Critical Dialogue

Political Peoplehood: The Roles of Values, Interests, and Identities. By Rogers M. Smith. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 336p. $90.00 cloth, $30.00 paper.
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— Rogers Brubaker, *University of California, Los Angeles*

Rogers Smith has long been a leading theorist and empirical analyst of the role of ideas, ideals, and narratives in political life. His interest in peoplehood and in the related themes of citizenship and membership goes back to his second book, *Citizenship without Consent*, coauthored with legal scholar Peter Schuck (1985), which explored the tension between birthright citizenship and consensual understandings of membership. Smith's best-known book, *Civic Ideals* (1997), showed in rich detail how liberal, republican, and ethnoracially, religiously, or otherwise ascriptive understandings of membership have been intertwined in differing combinations at differing moments of American history. His subsequent *Stories of Peoplehood* (2003), pitched at a more abstract level, distinguished economic, political, and "ethically constitutive" narratives of political belonging. The book gave special attention to the latter, which offer the most powerful and enduring—though also the most problematic and exclusionary—underpinning for political community.

The present book builds on and extends the analyses of *Stories of Peoplehood*. It brings together previously published work (in significantly revised form), as well as some new work. The first part comprises four theoretical chapters. Chapter 1 provides a broad defense of the interpretive study of political ideas, a defense articulated as a variant of a historical institutionalist theory of politics. Chapter 2—the theoretical core of the book—develops a theory of the "politics of peoplehood," focused on the role of what Smith now calls simply "constitutive themes" in stories of political peoplehood. Chapter 3, coauthored with Meral Ugur Cinar, draws on literary theories of narrative structure to argue that national narratives articulated at key founding moments—once they are crystallized in textbooks, monuments, festivals, and so on—continue to inform and shape debates in much later and substantively different contexts. Chapter 4 analyzes the intertwining of personal stories and stories of peoplehood, focusing empirically on the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns.

The second part of the book comprises two historical essays on American peoplehood: one focusing on the shifting meaning and valence of the language of universal individual rights and the other on rival narratives of American peoplehood, especially as they have been articulated through the intertwining of "constitutive themes of religion, race, and gender" (p. 146). The final three chapters are unabashedly normative. Chapter 7 argues for abandoning the deep-seated tropes of exceptionalism—long enlisted on behalf of both progressive and conservative agendas—and providentialism in favor of a more "moderate, malleable, and multiple" understanding of American peoplehood. The final two chapters consider the implications of the general principle that states have special obligations to those—including noncitizens—whose "identities, aspirations, and interests have been coercively constituted" by the actions of the state (p. 220). Chapter 8 argues that the principle obliges the United States to "extend special opportunities for membership to Mexicans" (p. 220); Chapter 9 argues that it also generates special obligations toward residents of current or former colonies.

Political Peoplehood is impressively wide-ranging. Like Smith's other work, the essays in this book bridge the divides between historical and contemporary work, between empirical and normative analysis, and between the political science subfields of political theory and American politics. Unusually for a collection of essays, the chapters fit together very nicely, enriched by cross-resonances between chapters, yet without too much overlap. Smith has taken evident care to integrate the essays into a coherent overall framework.

I have learned a great deal from the book, and I find most of Smith's substantive arguments convincing. I am not entirely persuaded, however, by his expansive understanding of "political peoplehood." Criticizing accounts of peoplehood that focus on race, ethnicity, and nation, the author defines political peoples as "any and all human associations, groups, and communities that are commonly understood to assert that their members owe them a measure of allegiance against the demands of other associations, communities, and groups" (p. 2). On this understanding, strong claims to political peoplehood are

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advanced not only by nation-states (or by nationalist movements challenging those states) but also by some religious leaders, economic and social movement organizers, radical feminists and environmentalists, and others (p. 40): "It is the fact that these associations, groups, and communities are perceived to advance claims to governing authority in competition with others that makes them 'political'—and the more demanding the claims, the more political the group" (p. 2).

Smith provides a compelling account of why such associations, communities, and group should be regarded as *political*, but he does not specify why they should be regarded as *peoples*. The category "political" receives sustained examination; the category "peoplehood" does not. To my mind, it is not helpful to think of radical feminists or environmentalists (or of "labor movements, social movements, nongovernmental organizations, [and] cities" [p. 5]) under the rubric of peoplehood. Not all political projects—even those that advance strong claims to allegiance and authority in the context of struggles against other political projects—are projects of peoplehood.

Peoplehood, as I understand the category, involves more than the demandingness of political claims. The claim to constitute a "people" is a specific *kind* of political claim, not simply a claim to a certain *degree* of allegiance or commitment. If one limits one's attention to (roughly) the last two centuries, it is a kind of claim that is shaped by the intertwining of 1) understandings of popular sovereignty and democracy, 2) understandings of the diversity of languages, religions, cultures, peoples, and nations, and 3) the ongoing reorganization of political space along putatively national lines. In this context, I would argue, a "people" is understood as a group that is (relatively) *stable, enduring, distinctive, encompassing, self-reproducing*, and (at least ideally) *self-governing*. Stable and enduring: Claims to peoplehood are not made on behalf of rapidly changing social movement projects, no matter how radical and uncompromising their political claims (though some social movements may, of course, claim to represent peoples). Distinctive: Claims to peoplehood generally presuppose an understanding of a pluralistic and diverse world of multiple "peoples," each with its own distinctive character. Encompassing and self-reproducing: Claims to peoplehood are made in the name of communities understood as in some sense "complete" rather than sectoral, and as capable, at least ideally, of reproducing themselves and their distinctive cultural characteristics over time. Self-governing: Claims to peoplehood usually involve, implicitly or explicitly, a claim to some kind of self-governance. (Smith's notion of variation in both strength and breadth of claims is helpful in conceptualizing the space of variation in such claims to self-governance.)

If this understanding of what it generally means in political practice to claim to constitute "a people" is roughly correct, then while Smith is certainly right to emphasize that claims to peoplehood are not limited to nation-states—they are often made in the name of non-state ethnic, racial, national, indigenous, regional, and in some cases religious groups—the analytical payoff for defining the notion of "political peoplehood" as broadly as Smith does is unclear, especially since his own substantive analyses focus on a much narrower range of cases where the category of peoplehood indisputably applies.

This conceptual disagreement aside, Smith's focus on peoplehood is much to be welcomed. At a moment of heightened populism in Europe and the United States, a focus on stories of peoplehood—especially on the powerfully resonant constitutive themes of race, gender, and religion—is indeed more timely than ever. For whatever else populism might involve—and forms of populism are extraordinarily diverse—it always involves an attempt to define, delimit, and characterize "the people," in implicit or explicit contrast both to "the elite," represented as out of touch with and as incapable of speaking for "the people," and to other "peoples." And Smith's suggestions about the occasions on which constitutive themes—rather than economic or political themes—will come to the fore in stories of peoplehood seem eminently plausible (if not easily testable): Such themes are likely to be prominent "when the provision of economic and political power benefits seems uncertain or clearly deficient" (p. 63) and "when the ideas, institutions, and practices expressive of established constitutive themes are threatened" (p. 65).

In short, Smith's book (like its precursor volume) has much to teach us about the centrality of narratives to political struggles; about the power—and the danger—of constitutive themes in stories of peoplehood; and, not least, about our obligation, as citizens, to enter the fray and to seek to rearticulate stories of peoplehood in ways that can counter the exclusionary implications of prevailing constitutive themes, while still providing a compelling account of political belonging.

Response to Rogers Brubaker's review of *Political Peoplehood: The Roles of Values, Interests, and Identities*

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— Rogers M. Smith

Because Rogers Brubaker's work is notable for analytical precision, I said it was striking that late in *Grounds of Difference,* he introduces the category of "peoplehood" as one that is "extremely flexible and adaptable," capable of being grounded on "citizenship, history, language, way of life, descent, race, or religion." Fortunately, he is still Brubaker. In his generous review of *Political Peoplehood*, his chief concern is that my use of "peoplehood" is *too*

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flexible and undefined. I do use that term interchangeably with "any and all human associations, groups, and communities."

Brubaker finds this unwise because he believes that in the last two centuries, the word "people" has gained specific meanings from the rise of popular sovereignty and democracy, the ascendancy of the nation-state model, and heightened recognition of human diversity. These meanings are not attached to "any and all" groups. He suggests a people must be "*stable, enduring, distinctive, encompassing, self-reproducing*," and must aspire to be "*self-governing*" to some degree.

For three reasons, I use "peoples" and "peoplehood" more expansively. The first is in the spirit of Brubaker's "ethnicity without groups": if we reject essentialized notions of group identities, we must acknowledge that associations that at one point do not aspire to be "political peoples" may do so at another. The recent cinematic depiction of the class-based formation of the "people" of *The Free State of Jones* is an example. Second, if we define "peoples" only as groups currently displaying the six features Brubaker lists, we risk assuming that the content elements and dynamics of identity construction that I delineate for "political peoples" do not apply to other kinds of groups. That will often be a mistake—precisely because most human associations, even many in social movements like LGBTQ groups, *do* aspire to be stable, enduring, distinctive, and self-reproducing to some meaningful degree. And though they vary in the degree to which they seek to be *fully* encompassing and self-governing, so do associations like municipalities, religious congregations, ethnic organizations, and regional federations. As Brubaker agrees, we would miss much if we did not recognize that all these groups may at times act as political peoples—fostering senses of loyal peoplehood to do so.

My final reason for defining "peoples" broadly is that, as Brubaker notes, he focuses on the term "people" during what we call the "modern" era, marked by the rise of nation-states and democracy. I do not, because I resist presumptions that the content elements and dynamics of identity construction in "pre-modern" political communities were sharply different from those of modern times. Such presumptions may lead us to overestimate the differences between past and present politics and to underestimate the diversity of forms that political peoplehood still displays, even during the centuries in which models of republican nation-states have gained an always-contested primacy.

Still, Brubaker is right that the term "people" has acquired more specific political connotations in the modern era. My broad usage risks fostering failure to appreciate vital differences between modern and pre-modern politics. I conclude that the questions of whether processes of forming "political peoples" have fundamentally changed over time, in ways that justify a firm modern/pre-modern divide, and that also imply a rejection of the label "people" for many groups today, are great questions to pursue. They provide a terrific agenda for scholars of the politics of identity construction and contestation to explore. In doing so, I hope they will find things to build on in the work of both of us. But I'm eager to see others boldly go where no Rogers has gone before.

Grounds for Difference. By Rogers Brubaker. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015. 240p. $39.95.
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— Rogers M. Smith, *University of Pennsylvania*

From another author, the title of this book might suggest a normative argument; but Rogers Brubaker's aims are characteristically analytical and empirical. Like his seminal *Ethnicity without Groups* (2004) (and like my own *Political Peoplehood*, 2015), *Grounds for Difference* combines new essays with a number of earlier ones—revised here to produce thematically linked reflections on the forms of human difference that are most socially and politically significant today. Two new essays address how best to understand the rising inequalities we now see, and the many ways that biology is resurfacing as an explanation for, especially, racial and ethnic inequalities. The rest explore how religious differences have become more deeply contentious than linguistic ones, contrary to historic trends, as well as how modern nationalism can still be understood as at most intertwined with, not identical to, religion; how, accompanying heightened migration, claims of diaspora and transnational identities have emerged as factors in modern global politics; and how fashionable "multiple modernities" claims may distract us from grasping global processes generating an epoch-defining diffusion of broadly similar political and economic concepts and organizational forms. The two new chapters are the most fully developed, but each displays Brubaker's exceptional breadth of learning, analytical acuity, and shrewd empirical insights.

The opening chapter, "Difference and Inequality," critiques Charles Tilly's arguments in *Durable Inequality* (1998) that inequalities within modern major institutions are linked to external "categorical inequalities," such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, citizenship, and education. According to Tilly, institutions generate inequalities either by exploiting certain categories of persons or excluding them from opportunities and resources ("opportunity hoarding"). Brubaker states, a bit misleadingly, that categorical differences are not "*intrinsically* linked to inequality" (p. 11). In fact, different entities must be unequal on *some* dimensions or else they would be identical. What he means is that categorical differences need not be tied to substantial material and status inequalities—and so we must explore how and why they are.

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Brubaker contends persuasively that categories like citizenship, which primarily excludes, and gender, which primarily divides labor, and race and ethnicity, which do both, operate differently from one another (in more nuanced ways than can be summarized here). And he stresses that with the partial exception of citizenship exclusions, categorical inequalities are today chiefly generated by the ways in which persons are socially "produced" with different resources and aspirations; by the subtle ways that processes of selection for valuable positons are categorically skewed; and by the ways that unequal structures of positions, some lucrative and prestigious, others not, are themselves created.

Brubaker's illuminating discussion stops short, however, of analyzing the politics, the political agents, and their motivations that *create* these structures of positions, these processes of skewed selection, and these modes of human socialization, with their categorically inegalitarian consequences. Apart from citations to scholars, this first chapter is devoid of proper names, or even typologies of the political actors who might generate the patterns it delineates convincingly. To a lesser degree, this feature is true of all the ensuing chapters, and it comprises the book's only real weakness (which we might excuse by saying that Brubaker is a sociologist, not a political scientist—but he is a political sociologist!). Patterns and processes play the role of independent variables more than any recognizable political agents.

In truth, however, there is little to fault in Brubaker's important second chapter, "The Return of Biology." The political agents involved are still not highlighted, but they and their often benign motives can be readily identified. And the chapter focuses on a disturbing development about which too many social scientists are in denial: Despite several decades of our insisting that race is a social construction, many factors—including genomic research, innovations in biomedicine, forensic uses of DNA, public fascination with genetically aided genealogy, and claims of authentic indigenous and ethnic identities—all simplified and amplified by the media, are giving fresh life to biological conceptions of race and ethnicity. While replying with a powerful defense of constructivist perspectives, Brubaker issues an equally powerful call not to ignore or dismiss these developments.

The remaining chapters are united by a concern to ensure that scholars do not throw out with the bathwater the findings that Brubaker sees as important to retain in scholarly accounts holding that the modern era has been marked by the rise to predominance of nation-states, in which conceptions of shared national identity are often intertwined with, yet not identical or reducible to, religious conceptions. Brubaker does maintain that while in early modern Europe the rise of nationalisms based on language eclipsed religion as a prime axis of political identities and conflicts, today religious worldviews constitute "deep diversity" that modern nation-states find far harder to manage than linguistic disputes (p. 97). But he sees other much-discussed recent developments as overhyped.

Brubaker particularly regards as exaggerated the notions that transnational memberships, including "diasporas" of various sorts, are displacing nation-states. He stresses that only 3% of the world's population migrates, and that new transnational political networks are generally political projects through which either nation-states seek to gain external support or petitioners abroad hope for nation-state assistance. Both types of endeavor extend but do not displace the nation-state system. Brubaker acknowledges that that system is not and has never been universal, uniform in its components, or unchanging, but he insists that it remains the dominant political structuring that most distinguishes global "modernity" from past eras. His account may somewhat understate the power of the numerous challenges to the primacy of nation-states that are visible in the contemporary world, and it risks deflecting attention from the great variety of forms taken by today's nation-states; but it still is far more right than wrong.

This reviewer must note, however, that in his last two pages, Brubaker adds a previously undiscussed term —"peoplehood"—as one that is linked to the "nationhood and citizenship" of the nation-state, but that is not simply identical to either (p. 153). Although he does not define the term, he uses it in a way that encompasses both nationalism and modern state citizenship, and much more. He notes that the language of peoplehood can be used "by states but also against them." It can help to legitimize a nation-state, to demand a new polity, or to claim only a measure of autonomy within an existing regime. "Peoplehood" also can be presented as state-fostered or prepolitical, and it can be "understood as grounded in citizenship, history, language, way of life, descent, race, or religion" (p. 153). In a work so often concerned with drawing distinctions that clarify categories used in both scholarly and popular discussions, it is striking to find at the end the brief introduction of a term that is "extremely flexible and adaptable," so much so that it encompasses many of the categories that Brubaker has previously differentiated (while concisely sketching arguments I needed two books to make).

Brubaker employs this term "peoplehood" to advance his closing contention, that we can still speak of a single global "modernity," not "multiple modernities," while recognizing fully the great diversity of states, nations, citizenships, and, yes, "peoples" that the modern world displays. I am persuaded that stressing "multiple modernities" can blind us to globally interconnected economic, political, and cultural processes constructing the modern world, and in particular to the diffusion of the ideas and organizational models that have made nation-states

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preeminent in global political life. But I submit that the recognition that we can only understand modern processes of nation-state construction, contestation, and transformation by invoking the broader, more encompassing category of political "peoples" suggests something more. We should also be careful about overstating the differences between "modernity" and "premodernity." Yes, it is true that beginning in the seventeenth century, and especially in the course of the twentieth century, the world came to be dominated by regimes that can more or less be called nation-states, with shared features that in many respects differentiate them from the empires, city-states, tribes, theocracies, and other polities that prevailed in earlier epochs of human history. But it is possible that there are elements of the tasks of constructing political communities, political peoples, that are enduring features of political life, shared by both premodern and modern political endeavors. Analyzing the politics of membership and difference in ways that begin with nation-states may lead us both to overlook those continuities and to minimize the variations in political community construction and contestation that are now occurring and emerging.

The possibility that there are common features to the construction of all conceptions of political community that can nonetheless generate wide variety is what led me to explore "political peoplehood" at the same time that Rogers Brubaker was writing *Grounds for Difference*. Despite the differences in our projects, there are grounds for thinking that they can usefully inform each other. But I would not claim that the contributions are symmetrical, because I have been so greatly informed by Brubaker's latest outstanding book. Many other readers will be as well.

Response to Rogers M. Smith's review of *Grounds for Difference*

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— Rogers Brubaker

I would like to reply to three points made by Rogers Smith in his generous review of *Grounds for Difference*. First, Smith characterizes as misleading my observation that categorical differences are not *intrinsically* linked to inequality; he writes that "different entities must be unequal on *some* dimensions or else they would be identical." To my mind, this conflates difference (which in and of itself exists on a horizontal plane) with inequality (an intrinsically vertical notion, as I understand it, implying more or less of some generally valued good). Not all differences are ipso facto forms of inequality; non-identity (or difference) is a broader notion than inequality. My aim was to distinguish difference and inequality and to ask how they are related: how categorical distinctions are implicated in the production and reproduction of inequality as a matter of contingent fact, not logical necessity.

Second, Smith criticizes the absence of politics—especially of named political actors and their projects—from my argument. This is a fair point, especially as it regards the lead chapter on difference and inequality. Other chapters do include analyses of the politics of difference and the politics of belonging, but these are treated in a highly generalized fashion; specific political agents and their struggles are mentioned only fleetingly. I analyzed nationalist political struggles in some detail in two earlier books, and my new book, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, 2016, addresses contemporary political struggles over gender and racial categories. But *Grounds for Difference* is not a work of political analysis; it is concerned to map out the shifting terrain on which political struggles over difference unfold, not to analyze those struggles themselves.

Third, Smith highlights my use of the term "peoplehood" in the book's concluding pages. Here I think Smith reads too much into my use of the term and interprets these passages in too Smithian a manner. I don't in fact use peoplehood in a way that "encompasses both nationalism and modern state citizenship, *and much more*" (my emphasis). That is Smith's preferred usage, but as outlined in my review, it is not mine. Smith rightly cautions against exaggerating the break between premodern and modern politics. And I agree that certain "elements of the tasks of constructing communities" are characteristic of premodern as well as modern political undertakings. But I wanted to highlight here the global diffusion in the last two centuries of a set of organizational forms and political-cultural templates that provide the institutional and cultural materials for various distinctively modern forms of nationalism and politicized ethnicity. The linked ideas, ideals, and organizational models of nation, state, citizenship, and popular sovereignty, I suggested, form a kind of package, with an organizational component (above all the basic form of the bureaucratic territorial state) and a cultural or ideological component (the linked ideas of peoplehood, nationhood, and citizenship). This package, I submit, *is* distinctively modern, though it is also high flexible, adaptable, and varied.

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