Explaining the Conflict Potential of Ethnicity

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Characteristics of ethnicity

Ethnicity, as collective phenomenon and form of identity, has in the contemporary world a singular capacity for social mobilization. Although it is not inherently conflictual, ethnicity has psychological properties and discursive resources which have the potential to decant into violence. No other form of social identity, in the early twenty-first century, has a comparable power, save for the closely related forms of collective affiliation, race and religion. Social class, however significant a political vector, lacks in most settings the clarity of boundaries, the primordial dimensions and affective resonance evident in ethnicity. Other forms of social categorization, such as occupation, gender, political affiliation, or the many other kinds one might list, although frequently a basis for competition and conflict, fall far short of the potential volatility of ethnic consciousness. The task of this chapter is to unravel the distinctive properties of ethnicity which explain this phenomenon.

Instances of conflict pitting human groups bearing different ethnonyms extend far back into the mists of the past in all parts of the world. Indeed, some authors assert that a prehistoric competence in recognizing and utilizing group solidarity was a key to survival in the early years of the species, embedding a genetic propensity to within-group kin-like altruism, and distrust tinged with fear towards the out-group 'other'.1 Others trace 'ethnie' as a state-forming force back more than two millennia.2 But the scale and salience of ethnic conflict have increased in recent decades. There is surely significance in the recent origins of the term 'ethnicity', which the linguistic custodians of the Oxford English Dictionary had yet to uncover in the 1933 edition, acknowledging its currency only in the 1972 supplement.3

Equally significant is the contemporary coinage (1944) of the term 'genocide', a word precipitated by the Holocaust. In its original usage, configured by the Nazi effort to exterminate Jews (and Roma), genocide meant the deliberate policy of a state to liquidate an entire people. By extension, genocide has come to include lethal assaults by one people upon another, with an intention of their physical elimination. Emblematic of the political force of ethnicity is the frequency of genocidal events and allegations in the 1990s: Bosnia, Rwanda, Burundi, Kosovo.
Once given lexical recognition, ethnicity has been defined in diverse ways, usually in terms of some of its attributes: mythical kinship, ancestry, language, shared values, common culture and the like. I prefer conceptualizing ethnicity in terms of three prime components. Firstly, ethnos is rooted in a variable array of shared properties. Language is often a core element, but not always (Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi share the same language; Serbian and Croatian are mainly distinguished by the script). The metaphor of fictive kinship is usually present, joined to a mythology of shared ancestry. Common cultural practices and symbols help define group identity. Sometimes the group is defined by a particular economic or social niche.

Equally important are the other two attributes. The shared culture becomes a visible ingredient in identity when it is joined to active collective consciousness. This in turn is contingent upon 'the other'. A group achieves consciousness not only in terms of the culture they share, but whom they are not. The boundary which demarcates 'we' and 'they' is critical in giving social meaning to the collective self.

Ethnicity and nationalism

Grasping the conflict potential of ethnicity requires exploring its relationship to nationalism. Whether one traces its origin to sixteenth-century England (for example, Greenfeld) or the French Revolution (for example, Hobsbawm), nationalism is a distinctly modern ideology which links an assertion of collective identity, initially ethnic, to a particular set of political claims. The nation achieves fulfillment through possession of its own state. This vocation rests upon two master precepts: popular sovereignty, and the doctrine of self-determination. The former locates the ultimate source of legitimation not in the institutions of rule, much less in a monarch, but in the citizenry collectivized as a 'people'. The latter asserts a right of a 'people', originally understood as an ethnic collectivity, to have their own state, or at least autonomous self-rule.

Nationalism as an ideology also elevates the mythologies associated with ethnicity to new levels of intensity. By joining the intrinsic solidarities of ethnicity to the institutional resources of a state, nationalism ratchets up the stakes of potential conflict any number of notches. Nationalism, runs the epigram, is ethnicity with an army and a navy. The most aggressive forms of nationalism, in the contemporary world, are those with an explicit ethnic content: ethnonationalism, a term given currency by Walker Connor.

We need at once to underline that nationalism and ethnicity are not identical terms. The most crucial distinction between ethnicity and nationalism lies in the nature of the political claims advanced. Of the thousands of ethnic groups in the world, only a modest minority assert a demand for full sovereignty. There is, of course, always the possibility that ethnic consciousness may mutate into ethnonationalism, but there is no inevitable progression.

Conversely, not all nationalism is ethnic; it can be grounded in shared political values (civic nationalism), a given territory or a shared history of colonial oppression. However, the sharpness of the distinction between civic and ethnic nationalism drawn by some authors (for example, Greenfeld) has been subject to effective critique. Even in the swathe of countries from the Atlantic to the Pacific, in Europe, the northern part of the Eurasian land mass, and parts of South-East Asia where the dominant ethnic group gives its name to the state, there is a discernible spectrum in the degree to which the discourse of nationalism is exclusively ethnic, or reflects shared political values (the republican virtues of liberty, equality and fraternity of the French Revolution, or the 'constitutional patriotism' of post-war Germany). Western hemisphere nationalisms originated in a territorialized rendition of the Creole or settler independence elites needing to demarcate their identity from that of the former colonial rulers. Most African and Asian nationalisms imagined a community from culturally diverse populations whose shared historical experience was colonial oppression. To transform from ideology of anti-colonial revolt into doctrine of post-colonial state legitimation, such a nationalism was compelled to assert an exclusively territorial referent, and deny any ethnic attachments.

Thus ethnicity and nationalism are overlapping but distinct terms, but their area of intersection as well as the zones of differentiation assume in the nineteenth and especially the twentieth centuries a new importance for some other reasons. Here we need to note the marriage through hyphenation of state and nation. The great imperial multinational states (Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and most recently the Soviet) shattered before the force of ethnonationalism in the wake of lost wars, hot or cold, and the overseas empires dissolved under the impact of anti-colonial nationalism and a newly hostile international environment. In the wake of this epic transformation of the world state system, the ideology of nationalism, however defined, silently permeated reason of state. The imperative of legitimation compelled states to represent themselves at least as nations in formation, and to deploy the considerable didactic capacities of the state to 'nation-building'.

The nationalizing of the state posed the issue of inclusion with a novel intensity. In the substantial number of states where a 'titular nation' named the country, cultural communities who fell outside the reach of this dominant identity became 'national minorities', a category whose juridical personality first achieved international recognition after the First World War. Even when 'nation' was a more political or territorial idea than ethnic, patterns of exclusion were frequent (indigenous or African diaspora peoples in Western hemisphere states).

Further intensifying the conflict potential of cultural pluralism was the vast expansion in the role of the twentieth-century state. The fraction of total resources subject to allocation through the public domain rose sharply, through the emergence of the Welfare State, costly technological innovations in the military field and the enlargement of the administrative reach of the state. Despite the modest retrenchments associated with the rise of market liberalism in the 1980s, the group stakes in access to and control of state power are immensely greater than in previous centuries.

This leads to two basic premises regarding the contemporary political landscape. Firstly, the politics of cultural pluralism are framed by the state system. Conflict and competition between ethnic groups, virtually without exception, occur within
the political arena enclosed by the territorial boundaries of a nation-state. Secondly, the overwhelming majority of the nearly 200 nation-state entities, defined by United Nations membership, are culturally plural. Even with an only moderately rigorous definition of homogeneity, one is hard pressed to identify more than a dozen countries devoid of cultural plurality.

The variable conflict potential of ethnicity

With the context of ethnicity thus described, we may now return to explaining its conflict potential. Critical to an understanding of its mobilizational force is a recognition that ethnicity is highly variable along two dimensions. Firstly, at a group level, ethnicity is not constantly activated. In any given social space there is likely to be some multiplicity of ethnic groups; most of the time, even though some consciousness of difference is present, interaction is civil and ethnicity quiescent. Social capital may accumulate primarily within groups, but everyday transactions involve no discernible tension.

The texture of group relationships varies widely. In some settings, such as that of the Swedish minority in Finland, cultural rights are well assured, political tensions are minimal and intermarriage frequent. In others, a long-standing pattern of everyday frictions, and endemic political competition, keep ethnicity foregrounded, as in the relationships between Flemings and Walloons in Belgium. In still others, an ineradicable memory of conquest and subordination continuously reinscribes difference in social and political life, as with francophone Quebec or Chechens in the Russian Federation. In yet other instances, the stigmatization and marginalization by dominant components of society force consciousness into a ghetto escapable only through identity denial or assertion (Alnai in Japan, Roma in Europe). Territorially concentrated groups, which have the possibility of a self-determination claim, are differently positioned from those who are geographically dispersed. The ethnic consciousness of those who have voluntarily migrated differs fundamentally from that of national minorities with a strong sense of territorial attachment and linguistic distinctiveness; these contrasts give rise to very different ethnic claims, and makes intergenerational dilution a possible, even likely outcome. These enduring patterning of group relationships all shape the intensity of ethnicity.

Secondly, one must recollect that ultimately ethnicity is experienced and performed at an individual level. Here as well the range of possible variation is very wide. The daily life of a given individual may have a low level of interactions defined by ethnic content; equally variable is the degree to which the 'other' is encountered in situations evoking threat or antagonism. Ethnic consciousness is reinforced or attenuated by the frequency of identity performance, through participation in rituals or routines defined by ethnicity (a rite of passage, a religious ceremony, even a meal). The individual member of the Arab minority in Israel finds identity constantly imposed by the manifold differences in citizenship status, and the ebb and flow of confrontation and crisis between Israel, the nascent state of Palestine and the Arab world more broadly. It is frequently performed in diverse protest actions. However, ethnic Americans of European ancestry, as Mary Waters engagingly shows, find ethnicity an option, to be ignored or employed dependent on context and situation; for many, ethnicity is a very weakly held identity, further attenuated for many by multiple ancessories. Where large numbers of ethnic subjects hold only a feeble level of communal consciousness, and participate only sporadically or not at all in rituals of identity, the mobilization potential of ethnicity is far less than for a group such as Palestinian Arabs in Israel or Palestine.

Analytical approaches to ethnicity

In recent years, ethnicity has frequently been analysed in terms of three dimensions: the primordial, the instrumental and the constructivist. These three faces of cultural pluralism can provide a useful framework for illuminating the aspects of ethnicity which explain its exceptional potential for conflictual mobilization. The three are distinguishable only analytically; in real world social action they are interwoven.

The primordial dimension of ethnicity calls attention to its affective properties. For those whose ethnic moorings are robust, the consciousness of cultural identity is deeply embedded in the constitution of the self. The solitary individual bereft of anchorings in some web of cultural affinity and solidarity is unusual. Although ethnicity is not the only available such relationship, it enjoys an unusually broad array of discursive resources in framing identity: name, language, narratives of shared ancestry, cultural practices, common symbols. There is force to the primordialist arguments of Harold Isaacs that ethnic identity serves basic human needs for a safe place of ultimate belonging.

The social psychology of identity provides important clues to the puzzle of the social force of ethnicity. The child acquires early from the socializing influence of family, school and play group a cognitive capacity to recognize the different ethnic claims, and makes intergenerational dilution a likely outcome. These enduring patterning of group relationships all shape the intensity of ethnicity.

We all have our fears of one another. Some fear that the opportunities in their own areas are limited and they would therefore wish to expand and venture unhampered in other parts. Some fear the sheer weight of numbers of other parts which they feel could be used to the detriment of their own interests. Some fear the sheer weight of skills and the aggressive drive of other groups which...
they feel has to be regulated if they are not to be left as the economic, social, and possibly political, under-dogs in their own areas of origin in the very near future. These fears may be real or imagined; they may be reasonable or petty. Whether they are genuine or not, they have to be taken account of because they influence to a considerable degree the actions of the groups towards one another and, more important perhaps, the daily actions of the individual in each group towards individuals from other groups.16

The emotive properties of ethnicity and the cognitive frames it provides lend themselves to the historicization of the collective self. Ethnicity frequently invokes the language and symbols of kinship.17 By historical legend, imagined kinship becomes shared ancestry. Identity in the process acquires a potent narrative.

The instrumental dimension of ethnicity captures its utilization as a weapon in social competition.18 The ethnic politician is a familiar figure in contemporary politics, using the group as a vote bank in electoral competition. Particularly in urban settings, the social competition for scarce resources—employment, housing—readily translates into ethnic mobilization. Nigerian popular imagery expresses metaphorically the instrumental aspect of ethnicity: politics, runs the aphorism, is about cutting the national cake. The resources of the country, in this colourful portrait, are sweet to the taste, and divisible into slices. The relative size of the servings will be visible to all; elementary justice requires equal slices, but the ethnic partisanship of the power-holder who holds the knife makes likely unequal portions.

The instrumental use of ethnicity has feedback consequences. The more ethnic mobilization is deployed as a political weapon, the more the ethnic other is compelled to respond by counter-mobilization. This readily decants into a cycle of out-bidding, which deepens the politicization of identity and sharpens antagonisms, a possible dynamic identified long ago by Rabushka and Shepels, armed with rational choice theory.19 In turn, its repeated instrumental use tends to inscribe it more deeply in the popular consciousness.

Practitioners of rational choice theory such as Russell Hardin also persuasively argue that the prior existence of group consciousness means that 'self-interest can often successfully be matched with group interest'.20 As well, mobilized ethnicity provides its leaders with effective resources for both summoning and enforcing solidarity. The large flow of funds from the Tamil diaspora to the insurgent 'Tigers' in Sri Lanka is assured not only by the dictates of ethnic solidarity, but by the capacity of Tiger representatives abroad to identify, monitor and discipline reluctant diasporic Tamils.

Finally, a full grasp of ethnicity requires attention to the processes by which identity is socially constructed. Ultimately all forms of identity are social constructs, products of human creativity. Examination of the dynamics of ethnosgenesis in any given group illuminates the nature of the discursive resources of the group. Crucial is the role of cultural entrepreneurs who codify and standardize a language, equipping it with a written form, creating an ethnos-centred historical narrative, populated with internal heroes and external villains, and build a literary tradition.

The constructivist focus reveals the uneven degree of mobilization potential among ethnic communities. Some have only a weak ideology of the collective self; absent such discursive capacity, activation is much more difficult. An extensively elaborated theorization of the group as speakers of a prestigious language, holders of a deep and heroic historical legend, and possessors of a rich cultural tradition constitutes ethnicity ripe for mobilization.

The dynamic of ethnic conflict

With ethnicity thus assembled, we can begin to appreciate its primal force in some conflict situations. When antagonism between groups, or state repressive action directed at an ethnic community, reaches a threshold of mutual threat, then the emotional dimensions of ethnic consciousness can take command. The other can come to pose a mortal threat to one’s very existence; in the genocidal confrontations in Rwanda, Burundi and former Yugoslavia in the 1990s this clearly became the case. Along with fear came the longing for revenge. In polarized moments, selective perception is general. The atrocities committed towards the ethnic ingroup are instantly perceived and indeed exaggerated in the rumours which flood an environment of violent confrontation. The harms which may have been inflicted upon the ethnic other recede into the remote recesses of awareness. Thus a passion for vengeance takes hold; this punitive impulse is entirely separated from any need to identify perpetrators. Any random members of the ethnic other are suitable victims for retribution.

In such situations, the ethnic other becomes dehumanized and demonized. As a source of boundless evil, and a mortal threat to the ethnic self, moral inhibitions dissolve and unspeakable violence can occur: the widespread use of machetes in the mass killings in Rwanda, or the large-scale rape accompanying these deadly episodes, whose purpose was much less sexual gratification than ritualized humiliation and moral destruction of the ethnic other. Indeed, the singular bestiality often associated with ethnic violence further escalates the fears and animosities. Such eruptions of inter-group hostility are inscribed in historical memory, and are not readily dissolved. Control of political power becomes a matter of life or death. Should power be the exclusive possession of one’s ethnic adversaries, one is fated to unlimited insecurity (among several studies see Prunier; on Burundi, Lemarchand).

Comparative study of the deadly ethnic riot reveals a common set of patterns reflecting the pathologies described above.22 The riot differs from the genocidal struggles in Rwanda, Burundi or Bosnia in its relatively brief duration and often greater spontaneity. However, in regions such as South Asia where communal violence has become an institutionalized part of the landscape, riots accumulate specialized personnel, readily available for participation, and what Brass terms ‘fire-tenders’, who have an interest in sustaining communal tensions. In turn, individual episodes are easily converted into grand narratives of communal conflict, by the press or by the state authorities.

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forms of identity constituted by race and religion. Race is defined by a social definition of phenotype, a construction originating in the imposition of hierarchy upon differentiated populations coerced into unfree labour, and permeated with stigmatization of the subordinated as inferior. Thus, in contrast to ethnicity which is an asserted form of consciousness, race categories were assigned by the dominant. Though racial solidarity comes to be asserted by the oppressed categories, accompanied by claims of collective worth contesting the stigmatization, its discursive sources are quite different.

Religious identity is also a distinct domain of cultural identity, overlapping with ethnicity in some instances where religion demarcates a group also possessing ethnic characteristics and self-consciousness (Jews or Armenians, for example). Since community is defined by theology, elaborated in sacred texts, affiliation compacts very distinctive obligations. The world religions possess sophisticated institutional structures for their perpetuation and reproduction, as well as anointed specialists for their leadership. The divine nature of their calling opens them to struggle over doctrine and frequent sectarian splintering. As the frequency of communal riots pitting Hindus against Muslims in India attests, religion can also serve as a mobilizing idiom for violent confrontation. In the early modern age, religion was the prime source of communal conflict, tamed only in the Western state by secularization and religious toleration.

Concluding reflections

In this chapter, I have endeavoured to explain the conflict potential of ethnicity. In conclusion, one must return to the variability in degree to which ethnic groups in presence within a nation-state arena have constantly conflictual relations. In the great majority of cases, conflict which exceeds the bounds of the civil is unusual. Further, there is evidence that, with a greater acknowledgement throughout the world that cultural pluralism is "normal", and not a threat to the polity requiring erasure or repression through exclusionary 'nation-building' projects, one may discern a global process of political learning in the accommodation of cultural diversity. A large repertoire of policy options for this purpose is available: decolonization, asymmetric federalism, electoral systems, affirmative action, legal pluralism, among others. Ted Gurr in a quantitative survey of ethnic conflicts concludes that they have significantly diminished in number in the 1990s, a counterintuitive finding he attributes in part to political learning.

A modicum of political learning occurs at the level of the international community and a doctrine of humanitarian intervention to halt ethnic violence takes form. The education process is marked with failures, as in the early stages of a Bosnia intervention, and more disastrously in Rwanda, where the United States and France in particular pursued policies which exacerbated the calamity. But an acceptance of a global responsibility to contain ethnic violence, however difficult its implementation, is an important development.

But these encouraging developments do not eliminate the possible perils of extremism which escapes the bounds of civility. Intransitive policies and ethnic extremists can form a lethal cocktail. A sustained and robust commitment to conflict containment and resolution will remain indispensable to a peaceful world.

Notes