



There Is More to Groups of People Than Just Groups and People: On Trans-Actional Analysis and Nationalism Studies

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Historically Nationalism Studies (e.g. Kohn 1944; Gellner 1983, 1997; Anderson 1983; Smith 1986, 1998; Connor 1990; Greenfeld 1992; Schöpflin 1997, 2005; Hobsbawm 1997) focus on the formation of nations and the development of their collective identities, trying to answer fundamental questions, such as:

- Are nations ancient or modern?
- What is the connection between ethnicity and nationhood?
- How did industrialization and modernization determine/shape the formation of nations?
- How does (the lack of) historical statehood influence the development of a nation—is it fruitful to talk about civic and ethnic nations?

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- In what ways do different nations influence each others' formation?
- What are the grounds for the right to national self-determination or its denial?

From the late 1980s onwards, collectivity-centredness has come under attack by scholars in Nationalism Studies who emphasize the diversity and conflict *within* nations, based on factors like class and status, gender, locality, ethnicity, etc. (e.g. Bhabha 1990; Yuval-Davis 1997; overview of these approaches Özkırmırlı 2010, pp. 169–198) and/or entirely denounce the idea of “groupness” together with “the tendency [in scholarly writing] to treat ethnic groups, nations and races as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed” (Brubaker 2002, p. 164), or as collective actors with shared purposes.

Against that background in the development of the field our chapter explores the innovative heuristic potential for Nationalism Studies of transactional analysis as first systematically developed by Dewey and Bentley (1949) and used within relational sociology for highlighting the conceptual distinctions between substantialism (in the forms of ‘self-actionalism’ and ‘inter-actionalism’) and relational approaches (in terms of ‘transactionalism’) (see Emirbayer 1997; Dépelteau 2008, 2013, 2018b; Selg 2016a, b, 2018, 2019). Our goal is to consider a new perspective on the dynamics of nation formation, as well as individual–collective relations active across different levels, such as person-to-person, institutional, local, national and transnational.

We approach the issue via two case studies in meta-methodological analysis. First we discuss the by now canonical “Warwick Debates” that took place in 1995–1996 at the University of Warwick, UK, between the leading nationalism theorists Anthony Smith and Ernest Gellner (“The Warwick Debates on Nationalism”). The two influential scholars disagree over the patterns of nation formation and use *the Estonians* as a test case in their debate. We employ the categories “self-action” and “inter-action” to characterize the methodological premises of Smith’s and Gellner’s accounts of how the Estonian nation developed, and compare their approaches to an interpretation that would result from trans-actional analysis. This accounts for what had appeared as compact entities as arenas of trans-actions, and highlights “smaller” actors and processes (such as Estonian peasants engaged in the local modernizing change) previously invisible. Secondly we consider Rogers Brubaker’s influential “anti-groupist” approach to ethnic relations in Transylvania as a generally accepted example of what one

could view as trans-actionalism in ethnic/nationalism studies. The problem for us is located within two seemingly contradictory tensions. On the one hand, is this reduction of focus from macro-level to micro-level analysis that Brubaker proposes something intrinsically required by trans-actionalism that often shuns macro notions like “structure” or “system” as mere reifications of trans-actions (see especially Dépelteau 2008)? If so, a question arises whether trans-actional analysis could also help to gain insight into large scale political movements and complex processes of institution- and nation-building. This dilemma between reasonably close-up and reasonably distanced perspectives on phenomena is, arguably, haunting all social research. But it is even more pronounced in case of “deep relational” or trans-actional approaches that purport to de-reify social reality and presume the primacy of process (Dépelteau 2008, 2013; Selg 2016b). Hence a reflection is in order on the methodological consequences of this approach.

LOOKING CLOSER UP: FROM SELF- TO INTER- TO TRANS-ACTIONAL ANALYSIS OF NATION(ALISM)S

Self-actionalism, according to Dewey and Bentley, is a pre-scientific world view—the criterion of scientificity, of course, being mostly derived from Newtonian and post-Newtonian natural sciences—that presumes things in the world to be possessing their own powers under which they act (1949, p. 66). It is, more or less, our spontaneous common-sense view of the world. We presume the primacy of things (including social things like laws, regulations, institutions, actors) and see their actions as something *they do*. Inter-actionalism—basically Newtonian world-view—sees action as something taking place “between” or “among” things. It takes two hands to clap, but the clap is not *done* by either of the hands alone, it is something that is a result of the *inter*-action of those hands. Nevertheless, it makes sense to ask, which one of those hands (or both) caused the clap, or rather, which event that preceded the clap, caused the clap. Extrapolated to social sciences, this view is most concisely present in “variable-centered” approaches as they are called by Emirbayer (1997, p. 286) via Abbott (1988, p. 170), and the question is basically which is the independent variable that explains the outcome or the values of the dependent variable. “Variable-centered researchers employ a variety of quantitative methods to test their causal hypotheses, including multiple regression, factor analysis, and event history approaches”, Emirbayer (1997, p. 286) points out. In terms of ontological commitments of inter-actionalism in the social sciences, this is causalism

looming large—it is extrapolating the Newtonian world view presuming the world in which “thing is balanced against thing in causal interconnection” (Dewey and Bentley 1949, p. 101; see also Selg 2019). This is not problematic in itself and many problems can be addressed in these terms. But it is limited, since it presumes that there could be separate and independent existences of causes and effects—like claps that exist out there to be explained with reference to their causes.

This core of inter-actionalism—seeing relations as “happening” to independently existing entities—is an oversimplification at best if not utter nonsense from the viewpoint of *trans*-actionalism. The latter is an approach that presumes that “systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to ‘elements’ or other presumptively detachable or independent ‘entities’, ‘essences’, or ‘realities’, and without isolation of presumptively detachable ‘relations’ from such detachable ‘elements’” (Dewey and Bentley 1949, pp. 101–102). Thus analyzing whichever social “thing” or “entity” X, presumes that it cannot be properly done by conceiving this X as being separate from its relation(s) to Y and other relations it is engaged in each trans-action. In addition, relations are not something “supplementary” to things or entities, they are constitutive of those entities (see also Selg 2019). The flip side of the coin is that there cannot be any presumption of “essences” of those things studied in trans-actional approach and therefore conceptual schemes or “systems of description” are always “preliminary,” referring to “phases” or “aspects” of the thing under scrutiny.

One way to “land” the somewhat obscure points of trans-actionalism for the reader, before we turn to our illustrative case studies, is to view this approach as pushing the research towards close-up observation of social things, in which case it makes more and more difficult for the observer to not notice that the “things” she is observing are not, in fact, things but “dynamic, unfolding relations” (Emirbayer 1997, p. 281). Michel Foucault who is arguably among the most consistent analysts of power in “deep relational” or trans-actional terms (though not using this vocabulary) has actually made this point succinctly:

unless we are looking at it from a great height and from a very great distance, power is not something that is divided between those who have it and hold it exclusively, and those who do not have it and are subject to it. ... It is never localized here or there, it is never in the hands of some, and it is never appropriated in the way that wealth or a commodity can be appropriated.

Power functions. Power is exercised through networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks; they are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power. They are never the inert or consenting targets of power; they are always its relays. ... The individual is in fact a power effect, and at the same time, and to the extent that he is a power effect, the individual is a relay: power passes through the individuals it has constituted. (Foucault 2003, pp. 29–30, italics added)

Foucault is talking about power, but the idea that the lens of transactionalism is about looking at “things” somehow “closer up” (not “from a great height and from a very great distance”) is a more generally relevant trope and also holds when the focus is not primarily on power. In the present context, for example, trans-actionalism would require looking “closer up” at the workings of collective formation and institution formation, *longue durée* history, cultural memory and the dynamics of path dependencies. Looking closer, one sees

- “smaller” actors and processes invisible in mainstream social science
- no static structures, since they now all appear as processes; as a result they also appear as less stable
- compact entities (events, nations, even individual people) appear as arenas of a multitude of trans-actions in their own right.

Dewey and Bentley bring out several points regarding trans-actional research which warrant us to think of it as a sort of close-up observation (1949, pp. 113–115, italics in the original in the quotes below). Trans-actional research is an inquiry:

- “of a type in which existing descriptions of events are accepted only as tentative and preliminary, so that new descriptions of the aspects and phases of events, whether in widened or narrowed form, may freely be made at any and all stages of the inquiry”.
- “which ranges under primary observation across all subjectmatters that present themselves, and proceeds with freedom toward the re-determination and renaming of the objects comprised in the system”.
- “such that no one of its constituents can be adequately specified as fact apart from the specification of other constituents of the full subjectmatter”.

- which “regards extension in time to be as indispensable as is extension in space (if observation is to be properly made), so that “thing” is in action, and “action” is observable as thing, while all the distinctions between things and actions are taken as marking provisional stages of subjectmatter to be established through further inquiry”.

The outlook of relational sociology has developed itself against the assumption prevalent in much of mainstream social sciences (perhaps especially in the Anglo-American academia) that “one can posit discrete, pre-given units such as the individual or society as ultimate starting points of sociological analysis” (Emirbayer 1997, p. 287). Instead, all social phenomena should be studied as constituted inter-dependently through the constant processes of trans-acting with other social phenomena. “The society” (like “the reality”), thus, emerges as a dynamic medley of relations, a fluid one that all the participants constantly keep co-producing through their trans-actions. Thus it is constantly changing, but not by individual actors at will, but exactly through their various trans-actions (individual entities not necessarily equally impactful) without clear predictability.

A number of promoters of relational approaches in sociology and political science (Emirbayer 1997, 2013; Dépelteau 2008, 2018b; Selg 2016a, b, 2018) use Dewey and Bentley’s vocabulary of “self-action”, “inter-action”, and “trans-action” in their meta-methodological accounts¹ of the three ideal-typical approaches to how social action is perceived in different scholarly work. The “self-actional” perspective posits that an entity acts (including acts upon others) autonomously and independently—be the entities individual people/collectives (e.g. in rational choice theory) or abstract structures (such as “patriarchy” or “ideology”). In the “inter-actional” perspective the entities can influence each others’ qualities, but are analysed as essentially separate “things” that do not influence each others’ pre-given substantial nature. This is a “billiard balls” model of reality characteristic of much of mainstream sociology. Similarly, accounts of cultural influence or “borrowing” in the field of Comparative Literature, presume that there is an authentic cultural core, and then attributes that can be added or taken away (cf. Clayton and Rothstein 1991). This is a version of interactionalism. In the “trans-actional” perspective the entities are considered

¹ See Bevir (2008) for the notion of meta-methodology. Basically, of course, it includes reflections on the underlying ontological and epistemological premises of methodological thinking.

“separately, but not as being separate” (Elias 1978, p. 85); the focal point of analysis is the relational process that shapes and transforms the entities. Inter-actional and trans-actional perspectives might be seen as compatible (see Selg 2016a, b), but some scholars consider the latter more fruitful for social analysis (most notably Emirbayer 1997 and Dépelteau 2008).

It could be noted here that except for the maybe unfamiliar vocabulary, much of the previous does not sound very surprising and radical for a scholar in Cultural Semiotics, Cultural Studies in the gist of the Birmingham School, or Postcolonial Studies, all potentially helpful fields for reshaping Nationalism Studies. Indeed, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology* (Dépelteau 2018a), Julian Go (2018), when discussing the relationship between Postcolonial Studies and Relational Sociology, persuasively shows, how pervasive the relational approach, akin to Relational Sociology is in the Postcolonial Studies, even in its early days.

In what way is Relational Sociology more beneficial then? A major difference is that the methodological aspects are very explicit and rigorously debated, with the idea to be consistent in one’s approach and express it with as much lucidity as possible. In contrast, contemporary Postcolonial Studies, for example, is usually very “relational” when discussing the dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized, yet often not so much so when discussing postcolonial nationalism, where a lot tends to be assumed and not studied “close up”. Further, though Relational Sociology could benefit from more case studies next to theoretical argument, it is not a field dedicated to creating abstract technical frameworks. Its ideologues/axiologists are clear that it is about a certain worldview, a different way of looking at the world, seeing it as

- open-ended, possible to change, even when starting on the micro-level;
- unpredictable, precarious;
- without the option of self-sufficiency for anyone (Dépelteau 2008).

The approach carries the proposition that their suggested perspective allows more adequate insight into the world and can help to make it more bearable. In view of this brief introduction and contextualization of the relevant vocabulary we now turn to scrutinizing our cases of interest.

THE WARWICK DEBATES BETWEEN ERNEST GELLNER AND ANTHONY SMITH

The so-called Warwick Debates took place in 1995–1996 between the anthropologist and philosopher Ernest Gellner (1925–1995) and his one time student, described as a historical sociologist, Anthony D. Smith (1939–2016), both associated with the emerging innovative discussions in Nationalism Studies at the London School of Economics. The debate concerns the formation patterns of nations, and their relationship (or lack thereof) with the pre-modern communities (the *ethnies*) that preceded them. The “modernist” school in Nationalism Studies (to which Gellner and Smith both can be said to belong) argues that nations in the modern sense (i.e. political nations based on the ideal of popular sovereignty and citizenship) are not to be perceived as ancient “slumbering” communities “awakened” by national patriots, but forms of modern organization that develop in answer to the emergence of “specifically modern conditions”. Here Gellner singles out early industrialization and urbanization that create social mobility and thus the need for shared high culture to enable the participation in the modern nationhood—public education, mass literacy, other high cultural institutions, such as professional journalism, museums, opera, etc. (Gellner 1983, 1997).

The difference between the two debaters is that Gellner strongly insists that a modern nation has no pedigree, no “navel”, as Gellner would put it, in reference to the nineteenth-century theological debate upon the question, whether Adam and Eve (not having been born of a woman) could have had belly-buttons. The nations do not develop organically from earlier identity communities, so Gellner argues, rather they are created “by the great tidal wave of modernisation” that brings into being national movements and that in turn nations. Even if there is a navel in some case, or rather seems to be—the instances where modern nationhood develops out of/in connection to a previously existing entity, such as a monarchical state, a shared political culture, or an ethnic self-consciousness of some kind—, this is irrelevant, ornamental, because modernity does not *need* such antecedents to create nations by its own tidal wave—the tidal wave is sufficient *in itself*.

In the vocabulary of Relational Sociology that we introduced in the previous section, this is a typical model of “self-action”, modernity (in this context equalized to urbanization, industrialization and high culture) being the actor acting “under its own powers”. Looked at from a great distance and height one can see nations being swept to their places “ex nihilo”. In

this connection, like a few other modernist nationalism theorists, Gellner is very fond of the story of the Estonian nation-building because it seems to provide him with a case where there is nothing whatsoever resembling a pedigree. During the Warwick debates, Gellner argues the following:

I mean, take the Estonians. At the beginning of the nineteenth century they didn't even have a name for themselves. They were just referred to as people who lived on the land as opposed to German or Swedish burghers and aristocrats and Russian administrators. They had no ethnonym. They were just a category without any ethnic self-consciousness. Since then they've been brilliantly successful in creating a vibrant culture. This is obviously very much alive in the Ethnographic Museum in Tartu, which has one object for every ten Estonians and there are only a million of them. (The Museum has a collection of 100,000 ethnographic objects). Estonian culture is obviously in no danger although they make a fuss about the Russian minority they've inherited from the Soviet system. It's a very vital and vibrant culture, but, it was created by the kind of modernist process which I then generalise for nationalism and nations in general. And if that kind of account is accepted for some, then the exceptions which are credited to other nations *are redundant*. (Warwick Debates, our italics)

Gellner is undoubtedly right to portray the Estonians as a “people without history” (*ein Volk ohne Geschichte*) in Hegel's and Engels's sense (Rosdolsky 1979). A few words on Estonian history (pun not intended) is in order to help the reader to assess the case.

Inhabited by loosely associated (both cooperating and feuding) tribes, the present-day Estonian territory was conquered and formally Christianized during the thirteenth-century Baltic Crusades by the Teutonic Order and the Swedish and Danish crowns. A small German-speaking elite (never more than 10%) of landed nobility and clergy gradually increased its privileges and came to dominate the area. In 1721, the territory was won in the Northern War by Peter I who incorporated it into the Russian Empire. It remained under Czarist rule until World War I, locally continuously governed by the Baltic Germans who maintained all their privileges as the ruling class almost until the end of the nineteenth century. During the sixteenth-nineteenth centuries, the Estonian-speakers mostly belonged to the peasantry subservient to the Baltic German landowners. Particularly since the introduction of serfdom—partially in the seventeenth and comprehensively in the eighteenth century—they constituted, by and large, a socially homogeneous land-bound group until serfdom was abolished in

1816–1819. However, as the freedom of movement and the opportunity to purchase land increased from the mid-nineteenth century, there opened up avenues of accelerated change, especially as the Estonian-speakers had developed into a literate population with growing organizational skills and socio-political self-consciousness (more of that below). Profoundly dissatisfied with the Old Regime and seizing the opportunities emerging during WWI, the Estonian national activists declared independence 1918. Aided by Western support and fast-growing local enthusiasm, the pro-independence fighters eventually prevailed over both Baltic-German and Soviet troops, and Estonians governed an independent republic during the interwar period. As for later, Estonia was coercively annexed by the Soviet Union during World War II while *de jure* remaining independent under international law. Following a wide-based popular movement at the end of 1980s and the beginning of 1990s (“the Singing Revolution”), Estonia reclaimed *de facto* independence in 1991 and joined the European Union and NATO in 2004.²

In her amply-sourced *magnum opus* on the eighteenth-nineteenth-century beginnings of Estonian modernization, Ea Jansen (1921–2005), one of the most eminent Estonian historians places the people’s pre-World-War-I history in the postcolonial framework. “When dealing with the history of Estonians from whatever aspect,” she argues

it ought to be definitely taken into account that, on the one hand, geopolitically and economically the territory has since pre-historicity been part of Europe, on the other hand, for a long time it has also been a colony of Europe, and this fact has impacted on the whole development in the locality. As claimed by Wilfried Schlau, the editor ... of an overview of the social history of Baltic Germans, the history of the German colonisation and decolonisation of the Baltic area followed the same model as the general development of European “overseas” colonialism. (Jansen 2007, pp. 12–13)

A slightly unusual peculiarity in the Estonians’ case, Jansen continues, is the double, shifting, power arrangement in the provinces of Estonia and Livonia whereby the power was varyingly shared between the local German nobility and (since the Northern War) the Russian Empire. Despite that,

²For a more thorough overview of Estonian history in English, see Raun (2001) or Kasekamp (2010). Lauristin and Vihalemm (2009) offer a useful account of the recent history of Estonian (national) activism.

“the colonial power over the indigenous people” and a model of European estate society lasted in the Baltics for centuries and “started to crack later than elsewhere in Europe” (p. 13).³

Gellner does have a problem when it is pointed out to him that there was no significant urbanization or industrialization in Estonia when the national movement first developed. He solves it by claiming that the Estonian nation came into being simply *in imitation* to others, the earlier industrializers (creating the museums, an opera, a parliament)—again in the general tidal wave of modernization, even if in its marginal zone.

Analyzing that description of affairs, what does the trans-actional perspective help us see that the self-actional view summarized above screens out? Gellner ignores, we argue, the dynamic medley of inter-dependent actions, and processes “on the ground”—those by various proto-Estonians, and—almost—also those by their “significant others” in the region, such as Russians, Germans, Finns, Latvians, etc. All these actors have different grievances, aspirations, life experience, capabilities, material possessions, and so on, motivating their actions (with no predictable outcome) and feeding into the economic, political and social developments. With his focus on modernization defined by him in a certain restrictive way, this is invisible. Some critics of Gellner and modernist nationalism generally have said that their problem is they do not know history—in this case Estonian history. But this is not the main point. If one takes a trans-actionalist view on what happened in Estonia, let us say, during seventeenth-twentieth century, one assumes that there is *some* kind of relevant history, historical sociology, to be found, even if one does not know yet, what it is exactly. This is because people are always participants, inter-dependent participants in historical processes in some way—even if they are in a subordinate position, such as serfs or corvée peasants.

From the trans-actionalist perspective modernization appears differently—“modernity” is not a tidal wave, but a diverse set of processes created by and sustained by a myriad of human trans-actions, those involving the proto-Estonians in their historical life-world, among them. During those processes, from the participants’ perspective, new opportunities, aspirations and grievances are created, and different people, individually and collectively, seek to make the best of their chances and options. However “powerless” they are, what they can or cannot do is a part of what comes

³Translation from Estonian by P. Peiker.

to be called “modernity”; they are co-producers of their modernity, in a very great variety of ways that may be invisible from a self-actionalist point of view.

We can see the lack of the experience of pre-modern statehood, from that point of view, as a certain “navel” between modernity and pre-modernity, *rather than a case of the lack of one*. To foreground one aspect of this circumstance, the formation of the modern Estonian nation has been certainly shaped by its participants’ common socio-economic and political history and shared perceptions thereof, such as long-term experience of serfdom and peasant status, and pre-occupation with land and agriculture. The pre-modern peasant focus on the land very clearly feeds into the values and aspirations of the Estonian state politics, as shown by the 1918 radical Land Reform and the protective agricultural policies during inter-war period state independence. With the reform, large estates, mostly belonging to Baltic Germans, were expropriated and 55,104 new farms created, making possible the fast advancement of a vibrant, mostly Estonian-speaking rural middle class (Kasekamp 1999, pp. 14–15). Furthermore, throughout the inter-war period economic depressions the *mix* of market economy with state interventionism kept the property and status security of the farmers stable, even if they faced considerable economic stress—something not enjoyed by the new urban middle class (Parming 1975, especially pp. 36–37). This was the political will supported by broad sections of Estonian society, based on their socio-cultural values and aspirations.

Now, what is Anthony Smith’s disagreement with Gellner? It does not much concern Gellner’s view of modernity as a self-actional force that induces the birth of modern nations: they have no controversy there during the Warwick Debates. However, Smith argues for the need to “supplement” the Gellnerian “structural analysis” with the study of nations’ cultural genealogies, their idiosyncratic “myth-symbol complexes” (myths, symbols, historical memories and values amalgamated into a unified pattern) that *are* rooted in a nation’s pre-history and make every modern, political nation different. These myth-symbol complexes, so Smith argues, shape the values of a nation, and can play a powerful role mobilizing collective action. The Gellnerian understanding that the new, modern high culture is enough to hold a nation together is not justified—there need to be deeper layers, roots in pre-modern culture, which may also be folk culture and which can get turned into the high culture with modernity. The most important part of the complex tend to be myths of common origin, myths of a golden age and hero myths, as these give the nation a

sense of common heritage, from which to proceed. That is why, says Smith, Estonians, who did not have them, needed to *create* that type of myths, in the form of the national epic—*Kalevipoeg*—in the nineteenth century.⁴ If a nation does not have a navel, the navel needs to be created—thus the Estonians’ voluntaristic creation of a mythology proves that navels are important, and Smith, not Gellner is right.

Smith’s emphasis of enduring patterns, as well as his analysis of the relationship between the cultural and political in the generation and reproduction of nationhood is fruitful in our view. However, in our Dewey/Bentley based terminology his understanding of how the myth-symbol complexes are generated and function is self-actional, with some elements of inter-actionalism. He views them as self-generated and pretty much independently maintained within one cultural (ethnic, later national) community, with some limited room for inter-cultural exchange—“borrowing” which may have some effect on the borrowers attributes, but not on the deep core culture. The latter does change historically, but within one cultural realm.

If one drops such an assumption and looks at the deep level mythical thought patterns in the “Estonian culture” with an eye towards international trans-actionality, one notices the deep presence of a particular kind of Christian, Moravian (*Herrnhuter Brüdergemeinde*) input in the Estonian cultural world. The denomination is a direct offshoot of the followers of Jan Hus (1372–1415) in Bohemia and emphasizes in its discourses and rituals the awakening from death to life, from darkness to dawn—like in the myth of the rising of the phoenix from the ashes. On the one hand, an individualistic and introspective creed, on the other hand, its spirituality is marked by the emphasis on neighbourly love, fellowship and practical cooperation. Literacy and basic education are seen as a means of personal salvation and a tool for God’s work that should be available to everyone. The central conception is that if one is renewed through God’s grace, one leads by personal example and works in service to mankind (Peiker 2018, pp. 49–54).

⁴The compiler/author of the verse epic *Kalevipoeg* F. R. Kreutzwald (1803–1882) was a son of Estonian-speaking serfs, however eventually received a university degree in medicine (in German). *Kalevipoeg* (1857–1861) is not based on a particular single folk source, rather Kreutzwald put together disparate materials, including those of his own invention. In folklore the main character Kalevipoeg is a trickster figure, sometimes behaving quite unpleasantly for modern tastes, in the epic he becomes a heroic farmer-seafarer-warrior king who maintains some trickster features (cf. Järv 2001, pp. 68–70).

The arrival of Moravian Christianity in Estonia in the eighteenth century is almost a historical accident, its consequences entirely unpredictable. However, we would argue that important as *Kalevipoeg* certainly is, the myth-symbol complex trans-acting with the proto-Estonian culture from outside is much more dominant. Indeed, *Kalevipoeg* can be seen as one variant of the earlier darkness to dawn myth: the hero, Kalevipoeg, is predicted to emerge from captivity and to come and help his people to make a new and better life. The rising phoenix type of thought pattern became a subsistent presence in the Estonian history. In the wake of the anti-Soviet popular movement, the “Singing Revolution”, that took place in the late 1980s–early 1990s, the cultural theorist Hasso Krull (1996) related this thought pattern to a widely shared world outlook among Estonians where history that otherwise may strike one as discontinuous, outwardly determined and devoid of local agency acquires mythical continuity. From that perspective, Estonian history is a pattern of rebirths, and thus has a continuity, promoting a perception of meaning and agency in the face of precarity. Instead of seeing chaos, one perceives political ruptures as potential opportunities for a fresh beginning—so as it has happened a number of times before, and as it can potentially always happen. Thus, this myth-symbol complex, though originally “foreign”, is both external to Estonian culture and inside it, having been shaping it for a long time. Indeed, strictly speaking, there is no “it” independent of it.

Secondly, while Anthony Smith sees modern politics and ancient myth-symbol complexes as inter-actional—they influence one another, but do not impact on each other’s distinct nature—one can argue that the Moravian heritage has been shaping modern Estonian politics from the very beginning—both through inducing a certain positive view of change and reform, compatible with the values of modernization, and through its emphasis on organizational skills and collective action towards self-betterment—the practical know-how of efficient ways to “rise from the ashes”. It is noteworthy that this outlook has become secularized and naturalized, its origins all but forgotten. The majority of Estonians tend to associate Christianity with the official Lutheran church and the German overrule, so that in the twenty-first century they have been found the least religious people in the world—in terms of church attendance, that is (Vucheva 2009).

Much of contemporary nationalism studies concentrate on pointing out that national cultures are never isolated and that inter-cultural interchange goes on even in circumstances where national ideologues see only polarization and no communication. For example, Monterescu (2013) discusses

ethnically divided Jewish-Arab Israel cities, concentrating on the city of Jaffa in particular. In our opinion this view is inter-actionalist, in the sense that it describes the situation in terms of core cultures impacting on one another. From the trans-actional point of view nations themselves are—slow—processes of multi-cultural intermixture.

ROGERS BRUBAKER'S ANTI-GROUPISM

Inspired by various social theorist who have called their approach “relational” (most notably Pierre Bourdieu), Rogers Brubaker has probably done more than anyone else for moving ethnic and nationalism studies from its substantialist roots to relational thinking. In connection to the movement of relational sociology Brubaker is mentioned by Emirbayer only in retrospect (see Emirbayer 2013). Emirbayer does not even mention Brubaker in his famous “Manifesto for a relational sociology” (Emirbayer 1997). Part of the explanation is, of course, that Brubaker raised to prominence as a (self-identifying) relational thinker later, even though *Reframing Nationalism* (Brubaker 1996) that puts forth an explicitly relational perspective on nationalism (especially chapter 3) was published a year before Emirbayer’s “Manifesto”. We can, of course, reasonably presume that both publications were submitted to the outlets at around the same time and could not have influenced each other in principle. Monterescu (2013) and Balint Neray (2016) among others have a take on Brubaker and his connection to relational sociology. Francois Dépelteau does not mention him at all, not even in his stage setting pieces for relational thinking (e.g. Dépelteau 2008, 2013, 2018b) where huge array of thinkers, both classic and contemporary are positioned from the viewpoint of relational sociology or trans-actional sociology more specifically.

What is Brubaker’s approach and his relation to relational sociology? To untangle this, we start with Brubaker’s famous thesis that is often referred to as anti-groupism. We treat this topic with a particular focus on ethnicity as a “group” that is yet to be deconstructed in the social sciences. Csergo makes it clear that Brubaker’s aim is to distance ourselves from “substantialist language that talks about what ‘nations’ and ‘ethnic groups’ do” and induce a “shift to an analytical and dynamic language in which we talk about *how and when nationhood and ethnicity happen*” (Csergo 2008, p. 393). Especially in *Nationalism Reframed* (Brubaker 1996), scholars are urged to “abandon the ‘nation’ as an analytical category altogether” (Csergo

2008, p. 393). Thus, even nationalism—the heaviest container of the sense of “reality” or even “necessity” of nations—

can and should be understood without invoking “nations” as substantial entities. Instead of focusing on nations as real groups, we should focus on nationhood and nationness, on “nation” as practical category, institution-alized form, and contingent event. “Nation” is a category of practice, not (in the first instance) a category of analysis. To understand nationalism, we have to understand the practical uses of the category “nation”, the ways it can come to structure perception, to inform thought and experience, to organize discourse and political action. (Brubaker 1996, p. 7)

In this chapter of the work under question, Brubaker develops a conceptual scheme for grasping the “interdependent relational nexus” that binds together “national minorities, nationalizing states, and external national homelands” (Brubaker 1996, p. 58).

The “relational” approach of Brubaker is, influenced by his (re)reading of Bourdieu, who had been active in putting forth a viable alternative to the substantialist dilemma of groupism vs individualism: “The alternative to the substantialist idiom of bounded groups is not an idiom of individual choice, but rather (as Bourdieu never tired of emphasizing) a relational, processual and dynamic analytical language” (2003, p. 555; see also Brubaker 1985). The Bourdieusian roots, of course, set certain background conditions for Brubaker’s approach, since Bourdieu’s status as a “relational” sociologist is not unanimously accepted and sometimes even seriously doubted, when it comes to at least “deep relational” or “trans-actional” perspective,⁵ that he purports to advocate in his methodological and meta-methodological reflections (e.g. in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), but has often trouble implementing in his empirical work. Brubaker’s oeuvre is roughly within the same contours: trans-actional reflections, but often inter- or self-actional analyses or research. Despite his constant urge to adopt the relational framework and to do away with the groups-as-things-in-the-world vocabulary starting with his *Nationalism Reframed* (1996) and continuing with his later works (2004; Brubaker et al. 2006), no “good” or “best” practices of actual research is readily available. The large book *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Brubaker et al. 2006) that discusses the case of the ethnically partly

⁵Most notably, by Dépelteau (2008, 2018b).

Hungarian and partly Romanian town of Cluj, a place with a complex history, was supposed to be lighthouse for that practice, but we can agree with Csergo's doubt casting comment on it:

Despite Brubaker's attack on "groupism", the novelty of the analytical language employed in this book does not lie in the absence of group terms in the text. Group categories, such as 'Hungarians', 'Romanians', 'Clujeni', 'most Romanians', 'the majority of Hungarians', appear regularly in the text. Disclaimers to the effect that such categories are used merely as shorthand expressions do not convincingly allay a suspicion that can creep into the reader's mind: Perhaps this book fails to supply a long-awaited 'good practice example' of groupless scholarly language precisely because a shift to a groupless vocabulary is neither possible nor necessarily beneficial. (Csergo 2008, p. 395)

Our agreement with Csergo comes with certain concessions. Put in our Dewey/Bentley inspired vocabulary we could say that often, yes, the anti-groupist vocabulary in Brubaker is ambivalent, tangling between inter-actionalist and trans-actionalist tendencies. In view of the principles of close-up observation we associated with trans-actionalism above we can point out to several important trans-actional interim conclusions that Brubaker and his colleagues reach in their book about the nationalist politics in Cluj:

1. Based on their case studies they recognize that "neither nationalist politics nor ethnic identity is an everyday preoccupation for the vast majority of Clujeni" (p. 207);
2. In addition, "Hungarians are more inclined than Romanians to see the social world through an ethnic lens" which points to "a basic asymmetry in the experience of everyday ethnicity" (p. 207);
3. Hence, ethnicity is, best viewed as "*a modality of experience,*" rather than "a thing, a substance, an attribute that one 'possesses', or a distinct domain of life" (p. 207). "Ethnicity is a way of seeing, a way of talking, a way of acting; a skilled practical accomplishment; a cognitive, discursive, or pragmatic frame; a way of understanding and interpreting experience" (p. 207);
4. Consequently and in a vocabulary that almost perfectly matches with the general mentality of the "close-up observation" principles in the first section:

as a modality of experience, ethnicity is not a continuous but an *intermittent* phenomenon. It *happens* at particular moments, and in particular contexts... Although we speak routinely of persons as *having* an ethnicity, we might more aptly speak of them *doing* [we would say: *being embedded in*] ethnicity at such moments; although we routinely speak of them as *being* Hungarian or Romanian, we might more aptly speak of them *becoming* Hungarian or Romanian, in the sense that “Hungarian” or “Romanian” becomes the relevant, operative description or “identity” or self-understanding at that particular moment and in that particular context. (p. 208)

In a nutshell, this book “tells us that ethnicity can matter a great deal, but its salience is neither constant nor continuous. People do not always see, talk, and act ‘ethnically’, but they do so when ethnicity becomes activated in particular encounters” (Csergo 2008, p. 395). Therefore, “ethnicity” in Brubaker’s conception is a relation, and a relation that is an unfolding process—entailing epistemologically and methodologically that it can be used as a preliminary category for making sense of certain processes/relations rather than referring to certain “essences” of the putative elements of reality.

In his short commentary on Calhoun’s criticism of his work, Brubaker basically takes up the bashing of two forms of self-actionalism: groupism, which would be a structuralist self-actionalism, and individualism (see Emirbayer 1997; Selg 2016b). Hence his title, “Neither individualism, nor ‘groupism’”. As for dismissing the latter he argues that

ethnic (or ethnicized) conflict need not be understood as conflict *between ethnic groups*, just as racial (or racially framed) conflict need not be understood as conflict between *races*, or nationalist conflict as conflict between *nations*. Participants may well represent such conflicts in groupist or even primordialist terms. They may well cast ethnic groups, races, or nations as the protagonists – the heroes and martyrs – of such struggles. This is entirely understandable, and doing so can provide an important resource in social and political struggles. But this does not mean analysts should do the same. As a social process, reification is central to the *practice* of politicized ethnicity, as indeed to other forms of politics. (Brubaker 2003, p. 554)

The principle of dereification is one of the cornerstones of trans-actional analysis (see Dépelteau 2008; Selg 2016b), and Brubaker is proposing the same: “As analysts, we should certainly try to *account* for the ways

in which – and conditions under which – this social process of reification works. But we should avoid unwittingly *doubling* or *reinforcing* the reification of ethnic groups in ethnopolitical practice with a reification of such groups in social analysis” (Brubaker 2003, p. 554). Would dereifying groups amount to reducing them to individuals. No, this would actually be yet another form of reification—individualism: “To criticize an analytical focus on bounded ‘groupness’ is not to posit an asocial individualism. We are not faced with a stark choice between a universalist, individualist analytical idiom and an identitarian, ‘groupist’ idiom” (Brubaker 2003, p. 554). Actually the very idea of going “beyond identity” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000) that Brubaker is highly regarded for, is related to avoiding replacing one form of reification with another. As Brubaker explains in his response to Calhoun:

We do not treat individuals as primary; nor do we treat identification as freely chosen by abstract individuals. Self-identifications, as we argue, always exist in dialectical interplay with ascribed identifications and categorizations, especially those employed by powerful, authoritative institutions – above all, the modern state (although the state is by no means the only powerful ‘identifier’). (Brubaker 2003, p. 556)

The overburdened category of “identity” makes Brubaker (and Cooper) “ask if that work – much of it, as we stress, legitimate and important – might better be done by alternative, less ambiguous analytical terms. ‘Identification’ is *one* such term. But in addition to identification (and categorization), we argue that other sorts of terms are also needed to do the varied work done by ‘identity’” (Brubaker 2003, p. 556). In our terms they put forth a trans-actional conception of identity, by proposing categories like “self-understanding”, “a dispositional term” designating the so-called “situated subjectivity,” which is “one’s sense of who one is, of one’s social location, and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act” (Brubaker 2003, p. 556). Brubaker admits his debt to Bourdieu in this kind of approach: “‘self-understanding’ is part of what Bourdieu called *sens pratique*, the practical sense – at once cognitive and emotional – that persons have of themselves and their social world” (Brubaker 2003, p. 556). As a result a “property” or “variable” like category of identity is deconstructed—in the fruitful sense of the word—into a relational concept. Various other terms supporting this deconstruction are “commonality”, “connectedness”, and

“groupness”, helping to “distinguish the sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded, solidary group from looser forms of affinity or affiliation. Both are important, but, as we note, they ‘shape personal experience and condition social and political action in sharply differing ways’” (Brubaker 2003, p. 556).

Brubaker’s general ethos in carrying through these kinds of deconstructions is not just providing new insights for the sake of their being new insights, but “constructing an analytical language that can do justice to the complexity of social affinities and affiliations, without falling back on the easily accessible yet impoverished social ontologies – individualist *or* groupist – on which moral and political theories too often rest” (2003, p. 557).

There are, however, certain concessions to be made about Brubaker’s movement to trans-actionalism in his perspective as a whole. Most notably when it comes to the parts related to his treatment of “mobilisation” and his attempt to conceptualize it in the “groupless” language. Here we draw heavily on Zsuzsa Csergo’s perceptive criticism of Brubaker’s analysis of the case of Cluj.

Mobilization can be conceived as a relational concept quite readily, when we dismiss the “common tendency to think of mobilization as a one-directional process (most often, in terms of the mass-level outcomes following elite-level strategies) and to associate ‘ethnic mobilization’ with the potential for violence” (Csergo 2008, p. 397). This kind of conceptualization would expand the notion to cover also “settings where mass violence or other forms of mass-level collective action are absent, but a whole range of different practices exist that embody a dynamic relationship between the fields of political power and everyday life. In such settings, a narrow understanding of ‘mobilisation’ hides more than it reveals about the intersections between the two fields” (Csergo 2008, p. 397). Discussing the Clujani, Csergo gives an array of examples of the ways how both ethnic Romanians and ethnic Hungarians have been successfully mobilized to non-violent, yet effective, political action, from bringing voters to ballot-boxes to initiating campaigns in protection of historical monuments. Brubaker’s “groupless language” has its limits, hence Csergo is right in claiming that “we do need a shift to a more contextualised and dynamic analytical language that expands the concept of mobilisation” (Csergo 2008, p. 397). Which is basically exactly what trans-actional approach sets out to do, of course. Csergo suggests ethnic/national “mobilisation” as a relational term that would not underestimate elite/people interaction and people’s contribution to

causes, even if only sporadically. The main question here is the question of resonance—who communicates what to whom and how, why sometimes people take action, sometimes not (cf. Hroch 1985; Schöpflin 2005; Castells 2009; Peiker 2018). The one-sided interest in mobilization in the scholarly literature has been for ethnic mobilization for violence, leaving mobilization for other things, like electoral behaviour for instance, out of the picture. Mobilization could be a quintessential concept in relational sociology to describe trans-action. Csergo does not use this vocabulary, but at the conceptual level she is making basically the same point that trans-actionalist view of mobilization would be all about:

This work should inspire scholars to develop new ways of integrating ethnography into the study of elite and non-elite interactions. It is only by integrating elite-level analysis with the study of everyday experience, however, that we can explore the ways in which political elites are ethnically ‘embedded’ and the ways in which non-elites are ‘mobilised’. If our analytical language reproduces a perceived dichotomy between the fields of high politics and people’s everyday experiences [as does Brubaker’s language], scholars will continue to overlook the significance of quieter, less contentious, forms of mobilisation. (Csergo 2008, p. 397)

Malesevic (2006) takes Csergo’s observation about the de-coupling of elite and non-elite in Brubaker’s work even further and points out that Brubaker’s anti-groupist articles become micro-level, resulting in “short explanatory breath” to analyze mass events with a historical dimension like wars, revolutions, state breakdowns that trigger large-scale ethnic mobilization. We can agree with Malesevic and concede that Brubaker’s texts that cover macro-level (e.g. Brubaker 2004, pp. 57, 60, 167–170; the first half of Brubaker et al. 2006) are traditionally groupist and, put in our vocabulary, concentrate on self-actional entities.

We would add that Brubaker is also unable to provide insight into large-scale historical processes of group-formation that do *not* take place in dramatic circumstances, such as, for example, the continuous process of building up of socio-political communities—often multi-ethnic—at the wake of wars, revolutions, etc. (cf. Calhoun 2003).

It is interesting that what disappears completely in Brubaker is the notion of democracy, people’s self-government—or any idea that someone could have wanted democracy precisely for its promise of self-governing bodies of people traditionally related to the idea of democratic citizenship. His

most famous paper “Ethnicity without Groups” (2002) does not mention the word “democracy” even once. “Ordinary” people, in Brubaker and his colleagues’ account of Transylvania are passive

- prey to ethnic entrepreneurs
- just going about their daily lives, not interested in politics.

This perspective is addressed by Craig Calhoun’s critique of contemporary “cosmopolitanism”: nations are not about “peoplehood” in the cosmopolitan thinking, but are seen as a monolithic self-actional categories (in our Dewey/Bentley based vocabulary) that serve people (or fail to do so) (Calhoun 2003). What is noteworthy is also Calhoun’s emphasis on “solidarity”—especially his understanding that solidarity is more important, more vital, in his view, to disempowered groups than to individuals belonging to dominant groups. In this context it is very telling that Brubaker almost entirely avoids the question of power in his approach. Csergo (2008), Calhoun (2003), and Bottoni (2012, p. 493; 2018, p. xii) take that up:

Ultimately, we must keep our focus not only on the questions of when ethnicity happens and how it matters in the everyday lives of people but also on the larger question of when ethnicity drives people’s actions in the realm of power relations – influencing people’s access to resources, power, and institutions – in all kinds of institutional settings. (Csergo 2008, p. 398)

Brubaker talks about the disparity between Hungarians and Romanians in Transylvania, but he fails to properly generalize or theorize this observation. We argue that behind the deficiencies of Brubaker’s in many ways compelling argument is his *hamartia* that is not to do with the potentialities of relational thinking at all, but rather with Brubaker’s suspicion of collectivities in general and not only in case of ethnicity, but also that of nationhood in particular.

CONCLUSION: NOT GROUPS OF PEOPLE, NEITHER GROUPS NOR PEOPLE

Calhoun has prefigured the discussion of this chapter in his response to Brubaker. Whether we have the issue the tidal wave of modernity self-actionally creating nations out of thin air without any navel connecting them to premodernity (Gellner); or whether we have nations that create

such navels for themselves (Smith); or whether indeed we see ethnicity and nationhood as more or less contingently and situationally evoked category that has no referent in the “real world” (Brubaker)—we have been mixing something up, at least from the trans-actional point of view. When it comes to ethnicity or nationhood, then, of course,

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. (Calhoun 2003, p. 560)

In other words, just that groupness is invented does not mean that it cannot be real or that it is merely a form of reification; and conversely: utterly “real” things can just as well be invented or, in fact, emerge out of various flows of relations and are, in that sense, not things at all. “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”, Calhoun points out, and adds:

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 2003, p. 561)

Consequently, whether we should do away with notions like “group”, “individual” or “identity” altogether is an open question even if we value relational approaches “in trying to overcome the hypostatization of both individuals and groups as self-subsisting entities” (Calhoun 2003, p. 562). Calhoun points out 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” (Calhoun 2003, p. 562).

We think Calhoun is pointing here to a crucial issue regarding transactional analyses in general: if everything is dynamic, processual, changing, etc. and there is no “essence” whatsoever in anything, then how do we explain stability? In a “normal” social science social change is what needs to be explained. But if change is presumed to be no brainer as it is in transactional analyses where everything is preliminary, then no changes—that is, stability—becomes a puzzle. When it comes to our main topic then even though ethnicity is performative, we argue that performances can and often do create patterns that are repeating, and from there phenomena emerge that are described by terms such as “path dependencies” and “memory cultures”, “myth-symbol complexes” which are, yes, not permanent and indestructible (always processes), but can be very resilient. This tension between resilience and dynamic change is what a deep relational or transactional analysis of ethnicity, groupness and nationhood should see as its research object.

* * *

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