Rogers Brubaker’s latest book, *Grounds for Difference*, is a collection of essays on race, ethnicity, religion, language, and nationalism, and why these distinctions continue to be so salient in modern societies. Brubaker, a renowned sociologist, former Harvard Junior Fellow, and MacArthur Fellow, has published a number of theoretical and empirical studies on nationalism and citizenship in Europe from a broad historical and comparative perspective. As he notes in his introduction, this work is a sequel to his earlier book *Ethnicity Without Groups* (also a collection of essays), with a focus on current themes related to the politics of “difference” (ethnicity, religion, language, race, immigration), including rising inequality, the use of genetic markers associated with race, and the continuing appeal of religious beliefs and community as part (or independent) of nationalism in advanced secular states.

Brubaker is best known for his analytical essays, in which he takes an important question, pulls it apart into several related questions, reviews the empirical literature on the topic, considers a number of thought experiments, and offers new insights on old debates. Both the value and the limitations of this genre of scholarship are on full display in this volume, which contains five previously published essays and two original pieces. Brubaker’s mastery of knowledge across many fields is dazzling, but it can also be dizzying. He is an organized and clear writer, but his arguments are neither linear nor cumulative. He frequently plumbs well below the surface of many academic topics with a discussion of both familiar and tangential issues, often failing to distinguish between major and peripheral points. This may make his essays frustrating for readers searching for hypotheses that might be tested in empirical research.

In his first essay, on “Difference and Inequality,” Brubaker takes issue with Charles Tilly’s claim (from his book *Durable Inequality*) that similar processes of discrimination (“categorical exclusion” and “opportunity hoarding” in Tilly’s words) are used by advantaged groups to maintain their power, privilege, and economic status. Brubaker reviews an immense body of research from different societies to argue that quite different mechanisms underlie various forms of categorical inequality, such as birthplace (by citizenship), residential segregation (by race), and stereotypes of gender “essentialism” (by sex). He also points out that much of the dramatic rise in inequality in recent years has not been categorical (it is within, not between categories).

Brubaker’s observations represent a challenge to one of the current vogues in sociology, which is the claim that all forms of inequality emanate from the same source—privileged groups favoring their own kind. This is a popular theme in some undergraduate texts and classes with titles like “Class, Race, and Gender.” This simplification is not only at odds with much empirical research, it is a muddle of concepts and the underlying demographic processes that sustain group differences and identities. Yet, I am not sure that I would recommend Brubaker’s essay to colleagues...
and students seeking to understand these issues. He lands many of right punches, but they are not delivered in a sufficiently integrated fashion to make a compelling case.

In contrast, I will offer an enthusiastic recommendation for chapter 2, on “The Return of Biology,” as a comprehensive account on how and why genetic interpretations of race differences in behavior, health, and social outcomes have made a comeback in recent years. Brubaker’s analysis clarified a number of issues that are often masked in arcane technical discussions and ideological debates. He begins with a useful review of how biologists, over the course of the twentieth century, abandoned the older “typological” understanding of race (with popular assumptions of essentialism and hierarchy), which assumed that differences between types were real in spite of wide individual-level variation. Population models derived from evolutionary theory posited that “folk races” (defined by popular beliefs) were only statistical abstractions with no underlying biological distinctions between them. The observed differences (or population distributions) between groups were interpreted as cultural and political phenomena that resulted from social processes, including prejudice, stratification, and political mobilization. The emergent unity of biological and social scientific understandings of race were celebrated at the 2000 White House press conference on the Human Genome Project when President Bill Clinton said that “in genetic terms, all human beings, regardless of race, are 99.9 percent the same.”

This understanding—race is only socially significant because of its correlation with socioeconomic status and power—has been challenged by recent biological claims about race in biomedicine and forensics (analyses of DNA databases used in the criminal justice system). Brubaker also finds parallels in the impact of the rising use of DNA testing in genealogical research and in political struggles to adjudicate claims of indigeneity. Although these developments have not yet displaced the social science assumption that race is “socially constructed,” the marketing of race-specific pharmaceutical drugs and the search for DNA markers to identify racial boundaries and differences have put social scientists on the defensive.

On the basis of a careful reading of the literature, Brubaker finds that the development of race-specific pharmaceutical drugs largely rests on flawed science by biomedical researchers who took advantage of NIH mandates to focus on racial and ethnic disparities in clinical trials. There are gaps in the incidence and severity of disease by race, some of which remain unexplained after “statistical controls” for correlates. These findings, however, do not provide direct evidence that the observed gaps in disease are due to biological or genetic differences between groups.

Faulty reasoning and flawed research designs have not stopped some researchers (and their sponsoring companies) from patenting and marketing race-specific drugs. A combination of scientific competition and avarice has led to a growing commercialization of biomedical discoveries targeted at racial and ethnic groups. Brubaker clearly explains these developments and how similar events in DNA testing are legitimating quasi-scientific claims (and popular beliefs) of genetic differences between folk races. This chapter should be required reading in all undergraduate and graduate social science classes on race and ethnicity.

The third chapter compares the role of religion and language as flash points of political contestation in multicultural societies, with an extended review of the
ideas and interpretation presented in the widely cited 1999 article “Why Islam is like Spanish: Cultural incorporation in Europe and the United States” by Aristide Zolberg and Long Litt Woon, which compared the reception of Muslim immigrants in Europe with the reception of Latin American immigrants in the United States. Brubaker concludes that contentious politics related to language had generally displaced historical disputes over the role of religion in public settings, but sometimes the cycle has moved in the opposite direction.

In another essay in *Grounds for Difference*, on the role of religion in the formation of nationalism, Brubaker summarizes his analysis:

The four ways of studying the relation between religion and nationalism that I have distinguished and delineated are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. They do not represent alternative theories; they do not provide different answers to the same questions but ask different kinds of questions. My aim has not been to argue for the merits of one of the four approaches over the others; all represent interesting and valuable lines of research. I have sought rather to give a sense of the range and variety of questions that can be asked about the relation between the large and multidimensional fields of phenomena we call religion and nationalism. (p. 116)

This statement illustrates my primary criticism of Brubaker’s essays. His creative mind often finds new insights, distinctions, and parallels on the politics of difference in modern societies that lead to increased conceptual and theoretical complexity. In my judgment, a good theoretical discussion is one that emphasizes core principles and causal mechanisms—parsimony, in a word. There is a symbiotic relationship between theory and research in science. Theory directs attention to causal principles, usually simplified with temporal or logical order. Empirical research invariably finds more “real world” complexity than is predicted by theory. However, when both theory and research are directed (or pulled) toward complexity, the objective of parsimony becomes more distant.

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*Places in Need: The Changing Geography of Poverty*  

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American suburbs began to draw the attention of social scientists after World War II, when the suburban population expanded rapidly. Two government policies helped populate the postwar suburbs. In 1944 Congress passed a series of benefits, known as the G.I. Bill, for citizens who had served in the military. Among the benefits was access to low-interest mortgage loans for the purchase of new homes. In 1956, the government began to construct a national network of expressways known as the interstate highway system, which was promoted by a Cold War president as a way of quickly deploying troops and materiel should there be a foreign invasion. (Its full name is the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways.) Although the invasion never happened, the wide, quick expressways provided an efficient way for workers to live far away from downtown and to