Ethno-national Conflict and its Management

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This special issue of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics covers the topic of ethno-national conflict management, with a particular focus on the intersection between this body of work and the interdisciplinary field of ethnicity and nationalism studies. In this introduction we briefly cover the objectives of the special issue, provide some tools for readers to assess the contributions against these objectives and, finally, sketch what can be expected from the four articles.

The overall objective of this collection of articles is to demonstrate how a nuanced and contextualized understanding of ethnicity and nationality can beneficially inform the theory and practice of ethno-national conflict management. While this may seem a rather benign goal, it builds on an observation that what is often lost in the theory and practice of ethno-national conflict management is that the nature of ethnicity and nationalism has been the object of intense scrutiny and debate. The theory and practice of ethno-national conflict management therefore needs to account for these debates to be successful. Each of the contributors address this point in some way: from an overview of related fields (Stefan Wolff); to case-specific analysis of the way understandings of ethnicity and nationality play into conflict management approaches (Robert Schertzer and Eric Woods); to a consideration of the relationship between ethno-national heterogeneity and violence (Elliot Green); to an investigation of the way that a deep and widely-held nationalist discourse can inhibit the application of solutions that may work elsewhere (David Rampton).

That the topic of this special issue, ethno-national conflict and its management, warrants treatment goes almost without saying. The oft-cited explosion of ethno-national conflict in the 20th century seems almost an inevitable circumstance when one considers the combination of, on the one hand, the rise of nationalism in the modern era, and, on the other hand, the "problem of fit" between nations and states (i.e. the fact that approximately 600 language groups and 5000 ethnic groups are housed in less than 200 states) (Gurr, 1993). Indeed, from the mid-20th century, intrastate warfare has made up the vast majority of conflict and has risen significantly – with struggles for national self-determination fuelling many of these conflicts (some 87 such conflicts have emerged since the 1950's) (Hewitt, 2008; Quinn, 2008: 34). While the research is not fully conclusive, there is a strong argument that ethno-national heterogeneity (manifesting as a lack of congruence between ethnic, national and state boundaries) significantly increases the probability of violent conflict breaking out (see Gurr, Hewitt and Wilkenfeld, 2008: 9; Montalvo and Reynal-Querol 2005). While, as David Latin points out, ethnic heterogeneity in a state does not predict civil war (with Fearon, 2003; 2007: 9-15), when ethnic groups are territorialized, the probability of conflict does rise significantly (Toft 2003; for a review of this issue see also, Kaufmann, 2011).

The volume of work on ethno-national conflict and its management is considerable. Yet, "new" conflicts regularly emerge (e.g. Darfur), tensions in previously "settled" conflicts occasionally lead to violent clashes (e.g. Northern Ireland) and others seem to defy effective management (e.g. Kashmir, Israel-Palestine, Sri Lanka). Clearly, continued focus on ethno-national conflict, and particularly its management, remains a worthwhile and important endeavour for scholars and policy-makers alike. It is with this in mind that the contributors in this special issue seek to engage the question; there is a real need to drive theory forward to better inform the study and policy of ethno-national conflict management. Hopefully, the articles here can help to bring about the required ingenuity to address this key issue of modern politics.

The theory of ethno-national conflict management

Before turning to the pieces included in this special issue, it is important at the outset to clarify the central concepts that make up the focus of this special issue on ethno-national conflict management. We leave the in-depth discussion of the theory and practice of ethno-national conflict management to Stefan Wolff in the first contribution, but, some cursory remarks here should help to frame the discussion around what are, at times, concepts that evade definitional consensus.

The first step in unpacking the concept of ethno-national conflict is to define the component groups that are in conflict. In doing so, it is helpful to separate the analytic categories of ethnic group, nation and state. Building on current literature, we see ethnic groups as communities sharing a belief in common ancestry, an association with a 'homeland' territory and one or more cultural markers (i.e. common language, religion or phenotype). Nations share many core characteristics with ethnic groups while also having an added public element, notably common laws and political aspirations. Finally, the state is the set of institutions that govern with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Note, however, that these definitions are ideal types. In social reality, the lines between them can be blurred. To help clarify, if we were to look at Kenya, the Kikuyu could usefully be seen as an ethnic group in contrast to the civic Kenyan nation that former President Jomo Kenyatta attempted to create via the set of institutions that comprise the Kenyan state.

These general definitions of key concepts can act as benchmarks to assess the way the authors in this issue present their own understandings of these phenomena; but, perhaps more importantly, in drawing the distinction between ethnic group, nation and state we also hope to illuminate the various potential dynamics of ethno-national conflict. In this way, conflict between ethnic groups, nations and states can be understood along a set of different "poles" (see Wolff and Weller, 2005: 4-11). So, groups can be in conflict with each other (*i.e.* ethnic group vs. ethnic group, or ethnic group vs. nation, or nation vs. nation). Similarly, groups can be in conflict with the state (*i.e.* ethnic group/nation acting against the state, or the state acting against an ethnic group/nation). Making this distinction also allows for a more nuanced understanding of this state vs. group pole of conflict, whereby minority or dominant ethnic groups or nations can "capture" and use the instruments of the state against rival groups.[1]

Throughout this special issue, ethno-national conflict is understood in a rather broad sense: it can refer to peaceful and violent conflict. The tendency of the contributors to this special issue is to focus on the latter, and so, generally, when discussing ethno-national conflict, they refer to the breakdown of the regular political process into violence. When discussing the peaceful variant of ethno-national conflict – where politics becomes dominated by a conflict of nationalisms, as in Canada or Northern Ireland – the authors strive to make this clear.

Ethno-national conflict management refers to those theories and policies that seek to make it possible for conflicting parties to pursue their aims without recourse to violence. As Wolff discusses in his contribution, there are key distinctions within this field of ethno-national conflict management: notably

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[1] Of course, ethnic groups or nations that have links to groups in other states than their 'host state' can introduce an inter-state pole of conflict (as is the case in the Georgia-South Ossetia-Russia conflict or the Irish-British aspect of the Northern Ireland conflict). On this point and more generally on the dynamics of conflict along these poles, see: Wolff and Weller, 2005. Additionally, as Schertzer and Woods argue in this issue, there are poles of conflict between actors *within* groups, as well as *over* the very way the state recognizes groups as nations.

between distributive and structural approaches. Supporters of distributive approaches promote agent-based solutions to mitigate ethno-national conflict by promoting inter-group cooperation and creating cross-cutting cleavages within an ethno-nationally diverse state (for example, via electoral mechanisms). Those promoting structural approaches seek to accommodate ethno-national difference through institutional mechanisms (for example, via territorial autonomy).

The contributions in this special issue deal with both these broad approaches. However, we note that structural mechanisms (particularly the use territorial autonomy) are increasingly being accepted as central to the successful management of ethno-national conflict (Gurr, 1993). Although, this is certainly not a settled matter: as noted earlier, one's understanding of ethnicity and nationality shapes one's preferred approach to conflict management. Accordingly, it is prudent for us to briefly review the main approaches within the field of ethnicity and nationalism studies to provide the necessary context for this special issue.

Ethnicity and nationalism studies

With the tragedies of the Second World War as backdrop, a body of literature mainly authored by macro historical social scientists, who are referred to as 'modernists,' emerged in the 1980's discussing the origins of ethnic groups, nations and nationalism. In step with the wider 'constructivist' turn in the social sciences, these modernists generally make the case that nations are a wholly modern phenomenon whose origins can be found in the ideological and structural changes wrought by industrialization and the rise of the modern state (rather than social entities that have endured relatively unchanged from time immemorial) (Kedourie, 1993 [1961]; Breuilly, 1993 [1982]; Gellner, 1996 [1983]; Özkirimli, 2000). Nations, in this view, are 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1991), whose culture, traditions, and histories are a kind of false consciousness imposed by state elites (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). For modernists, then, 'Nations', if they exist at all, are therefore a product of nationalism.

The modernist school, which now dominates the field, arose as a challenge to the notion that had preoccupied academic and lay thinking from the 19th Century onwards: that the world was composed of a fixed number of social groups called nations, whose primordial origins preceded historical writing. In contrast with modernists, this 'primordialist' view of nations and nationalism sees nations as preceding nationalism – nationalists merely "awaken" the deep sense of national solidarity that already exists in the form of shared ethnicity and cultural practices. Although primordialism certainly continues to influence nationalist lay thinking, in the academic literature its explicit form has fallen out of favour. However, there are still pockets of quasi-primordialism that continue to produce sophisticated work, for example in socio-biology (van den Berghe, 1978) and in the burgeoning cultural studies literature (Alexander and Smith, 2003). Brubaker has also argued forcefully that a kind of primordialism still prevails in academic discourse in the form of unreflexive 'groupist' thinking (Brubaker, 2004).

In reaction to a perceived failing among modernists to properly account for the highly affective dimension of national and ethnic identity, which can be seen in the way that the members of such groups are so often willing to act and even sacrifice their lives to protect their cultural attributes from disappearing or being assimilated, and in contrast to the ahistorical arguments of primordialists, a group of scholars have sought to bring to light the premodern ethnic and religious origins of nations (Connor, 1994; Smith, 1986; Hutchinson, 2001). Associated primarily with Anthony Smith and John Hutchinson's work, which they label 'ethno-symbolism', this body of literature points to the pre-modern ethnic (Smith, 1986) and religious (Smith, 2003) aspects of nations' myths, symbols, traditions, and memories (Smith, 2009; Hutchinson, 1987). By acknowledging that nations are overwhelmingly modern constructs,

but by also arguing that the affective dimension of ethnic groups and nations is derived from their members' shared cultural resources, ethnosymbolism aims to stake out a middle ground between modernism and primordialism.

In the literature that addresses how to manage ethno-national conflict, references to nationalism studies literature can at times be cursory. When it comes time to define ethnicity, nations, or nationalism, this usually takes the form of citing, for example, Anthony Smith, Benedict Anderson or John Breuilly's definitions. This approach misses the deep ontological divide separating these scholars' work and the wider debates in nationalism studies. In contrast to such a strategy, we are seeking to demonstrate in this special issue that the literature on managing ethno-national conflict can be enhanced by paying close attention to the different positions within ethnic and nationalism studies and that, furthermore, nationalism studies itself can be enhanced by such work.

Briefly then, as these insights are taken up throughout the section, why is a field that is generally dominated by historical sociology relevant to a discipline that is mainly concerned with mitigating contemporary struggles through policy interventions? The main reason is that one's view of nations and nationalism – whether nations are a product of nationalism or vice versa – to a large extent determines the institutional mechanism favoured to mitigate ethno-national conflict. Thus, if nations are understood to be fairly malleable elite constructs, distributive approaches such as centripetalism that seek to foster inter-ethnic cooperation will be favoured. On the other hand, if nations are understood to be enduring entities, structural approaches such as liberal consociationalism that seek to protect ethno-national boundaries will be favoured.

The modernist approach tends to inform most ethno-national conflict management theory and practice (as Wolff observes in his contribution to this special issue). However, since the end of the Cold War there has been an trend towards mechanisms that draw from a more ethno-symbolic understanding of nations and nationalism. Thus, in the most extreme cases of conflict, as in the former Yugoslavia, the international system has accommodated the partition of states into smaller 'ethno-national' units. In more protracted non territorial conflicts, as in Northern Ireland, policy-makers have favoured a highly institutionalised system of power sharing that locks the political parties representing the putative ethno-national groups into an arrangement in which the political pursuit of their agendas offers greater and more certain benefits than the use of violence. And in peaceful states, that are nevertheless dominated by ethnopolitics, as in Canada or Belgium, the tendency has been towards autonomy for the various ethno-national groups. The fact that a case such as Northern Ireland, although hailed as a success, remains dominated by ethnopolitics and continues to see sporadic outbreaks of low-level sectarian violence, suggests that more work needs to be done to keep conflict within the political process. Paying closer attention to developments in nationalism studies may advance this effort.

Work by Rogers Brubaker (2004; *et al* 2006), for example, has raised the level of sophistication within the modernist camp. His argument to approach ostensible ethno-national conflicts without an *apriori* understanding of them as ethno-national conflict has the potential to go some distance in helping policymakers and academics think through the transition from conflict, to peace, to 'normal' politics. Brubaker's colleague, Andreas Wimmer (2008), has also produced strong work on the relationship between elite cooperation and cultural boundaries that could also prove fruitful for the ethno-national conflict management field. On the other hand, John Hutchinson (2005), working in the ethno-symbolic tradition, has staked out a distinct line of enquiry which focuses on intra-nation conflicts. Such work can help to re-orient discussions away from a focus on ethnic groups and nations as monolithic units, while still acknowledging the relative stability of their boundaries.

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Foregrounding theories of nations and nationalism in the study of ethno-national conflict management also offers an opportunity to reflect back on such theories and, in so doing, push forward the field of nationalism studies. Scrutinising the relationship between nationalists and their putative groups and the making and unmaking of boundaries in the management of ethno-national conflict has the potential to produce new insights in both fields.

Outline

The contributions in this special issue consist of a theoretical overview followed by three case studies of Commonwealth countries (which employ a range of qualitative methods sensitive to the particular issues and contexts). Cases have been selected in line with a number of criteria: both "hot" and "cold" conflict zones in the developed and developing world are included. This broad overview allows for a comparison between: a case that is considered to successfully manage conflict and is the focus of attempts to export management mechanisms (Canada); a case where conflict has been curiously absent despite considerable ethnic diversity (Tanzania); and, a recently hot conflict zone, which has been the focus of attempts to import conflict management mechanisms (Sri Lanka). Through a diversity of cases and approaches, the authors all seek to demonstrate that a contextualized understanding of the phenomena of ethnicity and nationalism can have significant implications for ethno-national conflict management.

Stefan Wolff starts by surveying the theory and practice of ethno-national conflict and its management, while accounting for some of the intersections with the field of nationalism studies. He then presents a framework of ethno-national conflict management that the subsequent case studies engage with, while arguing that the context of cases and content of agreements matters in the success of attempts to manage ethno-national conflict.

In the first case study, Robert Schertzer and Eric Woods look at Canada as a key case that informs the management of ethno-national conflict via multinational federalism. Arguing the case has generally been misunderstood (through an overly primordial perspective) they adopt a more nuanced approach towards nations and nationalism that illuminates four potential poles of conflict in plurinational states like Canada that must be accounted for in the theory and practice of ethno-national conflict management.

This is followed by Elliot Green's analysis of Tanzania and the striking success of pan-Tanzanian nationalism and the lack of conflict in that state, despite significant ethnic diversity. Keeping an eye on comparable cases in Africa, he provides an update on Ernest Gellner's work by showing how distributive factors and demography are key in the management of ethno-national conflict in Tanzania.

David Rampton concludes with a post-structuralist analysis of the impact of Sinhala pan-state nationalism on the management of ethno-national conflict in Sri Lanka. He argues that power-sharing arrangements tend to fail in Sri Lanka because they do not account for the 'deep' hegemony of Sinhala nationalism among the Sinhalese.

Finally, it must be added that this special issue stems from a seminar series on the same topic, put on by the Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism (ASEN) held at the London School of Economics throughout 2009-2010. That series, and this publication, would not be possible without the dedication, hard work and conceptual input provided by the members of the ASEN Executive Committee

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