more nationalist government in Bucharest, while the socialist-liberal government that had come to power in Hungary in 1994 was more eager to cultivate good relations with Romania than the more nationalist governments that preceded (and followed) it. The reopening of the Consulate was one fruit of that rapprochement.

In Cluj, however, outspoken nationalist Gheorghe Funar, well known for his inflammatory rhetoric, confrontational style, and anti-Hungarian animus, had just been elected to a second term as mayor. Funar objected vociferously to the reopening of the Consulate, situated in a prime location on the north side of the town's main square (map 1). For the mayor, it was already a problem that the architecture of the square evoked the town's Habsburg and Hungarian past.² The square is dominated by the

¹ Kürti, *The Remote Borderland*, 129–30; Iordachi, "The Anatomy of a Historical Conflict," chapter III.b.4. Romania's 2002 census recorded substantially fewer ethnic Hungarians, about 1.43 million; on the decline, see this volume, chapter 4 (pp. 158–59) and the epilogue.

² Cluj was a predominantly Hungarian-speaking city from the seventeenth through the mid-twentieth century. Transylvania had long been part of the historic Kingdom of Hungary, and it was an integral part of the nationalizing Hungarian state that enjoyed nearly complete independence in domestic matters during the last half-century of Habsburg rule, from 1867 to 1918. We discuss these historical contexts in chapters 2 and 3.



Map 1. Cluj Town Center

massive bulk and stately spire of the austere late Gothic Church of Saint Michael, and by the adjacent equestrian statue of the Renaissance-era king of Hungary, Matthias Corvinus. Both church and statue can be seen as “Hungarian”: almost all parishioners of the church are Hungarian, and the statue is an early twentieth-century monument to Hungarian nationalism.³ When the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed at the end of World War I, the town (along with the rest of Transylvania) had become part of Romania, but Hungarians remained a local majority until the 1950s, and the central square could still be seen as having retained a “Hungarian” atmosphere.

In an effort to neutralize these Hungarian associations, and to assert the Romanian character of the square, Funar had undertaken a variety of initiatives since coming to office in 1992.⁴ He had reinstalled a 1930s-era plaque on the base of the statue, presenting a Romanian nationalist view of Matthias Corvinus. He had sponsored archaeological excavations in the square, designed to reveal Roman ruins and thereby to assert Romanian priority in Cluj (by virtue of the putative direct link between ancient Romans and modern Romanians). He had threatened to move the equestrian statue, or to remove it (“for restoration”). He had erected three towering flagpoles, flying Romanian flags, on either side of the equestrian monument, and strung pennants with Romanian national colors—red, yellow, and blue—between them. Later he would replace the white benches in the square with new ones painted in the Romanian colors. In the context of these ongoing efforts to “nationalize” the symbolically charged square, the prospect of a Hungarian Consulate functioning, and a Hungarian flag flying, was taken as a provocation by Funar. He issued a series of statements denouncing the Consulate, and warned that he would refuse to permit its opening. When it opened nonetheless, he boycotted the opening ceremony, attended by the foreign ministers of Hungary and Romania.

This was the setting on the July morning when the truck pulled up in front of the Consulate. Several men got out of the truck, and placed an extendable ladder against the side of the building. As passers-by looked on, one man climbed the ladder and removed the offending flag from its place next to the third-story window.

In severely divided societies, symbolic provocations such as this have served as flashpoints for ethnic or nationalist violence.⁵ In other contexts,

³ Religion and ethnicity are closely correlated in Transylvania: Orthodox and Greek Catholics are overwhelmingly Romanian, Calvinists overwhelmingly Hungarian, and Roman Catholics in their large majority Hungarian. On the ethnonational symbolism of the statue and its vicissitudes under differing regimes, see chapter 3, pp. 96–97, 100, 108.

⁴ These and other nationalizing initiatives are discussed in chapter 4, pp. 136–46; they are also documented in the color plates and halftones.

⁵ On the role of well-defined “rituals of provocation” in Hindu-Muslim violence in South Asia, see Gaborieau, “From Al-Beruni to Jinnah.”

too, such provocations have generated outrage and spontaneous or organized protests. Yet the theft of the flag did not provoke so much as a demonstration or the signing of petitions in Cluj. The event featured prominently in the next day's Hungarian newspaper; but the town's Hungarian residents, comprising about a fifth of the population, were not particularly exercised about it. Though some expressed outrage, others would snort derisively, make faces, and roll their eyes, as if to say, "What did you expect?" or "There he goes again." The episode was not represented as a desecration of a sacred national symbol; it was just another one of Funar's provocations, to which Hungarians had become accustomed over the preceding five years. It was discussed in the idiom of farce, not that of sacred drama. The perpetrators were arrested (the police being controlled not by the municipality, but by the county, whose officials depend, in turn, on the central government); and though Funar characterized them as patriots and proposed to make them honorary citizens of Cluj, the flag was duly restored to its place, where it has remained undisturbed ever since.⁶

This small incident points to a larger set of concerns. The theft of the flag was not an isolated incident; as indicated above, it was part of a broader politics of symbolic nationalization pursued by Mayor Funar. And Funar himself was not simply a local eccentric, but a leading figure in statewide nationalist politics.⁷ Nor was Funar's the only nationalist show in town. Cluj was (and remains) the headquarters of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians of Romania (DAHR), at once an umbrella organization claiming to represent the Hungarian minority and a statewide political party, committed to a far-reaching form of territorial and cultural autonomy for Hungarians. From the other side of Romania's western border, Hungary has made claims to protect the rights of "its" coethnics in Romania and elsewhere, and it has been represented in Romanian nationalist rhetoric as continuing to harbor irredentist aspirations. Local ethnopolitical struggles have been intertwined with statewide and interstate nationalist conflicts.

A number of elements for an explosive and potentially violent ethnonational conflict seemed to be united in Cluj after the fall of Ceaușescu: a radically nationalist and vitriolically anti-Hungarian mayor between 1992 and 2004; a well-organized, well-financed, and strongly nationalist

⁶ See plate 1. Our account is based on the reporting in *Szabadság*, July 26 through August 6, 1997, and on the July 31 and August 1, 1997, daily press reports compiled by the DAHR from statewide and local Romanian and Hungarian language papers (archived at <http://www.hhrf.org/rmdsz/sajtofigyelo/>).

⁷ Funar was chairman of the extreme nationalist Party of Romanian National Unity from 1992 to 1997 and has been general secretary of the equally nationalist Greater Romania Party since 1998.

Hungarian political party; nationalist Romanian- and Hungarian-language print and broadcast media; and bitter political conflicts over statues, plaques, flags, and other national emblems and insignia. To this could be added a series of equally inauspicious historical and contextual factors: the pulverization of civil society and heavy-handed official nationalism bequeathed by the Ceaușescu regime; the dismal economic situation of postcommunist Romania, and the dislocations and disillusionment occasioned by the “transition”; the long-standing nationalist struggle in and over Transylvania, leading to four changes in sovereignty since the mid-nineteenth century, the most recent of which—in 1940 and 1944—remain within living memory of the older generation; the violent dissolution and prolonged agony of Yugoslavia (with which both Romania and Hungary share a border); and, closer at hand, the episode of bloody street fighting between Hungarians and Romanians in March 1990 in Târgu-Mureș, just 100 kilometers to the east of Cluj.⁸

Yet Clujeni responded on the whole with equanimity and detachment, indeed with considerable indifference, to the nationalist rhetoric that has saturated public discourse. Despite initial alarm about Mayor Funar’s hypernationalist rhetoric and harshly anti-Hungarian pronouncements, local Hungarians came to treat the mayor’s symbolic provocations with scorn, derision, and in some cases even amusement, rather than alarm, and to speak of the mayor himself as “crazy” or “sick” rather than dangerous. And Romanians did not seem to be taking seriously his alarmist pronouncements—his characterization of the DAHR as a “terrorist organization,” for example, or his assertion that Transylvanian Hungarians were secretly collecting weapons, forming paramilitary detachments, and planning an attack on Romanians.⁹ With few and transitory exceptions, Clujeni were not afraid; they were not concerned that what happened in Yugoslavia—or in Târgu-Mureș—might happen in Cluj.¹⁰ The absence of such fear is telling, especially since the previous regime was notorious for fostering fear, suspicion, and mistrust.

Equally striking was the weakness of popular nationalist mobilization and the absence of serious ethnic tension in everyday life. A handful of substantial demonstrations marked the first year and a half of Funar’s tenure, but thereafter collective action was infrequent and

⁸ We discuss this episode of violent conflict in chapter 4, pp. 127–36.

⁹ See chapter 4, pp. 136–38, 144–46.

¹⁰ Fear is crucial to the social mechanisms and cultural meanings through which violence originates and spreads. See for example Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 175–84, emphasizing political psychology; Posen, “The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,” transposing the analysis of the “security dilemma” from the domain of inter-state relations to that of intergroup relations; Lake and Rothchild, “Containing Fear,” highlighting strategic interaction; and T. Hansen, “Recuperating Masculinity,” in a more culturalist vein. For a review, see Brubaker and Laitin, “Ethnic and Nationalist Violence,” 441–43.

weak.¹¹ An outside observer, reading the local newspapers, Hungarian or Romanian, might well get the impression that there were serious tensions between “the Hungarians” and “the Romanians.” And a researcher coming to town for a brief visit to study ethnopolitical contention, and meeting with representatives of the mayor’s office, the DAHR, local NGOs, and journalists, might have had that impression confirmed. Yet had that researcher stayed longer and settled into the rhythms of everyday life, she would have been hard-pressed to find evidence of that tension among ordinary Clujeni. She would have found plenty of people in the streets, at least in the crowded town center, but they would have been shopping, or cramming the buses and trams on their way to work, or sunning themselves on the benches in the main squares, heedless of the Romanian national colors on which, courtesy of the mayor, they were sitting. She might well have heard people complaining, but Romanians and Hungarians would most likely have been complaining about the same things—high prices, worthless pensions, and self-serving politicians—in the same, non-ethnicized way. She would not have seen people marching on City Hall, or assembling for demonstrations or protest meetings.

This, then, is one set of observations from which we start. For twelve years, Cluj was a turbulent site of nationalist politics, Hungarian as well as Romanian. Yet it was far from a “seething cauldron,” on the verge of boiling over, or a “tinderbox” that a single careless spark could ignite—to mention just two images invoked by pundits writing about ethnic and nationalist conflict.¹² People were not afraid, despite attempts to frighten them; they did not take to the streets, despite attempts to mobilize them. Heated nationalist rhetoric evoked only muted popular response.

The tepid response of ordinary Clujeni to fervent ethnonational rhetoric does not mean that ethnicity and nationhood have little meaning outside the political realm. Social life is powerfully, though unevenly, structured along ethnic lines; and ethnic and national categories are part of the taken-for-granted framework of social and political experience. Ethnicity and nationhood (or “nationness”) “happen” every day in Cluj, even if many such happenings are invisible or uninteresting to students of collective action or ethnic violence. They are embodied and expressed not only in political claims and nationalist rhetoric but in everyday encounters, practical categories, commonsense knowledge, cultural idioms, cog-

¹¹ We discuss the protests, which focused on perceived threats posed by Funar’s nationalizing initiatives to the town’s central “Hungarian” symbol, the equestrian statue of Matthias Corvinus on the main square, in chapter 4, pp. 142–44.

¹² On the image of the seething cauldron, see Brubaker, “Myths and Misconceptions in the Study of Nationalism”; Bowen, “The Myth of Global Ethnic Conflict.”

nitive schemas, mental maps, interactional cues, discursive frames, organizational routines, social networks, and institutional forms. We examine such everyday embodiments and expressions as a way of addressing basic questions about ethnicity: where it is, when it matters, and how it works.¹³

We are prompted to raise these elementary—and seemingly naïve—questions by our dissatisfaction with prevailing analytical vocabularies and theoretical stances in the study of ethnicity and nationalism. Theorizing in this domain has been dominated for a quarter-century by constructivist approaches. The idea of social or cultural construction has been an exceptionally fertile metaphor; it has inspired a large and important body of work. Yet constructivism has grown complacent, even clichéd, with success. Once a bracing challenge to the conventional wisdom, it has become the conventional wisdom; once an insurgent idiom, it has become the epitome of academic respectability.

With respectability has come routinization. Familiar constructivist formulae have become well-worn gestures that one reads (and writes) virtually automatically. Discussions of ethnic and national identity, for example, come predictably packaged with standard sets of qualifiers, indicating that such identities are multiple, unstable, contingent, contested, fragmented, constructed, negotiated, and so on. The problem is not that this (or the notion of social construction in general) is wrong. It is rather too obviously right, too readily taken for granted, to generate the friction, force, and freshness needed to push arguments further and generate new insights. *That* ethnicity and nationhood are constructed is a commonplace; *how* they are constructed is seldom specified in detail.¹⁴

Constructivism coexists uneasily in the literature—and often even in individual works—with a decidedly nonconstructivist “groupism.” By this we mean the tendency to take internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups—here ethnic groups and nations—as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis. Grounded in what Pierre Bourdieu called “our primary inclination to think the social world in a substantialist manner,”¹⁵ this tendency to reify groups has proved surprisingly robust.

¹³ On “nationness,” see Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins*. The term itself was introduced by B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 3. This and the next few paragraphs draw on formulations in Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*.

¹⁴ Others, too, have voiced dissatisfaction with the current state of constructivist theorizing on ethnicity and have sought to make constructivist research more rigorous and cumulative. See for example Fearon and Laitin, “Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity”; Lustick, “Agent-based Modeling and Constructivist Identity Theory”; Gil-White, “Are Ethnic Groups Biological ‘Species’ to the Human Brain?”; Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov, “Ethnicity as Cognition”; Chandra, ed., *Ethnicity, Politics and Economics*.

¹⁵ Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 228.

Despite a quarter-century of constructivist theorizing—or perhaps precisely because constructivism has lost its intellectual edge—ethnic groups continue to be understood as entities and cast as actors. Everyday talk, policy analysis, media reports, and even much ostensibly constructivist academic writing routinely frame accounts of ethnic, racial, and national conflict as the struggles “of” ethnic groups, races, and nations. Somehow, when we talk about ethnicity, and even more when we talk about ethnic conflict, we almost automatically find ourselves talking about ethnic groups.¹⁶

This unhappy marriage of clichéd constructivism and engrained groupism has encumbered the study of ethnicity and nationalism with an analytical vocabulary that is too often flat and undifferentiated. To give the constructivist project renewed analytical purchase, we have sought to develop an analytical vocabulary for talking about ethnicity without (necessarily) talking about ethnic groups; we seek to show how ethnicity works—in politics and in everyday life—without automatically taking ethnic groups as our unit of analysis.

Constructivist accounts of ethnicity have flourished in the United States in particular in recent years; the fluidity of the American ethnic landscape has no doubt contributed to their popularity.¹⁷ At the same time, the “differentialist” turn in American social and political thought and the institutionalization of multiculturalist policies and practices have provided support for groupist ways of thinking, talking, and framing claims. In the American context, such groupism is an obvious target for constructivist criticism. It is easy enough, for example, to highlight the enormous cultural, social, and economic heterogeneity of each of the “groups” taken to constitute the canonical “ethnoracial pentagon”—African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and whites.¹⁸ It is only a short step further to argue that, with the partial exception of African Americans, these are not groups at all but categories, backed by political entrepreneurs and entrenched in governmental and other organizational routines of social counting and accounting.

The case we address—drawn from a region with more stable, deeply rooted, and intensely politicized ethnic and national identifications, and from a town that has experienced continuous and often embittered elite-level ethnopolitical conflict since the fall of communism—would seem

¹⁶ As Domínguez, *People as Subject, People as Object*, 38–39 points out, this is true even of much scholarship by researchers who are aware of the socially constructed nature of ethnicity.

¹⁷ On the permeability of ethnic boundaries in the United States, see for example Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity”; Heisler, “Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in the Modern West” (on “ethnic nominalism”); Waters, *Ethnic Options*.

¹⁸ On the “ethnoracial pentagon,” see Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 8f., 23ff., a subtle and influential critique of rigid forms of ethnoracial pluralism and a plea for a more cosmopolitan understanding of diversity.

to be more resistant to constructivist analysis. Talk about the fluidity, contingency, and perpetual negotiation and renegotiation of identities can appear frivolous or naïve in this context, and the critique of groupism might seem misplaced. If ethnic and national boundaries are harder, more durable, and more constraining in Eastern Europe than in the United States, it might be asked, then why *shouldn't* one take ethnic and national groups as units of analysis?¹⁹

Cluj is thus a challenging—and at first glance unlikely—setting for an effort to develop a more cogently constructivist and nongroupist account of ethnicity and nationalism. Yet here, too, it is problematic to render ethnopolitical conflict—and, a fortiori, everyday ethnicity—in groupist terms. A groupist reading conflates groups with the organizations that claim to speak and act in their name; obscures the generally low, though fluctuating, degree of “groupness” in this setting; accepts, at least tacitly, the claims of nationalist politicians to speak for the groups they claim to represent; and neglects the everyday contexts in which ethnic and national categories take on meaning and the processes through which ethnicity actually “works” in everyday life.

More generally, to cast ethnopolitical conflict in groupist terms is to take *vernacular* understandings—the substantialist notions of ethnicity and nationhood that are central to nationalist politics and to commonsense “folk sociology” in Cluj and elsewhere—as *analytic* categories. It is to work with a “preconstructed” commonsense object of analysis instead of constructing that object through a break with commonsense understandings.²⁰ It is to accept the implicit social ontology that underlies ethnopolitical and nationalist rhetoric: the treatment of internally homogeneous and externally bounded ethnic groups and nations as basic building blocks of social reality.²¹

¹⁹ There has of course been a good deal of constructivist work on ethnicity and nationalism in Eastern Europe. But constructivism lacks the taken-for-granted status in Eastern Europe—and among Eastern Europeanists—that it has in the United States. And casual, clichéd constructivism has come in for criticism, much of it justified. For sophisticated statements of skepticism about the appropriateness of characteristically American constructivist language for the analysis of ethnicity and nationalism in Eastern Europe, see for example Sardamov, “Facing South Slav Ethnocentrism”; Luczewski, “What Remains for Nationalism Studies?”

²⁰ On the “trap of the preconstructed object,” see Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 231; more generally, on object construction in the social sciences through a break with commonsense notions and vernacular categories, see 220–22, 227–29, 235–38, 247. On “folk sociology,” see Hirschfeld, *Race in the Making*, 115ff., 190. Breaking with commonsense notions in the construction of one’s object of analysis and analytic categories, of course, does not mean neglecting vernacular representations and participants’ understandings. Vernacular representations of ethnicity are part of what we seek to explain; but they are not what we explain things *with*. They belong to our data, not to our analytical tools.

²¹ To the extent that such essentialist understandings of ethnicity and nationhood are widely held, readily activated, and experientially salient in a given setting, of course, they can take on a psychological and social power that constructivist observers neglect at their peril. But the pervasive relevance, experiential centrality, and essentializing construal of ethnic and national categories cannot be assumed; it must be demonstrated.

Social science scholarship has long been closely entwined with nationalist politics. All social science research, to be sure, is closely bound up with the objects of its analysis, and can contribute to producing, reproducing, or transforming what it studies; but the interpenetration of the social sciences and nationalist discourse has been particularly intimate. In an overt manner, history, political science, geography, folklore, linguistics, archaeology, anthropology, sociology, law, economics, and other disciplines have been enlisted to legitimate national claims (and discredit competing claims). But there are also more subtle forms of complicity. As anthropologist Richard Handler has observed, scholars writing about nationalism tend to slip unwittingly into an analytical language that embodies characteristically nationalist assumptions about the boundedness, homogeneity, and historical continuity of “the nation.”²²

We have tried to avoid this hazard through a strategy of analytical disaggregation. This does not mean focusing on individuals instead of groups. Our critique of groupism and commitment to disaggregation entail neither an ontological nor a methodological individualism.²³ The choice is not between a universalist, individualist analytical idiom and an identitarian, groupist one; this is a false opposition.²⁴ The alternative to a substantialist understanding of ethnic groups and nations as bounded entities, collective individuals, and self-conscious actors is not an asocial idiom of individual choice, but rather a relational, processual, and dynamic understanding of ethnicity and “nation.”²⁵

In analyzing nationalist politics, past and present, in Cluj and the wider region, we focus on the interplay of national claims and counter-

²² As a result, Handler concludes, much scholarship on nationalism “is to some extent a rationalization of ‘native’ ideology” (*Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*, 8); see also the more extended discussion in idem, “On Dialogue and Destructive Analysis.” A similar observation could be made about scholarship on ethnicity.

²³ A substantial literature in political science and other fields has developed rational choice, game-theoretic, and other individualist approaches to ethnicity and nationalism. See for example Hardin, *One for All*; Hechter, *Principles of Group Solidarity*; Congleton, “Ethnic Clubs, Ethnic Conflict, and the Rise of Ethnic Nationalism”; McElreath, Boyd, and Richerson, “Shared Norms Can Lead to the Evolution of Ethnic Markers”; and for an approach combining formal modeling of individual choices with historical and political analysis, see Laitin, “National Revivals and Violence” and “Marginality: A Microperspective.”

²⁴ For an exchange on this point, see Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity’”; Calhoun, “Belonging in the Cosmopolitan Imaginary”; Brubaker, “Neither Individualism nor ‘Groupism’”; and Calhoun, “The Variability of Belonging.” Although the language of bounded groups and that of individual choice might seem antithetical, they are in fact closely related, for groupism is itself a kind of individualism, in a double sense, treating groups as collective individuals, and as collections of individuals (Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, 33; Handler, *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*, 32, 39–47; Calhoun, *Nationalism*, 42ff.).

²⁵ The priority of relations over substances—whether individuals or groups—was a major theme of the methodological and epistemological position developed by Pierre Bourdieu, drawing on the work of the neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer. See for example Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 15–16. An accessible statement by Cassirer is found in “The Influence of Language.”

claims, on the shifting discursive and political fields within which such claims and counterclaims are embedded, and on the dynamics of nationalizing projects and processes, without reifying “the nation”—Romanian or Hungarian—or treating “the Romanians” or “the Hungarians” as the protagonists of national struggles. Similarly, in analyzing everyday ethnicity, we focus on cues, identifications, languages, institutions, networks, and interactions, without assuming that everyday experience is pervasively organized by strong ethnic “identities.”²⁶

Central to our analysis of both nationalist politics and everyday ethnicity is the distinction between categories and groups. This is of course not a new distinction; but it is too often forgotten. If by “group” we mean a mutually interacting, mutually recognizing collectivity with a sense of solidarity, corporate identity, and capacity for concerted action, or even if we adopt a less exigent understanding of group, it should be clear that a category is not a group; it is at best a potential basis for group-formation or “groupness.”²⁷ By distinguishing consistently between categories and groups, we can problematize—rather than presume—the relation between them. We can ask about the degree of groupness associated with a particular category in a particular setting, and about the political, social, cultural, and psychological processes through which categories get invested with varying degrees of groupness.

Taking categories rather than groups as a point of departure has consequences for the sorts of questions one asks. Starting with groups, one is led to ask what groups want, demand, or aspire toward; how they think of themselves and others; and how they act in relation to other groups. One is led almost automatically by the substantialist language to attribute identity, agency, interests, and will to groups. Starting with categories, by contrast, invites us to focus on processes and relations rather than substances. It invites us to specify how people and organizations do things with ethnic and national categories, and how such categories, in turn, channel social interaction and organize commonsense knowledge and judgments.²⁸ It invites us to analyze the organizational and discursive careers of categories—the processes through which they become

²⁶ For a critical analysis of the overburdened and ambiguous notion of identity, see Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity.’”

²⁷ This and the next paragraph draw on formulations in Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, chapter 1. On categories and groups, see Sacks, *Lectures on Conversation*, 1:41, 401; Handelmann, “The Organization of Ethnicity”; McKay and Lewins, “Ethnicity and the Ethnic Group”; Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity*, 53ff. A similar point was made in different terms by Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 307 (the passage is unfortunately obscured in the English translation; cf. *Economy and Society*, 389). On “groupness,” see Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, 62ff. Further pertinent literature is cited in Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, chapters 1–3.

²⁸ “Doing things with categories” includes limiting access to scarce resources or particular domains of activity by excluding categorically distinguished outsiders (Weber, *Economy and*

