ABSTRACT. Nationalism often involves risky and violent action. This has led many scholars to believe that its roots must be irrational. This attribution is ambiguous, however, because it fails to distinguish between two quite different meanings of the term 'irrational'. In principle, nationalism can emanate either from social or from individual irrationality. Only the latter kind of irrationality is theoretically provocative, however. The hallmark of rational individual action lies in its instrumentality. Whereas many aspects of nationalism have been analysed successfully using instrumental behavioral assumptions, nationalist violence has been a significant exception. This article offers a framework for the explanation of nationalist violence in instrumental terms. It concludes by suggesting that the temptation to view nationalism as an outcome of individual irrationality should be resisted.

In the midst of a lighthearted celebration of May Day taking place in the city of Colombo in 1993, a man rushed through the parade towards the marching 68-year-old President of Sri Lanka, Ranasinghe Premadasa, and set off explosives that were attached to his body. The president and his assassin were instantly killed, as were at least ten other people. The government of Sri Lanka blamed the Tamil Tigers, a rebel group that had waged a ten-year war of secession in the country's north and east and had used suicide bombers in the past to kill government and army officials (Gargan 1993). Whereas such self-sacrifice in the name of a nationalist cause is relatively rare, it is not unique. For example, Irish Republican Army hunger strikers in Northern Ireland detention centres were willing to pay the ultimate price on behalf of their own national movement.

Whenever nationalism emerges from its historical chrysalis, as has occurred more than once in the twentieth century, scholars often seem at a loss to explain its significance. Many resort to the old chestnut that nationalism is irrational:

The dyed-in-the-wool nationalist is a romantic, not a rationalist. He is a communitarian, not an individualist. He thinks in terms of the spirit and culture of his people, not in terms of bargains and calculations. He will fight for his case despite any number of rational arguments showing it to be unjustified. (Birch 1989: 67)
There remain ‘irrational’ elements of explosive power and tenacity in the structure of nations and the outlook and myth of nationalism . . . The conflicts that embitter the geopolitics of our planet often betray deeper roots than a clash of economic interests and political calculations would suggest, and many of these conflicts, and perhaps the most bitter and protracted, stem from just these underlying non-rational elements. (Smith 1989: 363)

The passions evoked by ethnic conflict far exceed what might be expected to flow from any fair reckoning of ‘conflict of interest’. (Horowitz 1985: 134–35)

As Chateaubriand expressed it nearly 200 years ago: ‘Men don’t allow themselves to be killed for their interests; they allow themselves to be killed for their passions’. To phrase it differently: people do not voluntarily die for things that are rational. (Connor 1993: 206)

Such conclusions seem almost inescapable in the face of nationalist phenomenology. How can the violence that has occurred in Bosnia-Herzogovina be explained rationally? True, it is not difficult to interpret events in Bosnia as the by-product of a cool, calculating land-grab by Serbs and Croats against their weaker Muslim victims, for grabbing land, like other forms of looting, is profitable in the absence of effective state authority. Yet what is remotely rational about the rape and pillage that have accompanied this territorial confiscation?

Are the personal sacrifices made by extreme nationalists rational? Or the illegal, highly risky, and violent behaviour carried out by terrorists? Even a sceptical observer like Hobsbawm (1992: 9) admits that nationalism ‘overrides all other public obligations, and in extreme cases (such as wars) all other obligations of whatever kind. This implication distinguishes modern nationalism from other and less demanding forms of . . . group identification’.

The irrationality of nationalism

The claim that nationalism is irrational can mean two quite different things, however. Nationalism may be collectively irrational because it is often associated with undesirable social outcomes like economic decline and civil war. Since undesirable social outcomes often arise from the interaction of rational individuals – think of rush hour traffic – this point is neither very illuminating, nor particularly relevant to the problem of nationalism.¹

That nationalism may be the product of individual irrationality is more provocative. Geertz (1963: 109), in an oft-cited paper that harks back to Tönnies’ Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft (1957), writes that nationalists regard congruities of blood, language and custom as having

an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves. One is bound to one’s kinsman, one’s neighbor, one’s fellow believer, ipso facto; as a result
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not merely of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but at least in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself.

The hallmark of rational individual action is its instrumentality. People are rational to the extent they pursue the most efficient means available to attain their most preferred ends. These ends may be material or non-material. People are irrational when they pursue a course of action regardless of its consequences. It cannot be rational, therefore, to regard social ties as binding notwithstanding their consequences for 'personal affection, common interest, or incurred obligation', in Geertz's words.

Since nationalism is more often associated with extreme types of behaviour than most other sorts of political movements, individually irrational explanations of it continue to have considerable influence. The supposed irrationality of nationalists is usually ascribed to one of three sources.

The first is biological. On this view, nationalism ultimately emanates from primordial, atavistic sentiments that spring up from the old Adam (Shils 1957), much as Dr Strangelove's gloved hand repeatedly attempts to fashion a Nazi salute against his will in Kubrick's eponymous film. If people are assumed to maximise their inclusive fitness, so evolutionary theory teaches us, then they will behave nepotistically and favour genetically proximate relatives - by implication, members of their own ethnic group - over more distant ones (van den Berghe 1981; Reynolds et al. 1987; Shaw and Wong 1989). Under certain conditions people might even aid close kin at considerable personal expense. Using inclusive fitness to explain nationalism is attractive on account of its parsimony, generality and broad scope. Yet whenever prosocial behaviour extends beyond networks of close kin and people act on the basis of charity, duty or civic obligation, inclusive fitness cannot be the explanation.

Emotion can be another basis for irrational action. Although action resulting from the heat of passion usually has consequences, and often dire ones, the point is that emotional actors do not calculate these consequences in advance. That people sometimes act emotionally is undeniable. Yet the social sources of emotional action are not well understood. As a result, no one has yet been able to spell out their implications for macrosocial outcomes like nationalism.

The last - and most intuitively appealing - source of ostensible nationalist irrationality is deeply held value commitments acquired in the course of socialisation (Isaacs 1975; Coles 1986). Value-driven (Wertrational) action is determined by

a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behavior, independently of its prospects of success. Examples ... would be the actions of persons who, regardless of possible cost to themselves, act to put into practice their convictions of what seems to them to be required by duty,
honor, the pursuit of beauty, a religious call, personal loyalty, or the importance of some 'cause' no matter in what it consists ... (Such) action always involves 'commands' or 'demands' which, in the actor's opinion, are binding on him. (Weber 1968: 24–25)

Collective identity often exemplifies this kind of value in discussions of nationalism (Taylor 1989; Connor 1993).

Value-driven explanations are problematic, however. It is difficult to accurately gauge what people desire because the mind can only be seen through a glass darkly, if at all. As a result, very little is known about the salience or intensity of values (Hechter 1992a; Hechter et al. 1993). Worse, values cannot readily be imputed from behaviour. Their salience is often inferred from social correlates of consumption behaviour (as in Bourdieu 1984). Thus when hungry Hindus refuse to eat meat, or hungry Americans to eat dogs and cats, or when poor Catholics are unwilling to practise birth control and abortion, these behaviours are said to reveal the salience of religious values. But this imputation is unwarranted. Usually we do not know if such behaviours result from the fear of sanctions (and thus really are instrumental actions), or directly from deeply held value commitments. Since both mechanisms produce the same outcome, it is impossible to tell which of them is responsible in the usual case.

This point does not deny the status of value-driven behaviour; it merely highlights the difficulty of discerning when it occurs. Whereas value-driven arguments are plausible explanations of social movements, they are not compelling ones. Until we have some more reliable means of detecting the variable salience of values, it is impossible to determine the boundary between instrumental and value-driven action.

The assumption of value-driven action is extremely restrictive. When people are value-driven, they will pursue a course of action regardless of the cost this action entails for them. Yet this is a most unlikely situation: even Weber (1968: 25), who included value-driven action in his famous discussion of the types of social action, believed that it occurred infrequently.

The rationality of nationalism

The temptation to treat nationalism as a by-product of individually irrational behaviour should be resisted. Instrumental analysis should not be abandoned prematurely; instead, it would be wise to heed Weber's injunction to assume instrumental rationality as a first step in social explanation:

For the purposes of a typological scientific analysis it is convenient to treat all irrational, affectually determined elements of behaviour as factors of deviation from a conceptually pure type of rational action ... For example a panic on the stock exchange can be most conveniently analysed by attempting to determine first what
the course of action would have been if it had not been influenced by irrational affects; it is then possible to introduce the irrational components as accounting for the observed deviations from this hypothetical course. Similarly, in analysing a political or military campaign it is convenient to determine in the first place what would have been a rational course, given the ends of the participants and adequate knowledge of all the circumstances. Only in this way is it possible to assess the causal significance of irrational factors as accounting for the deviations from this type. The construction of a purely rational course of action in such cases serves the sociologist as a type (ideal type) which has the merit of clear understandability and lack of ambiguity. By comparison with this it is possible to understand the ways in which actual action is influenced by irrational factors of all sorts, such as affects and errors, in that they account for the deviation from the line of conduct which would be expected on the hypothesis that the action were purely rational. (Weber 1968: 6)

Whereas many aspects of nationalism have been analysed successfully using instrumental behavioural assumptions, nationalist violence has been a significant exception. Contrary to the received wisdom in the literature, nationalist violence can best be explained instrumentally. A great deal of research has been lavished on the study of violence (Berkowitz 1993). The consensus of this research is that violence comes in both instrumental and expressive varieties. Obviously, violence can be a means to valued ends. There is also compelling evidence that violence can be the product of the arousal of negative affect, or bad feelings.

What implications does this conclusion have for the analysis of nationalist violence? No one has attempted to disentangle these two types of violence at the aggregate level of analysis, to my knowledge. Thus there is no good empirical answer to the question. There are compelling theoretical reasons, however, to suspect that nationalist violence is more instrumental than emotional. This is because the factors leading to emotional causes of violence (such as unhappiness in the spheres of family and work) are likely to be idiosyncratically distributed in any population, whereas the factors leading to instrumental violence (material, political and cultural demands) are more likely to be widely shared among nationalists.

While it has no impact at the individual level, the distribution of these dispositions is critical at the aggregate level of analysis (Stinchcombe 1968: 67–8n). Idiosyncratic dispositions tend to cancel out when they are aggregated; thus they will have little effect on the behaviour of the group. When dispositions to action are systematically distributed, however, they will have great implications for group action. Therefore, to the degree that expressive violence is idiosyncratic, it can be ignored as a cause of nationalist violence.

Actors’ goals must be specified ex ante to explain risky, violent and self-sacrificing behaviour on the basis of instrumental logic, else the explanation will be tautological and therefore quite uninteresting. Specifying goals in instrumental explanations is not a straightforward task, however. It must be
done either by directly measuring these goals, or by making assumptions about them.

How can the goals be measured? Obviously, it is instrumentally rational to be a nationalist if by so doing people believe they will be better off materially (for instance, by avoiding confiscation of their property), or culturally (for instance, by profiting from the existence of a linguistic monopoly). It turns out that precious little in the way of goals is ruled out under the logic of instrumental action, as enunciated in expected utility theory, for example (Dawes 1988). Instrumentally rational people can seek to bolster their identities (Azar 1990), self-esteem (Messick and Mackie 1989; Heisler 1987: 36–7), or security (Bloom 1990; Friedman et al. 1994; Anderson 1983 claims that nationalism is a secular religion). They can also be altruistically concerned about others (Becker 1981). These are all plausible motivations, and people might answer survey questions in such a way that these goals come to the fore. But how can we know for certain? None of these goals are readily observable. Further, nationalist goals are even harder to measure accurately than other kinds due to people’s tendency to falsify their political preferences (Kuran 1995).

Although explanations based on diverse goals are intuitively realistic, they encounter formidable measurement difficulties. Even Weber, who insisted on the plurality of goals in sociological explanation, recognised the difficulty of imputing them empirically:

Verification of subjective interpretation by comparison with the concrete course of events is, as in the case of all hypotheses, indispensable. Unfortunately this type of verification is feasible with relative accuracy only in the few very special cases susceptible of psychological experimentation. In very different degrees of approximation, such verification is also feasible in the limited number of cases of mass phenomena which can be statistically described and unambiguously interpreted. For the rest there remains only the possibility of comparing the largest possible number of historical or contemporary processes which, while otherwise similar, differ in the one decisive point of their relation to the particular motive or factor the role of which is being investigated. (Weber 1968: 10)

Finding independent evidence of actors’ goals is often difficult. Hobsbawm (1992: 79) makes this point with specific reference to nationalism:

Suppose ... we take the readiness to die for the fatherland as an index of patriotism, as seems plausible enough and as nationalists and national governments have naturally been inclined to do. We would then expect to find that William II’s and Hitler’s soldiers, who were presumably more open to the national appeal, fought more bravely than the eighteenth-century Hessians, hired out as mercenaries by their prince, who presumably were not so motivated. But did they? And did they fight better than, say, the Turks in World War I, who can hardly yet be regarded as national patriots? Or the Gurkhas who, fairly evidently, have not been motivated by either British or Nepalese patriotism? One formulates such fairly absurd questions not to elicit answers or stimulate research theses, but to indicate the denseness of the
fog which surrounds questions about the national consciousness of common men and women.

Therefore analysts often must settle for the imputation of goals by assumption. But what kinds of goals should be assumed? The usual suspects are tangible, measurable material goods – increments of some combination of wealth, power or prestige. Wealth, power and prestige have pride of place among all other goals because they are fungible goods that every instrumentally oriented actor can be expected to desire (see Hechter 1994).

In what follows, I assume, more or less conventionally, that people are maximisers of wealth, power and prestige at the margin. Such rational egoistic behavioural assumptions are necessary but insufficient to deduce \textit{ex ante} propositions about the conditions under which nationalist groups are likely to develop, in the first place, and to employ violent means, in the second. To do so, one also must have a theory that permits individual level assumptions about goals to yield propositions about nationalist outcomes, which are collective.

For this purpose I rely on an emerging theory, the solidaristic theory of social order. As its name suggests, this theory is not concerned with nationalism \textit{per se}, but rather with the more general problem of the evolution of social order – especially the security of persons and property. The theory suggests that violence arises for instrumental reasons, but only via the mediation of social groups (earlier statements are in Hechter \textit{et al.} 1992; Hechter and Kanazawa 1993; Kanazawa 1994).

\textbf{The solidaristic theory of social order}

The solidaristic theory begins in the putative state of nature. According to the theory, people join groups to attain valued goods that cannot be acquired by their own individual efforts. Some of these groups are likely to come into conflict. One by-product of this intergroup conflict is the establishment of the state. Once the state exists certain groups will challenge the state's legitimacy, and reward their members for engaging in violence.

The theory has two parts. The first part explains how solidarity develops in small groups and why groups have varying amounts of solidarity (Hechter 1987). The motive for group formation is the consumption of jointly produced goods that augment members' wealth, power or prestige. To obtain the joint goods that make membership worthwhile, individuals must comply with rules that permit these joint goods to be produced. Since individuals are rational egoists, however, they will free ride if they can continue to consume the joint goods by so doing. This free-rider problem can only be solved in groups having effective monitoring and sanctioning institutions. Hence, the demand for joint goods induces members to establish these institutions.
Further, groups with extensive production rules (or normative obligations) and effective controls will have the highest solidarity.

Group solidarity contributes to social order by regulating the behaviour of members. The members of highly solidary groups -- that is, groups with extensive rules and effective controls -- must divert a large proportion of their private resources, especially their time, to collective purposes. This leaves them with less private resources for investment at their own discretion. Ever since Hobbes, it has been appreciated that instrumentally rational actors will not hesitate to use force and fraud if these are the most efficient means of realising their goals. Acts of force and fraud clearly decrease social order, however. Absent the coercive power of the state (which has not yet made its appearance in this story), the only constraint on people's use of force and fraud is the amount of discretionary resources available to them.

Imagine two groups $\alpha$ and $\beta$ and assume that time is the only relevant discretionary resource. Members in good standing of $\alpha$ must devote 20 per cent of their waking hours to comply with $\alpha$'s production rules. But members of $\beta$ need only devote 10 per cent of their waking hours to remain in good standing in $\beta$. Members of $\beta$ thus have twice as much time to spend as they wish than members of $\alpha$. If both $\alpha$s and $\beta$s are equally likely to resort to force and fraud, then $\beta$s will be twice as great a threat to social order as $\alpha$s. Thus because they have fewer discretionary resources ($ceteris paribus$), members of highly solidary groups decrease social order less than members of less solidary groups.

The theory's second component identifies the conditions under which the state arises to produce social order by regulating intergroup conflict. Even though high group solidarity contributes to social order by limiting members' discretionary resources, a territory having multiple highly solidary groups is unlikely to be orderly. Instead, these groups are likely to compete for members and resources, thereby imposing negative externalities on one another.

Competition will provide members of all groups with short-run benefits because it will minimise both their dependence on any one group and the extensiveness of production rules, in effect lowering the price of the joint good. But competition also encourages some groups to engage in predation by appropriating the resources of well-endowed groups. The existence of predatory groups is a challenge to the survival of non-predatory, productive groups, for it threatens the latter groups' ability to provide their members with joint goods. Productive groups will respond either by diverting resources from goods production to protection, or -- if there are economies of scale in protection -- by establishing a third-party mechanism to regulate intergroup relations. This third-party mechanism is the state. When the productive groups sharing an interest in mutual protection are themselves highly solidary, then the collective action problems they face in establishing the state will be minimised.
At the behest of the highly solidary productive groups who created it, the state produces order by establishing rules of intergroup relations and enforcing them. Because members are primarily interested in their own consumption, they always attempt to limit the state's mandate and resources to secure social order. Hence the initial role of the state is likely to be confined to publicly identifying given groups as counterproductive so that they may be sanctioned or otherwise controlled.

The state designates two quite different kinds of groups as counterproductive. Predatory groups like urban gangs (Jankowski 1991) and the Mafia (Gambetta 1993) impose negative externalities on members of other groups by appropriating their resources. The state's primary task is to protect members of highly solidary productive groups from predation, for these groups, who established and paid for its services in the first place, constitute the state's principal constituency.

The very existence of the state, however, calls into being an entirely new category of group that the state also designates as counterproductive: oppositional ones that threaten the state by seeking to alter its boundaries or its form. Members of these groups might want to change state boundaries to avoid confiscation of their property, or because they feel they will be better off living in a political unit with their own language or religion. Oppositional groups (cf. Simmel 1955 and Coser 1956 on 'conflict groups') are quite different from predatory ones in that they have an ideological basis, are supported by an intelligentsia, and pursue ends that many people consider to be legitimate.

Since the rationale of oppositional groups is to weaken or dismantle the state, the state is likely to be especially vigilant about controlling their activities. For unlike predatory groups, oppositional groups are potential political units. Under historical conditions that remain to be discovered, they may constitute a threat to the existing regime, calling forth its violent response. State violence, in turn, will tend to precipitate violent activity in the nationalist group and a vicious cycle may ensue.

The greater the state's autonomy, the greater the proportion of its resources that will be spent to control oppositional groups. This is because the state is a principal when it comes to its own survival, and left to its own devices its first order of business is to curtail oppositional groups. With respect to predatory groups, however, the state is merely an agent. Hence, the less dependent the state is on its constituents, or the more divided these constituents are, the greater the state's liberty to control oppositional groups. Although predatory groups also employ violence, they have nothing to gain by challenging the state. This strengthens the state's incentive to resort to violence against oppositional groups. For the members of such groups, then, violence become instrumentally rational when they are dependent on a solidary group that has entered into prolonged conflict with the state. Why should a group ever take the state on? Because its members reckon that the state is vulnerable, and therefore that the gamble is worth taking.
This is where nationalism come in, for 'an effective nationalism develops where it makes political sense for an opposition to the government to claim to represent the nation against the present state' (Breuilly 1982: 382). There is ample evidence that nationalist groups employ violence strategically as a means to produce their joint goods, among which sovereignty looms large. Consider Northern Ireland, which has been a virtual laboratory for the study of nationalist violence since 1969. The most interesting thing about the violence in Northern Ireland during this period is how limited it has been. Violence between Catholics and Protestants has never escalated into a genocidal fury. Limits on violence are due to microcontrols such as the avoidance provided by segregation and situational variations in relationships (Darby 1987: 155–56). The Irish Republican Army's use of legitimate targeting, which was designed to maximise political support of its Catholic constituency, is further evidence of its strategic use of violence (Darby 1994).¹²

Even ostensibly individual events like sniper attacks require elaborate planning and the coordination of many different people—from the gunman, to support staff providing weapons, ammunition, and vehicles, to sympathetic bystanders. Figure 1 shows a typical 'runback', or escape route, used by paramilitaries against British occupational forces in Northern Ireland. Elements 3 through 6 in this figure all must be coordinated to provide maximum security for the sniper and his team. Security must be provided, in turn, to induce instrumentally rational members to undertake the risky business of attacking a British Army troop carrier.

State authorities are always interested in suppressing nationalist groups. However when the relative cost of controlling a nationalist group increases, due either to deterioration in the state's economic or political resources or to growth in the resources of the nationalist group, states will be more disposed to grant sovereignty to them. The two most notable cases of secession in the twentieth century—those of Norway and Ireland—can both be interpreted in these terms (Hechter 1992b).¹³

The preceding discussion is far from conclusive. It merely shows how collective violence might be explained on the basis of a purely instrumental analysis of nationalism. It suggests that, under some conditions, highly solidary oppositional groups will resort to violence strategically. Once such means are adopted, it becomes rational for the members to comply with group directives by participating in violent activities.¹⁴

This explanation has the great merit of being falsifiable. Whenever nationalist violence occurs in the absence of highly solidary (that is, organised) nationalist groups, this theory cannot account for it. I do not claim that all ethnic violence is a product of such mechanisms: others might also be responsible for violent outcomes in politics. Ethnic prejudice against Jews or gypsies, for instance, might emerge spontaneously without much prior group solidarity. Yet such violence is unlikely to persist unless the state turns a blind eye to it. But the preceding analysis suggests that
Figure 1. Runback map (based on a drawing by an Intelligence Officer of the Irish National Liberation Army). Key: (1) wasteground limiting the possibility for accidental civilian casualties; (2) British Army troop carriers waiting to make a right turn onto main road leading to barracks; (3) line of rifle fire from behind garbage disposal area of the flats; (4) position of attacking paramilitary unit; (5) beginning of runback to location of escape vehicle; (6) vehicle runback to 'wash house'.


if the state is at all dependent on these groups (which is more likely in the case of the Jews than the gypsies), it will not turn a blind eye to it.

The solidaristic theory of social order thus demonstrates that nationalist
violence is at least partly explicable in instrumental terms. The theory also makes it possible to derive empirical implications about the incidence of violence. The outbreak of violence is likely to be affected independently by characteristics of the host state, as well as by those of the secessionist nationalist group. It is also affected by their mutual interaction.

As for the state, both domestic and international autonomy of the host state increases its propensity to engage in violent repression of the nationalist group. State weakness, in contrast, increases the likelihood that the nationalist group will engage in violence to strategically exploit the state's vulnerability. This, in turn, greatly increases the chance that the state will respond violently, leading to a rapid escalation of violence.

As for the nationalist group, the less its solidarity - and hence its ability to control its own members - the greater the likelihood of violence, much of which will not be sanctioned by group leaders. This may be an important reason why violence in Bosnia and Rwanda has not been as limited as in Northern Ireland.

All told, this analysis suggests that violence is most likely to break out when a weakly solidary nationalist group confronts a strong state apparatus having high domestic and international autonomy. But since such a state will be able to repress secessionists, violence will seldom escalate in this situation. The escalation of violence is most likely to be sustained, therefore, only in the context of a weakened host state facing a highly solidary nationalist group.

Conclusion

Nationalism engenders such extreme forms of collective action that it is tempting to ascribe its appeal to mysterious well-springs of human agency. However plausible arguments about the irrational bases of nationalist violence may be, social scientists have much to lose by invoking them and little to gain. This is not because arguments premised on irrationality cannot be assessed empirically using prevalent research methods; frankly, too few instrumental analyses of nationalism are supported by compelling empirical evidence. The real danger is that reliance on irrational behavioural assumptions will continue to inhibit the development of sustainable research programmes for the study of nationalism.

In part, this is because arguments asserting the irrationality of agents contribute to a sense of scholarly self-satisfaction. To the degree that these arguments obscure our ignorance of the mechanisms which truly are responsible for producing nationalist outcomes, they impede the establishment of consensus about research priorities in the field. Arguments based on irrational behavioural assumptions are theoretically fruitless. When violence is ascribed to the je ne sais quoi of human nature, the emotion of the blood
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tie, or putative common values, it is impossible to derive further implications for research. All explanation necessarily becomes post hoc.

In the past twenty years instrumental analyses of nationalism have made great headway. Yet by and large they have failed to meet the challenge of explaining nationalist violence. This has been a critical failure, for it has reinforced the impression that nationalism ultimately emanates from irrational sources. This article suggests that even the most extreme forms of nationalist behaviour are capable of being explained, at least in principle, by using instrumental logic.

Notes


1 For other examples of these social dilemmas, see Boudon (1982) and Ostrom (1990).

2 Explanations based on irrational behavioural assumptions are not nearly so influential in closely related subfields, however. At one time such explanations prevailed in many sociological literatures, especially those concerned with collective action and social movements (McAdam 1982). Now they are unfashionable. The leading explanations today assume instrumental action, although they do so for the most part implicitly. Currently the causes of collective action are primarily seen to reside in the interaction of internal states (values, utilities or motives) that dispose people to pursue specific goals, with external conditions (resource and information constraints) that restrict the feasible set of options. In this new literature, further, external constraints are privileged over internal states generating the demand for nationalism. Many writers argue that the demand for collective action is a constant in social life. If life is tough and people always have grievances, then fluctuations in collective action can only be explained on the basis of variables (such as socially structured constraints) rather than constants (such as grievances) (McCarthy and Zald 1977: 1215; Jenkins and Perrow 1977: 266). Structural constraints affect social movements by altering peoples’ benefit/cost calculus, thereby making collective action more or less likely to occur. The thrust of the burgeoning literature on social movements – if not necessarily its content – is fundamentally instrumental, even economistic. In it, collective action ultimately is seen as an instrumental response to shifts in relative prices. Of course, these prices need not be pecuniary, and in the sociological literature they seldom are. Nevertheless they are akin to what economists term shadow prices.

3 For an interesting sample of current thinking on the relationship between emotion and instrumentality, see the special issue of Rationality and Society, 5, 2 (1993).

4 Some see Weber’s (1968: 1135–9) discussion of the charisma of blood ties as an early variant of this position, but such a view is mistaken. Weber stresses that the charisma of blood ties is quite historically variable; when coupled with primogeniture, for example, it provides an optimal solution to the problem of succession in certain types of regimes. The implication of Weber’s analysis is that the dominance of the institution of blood ties in a governance structure is due largely to instrumental considerations, rather than to human nature.

5 Even so, consumption behaviour is a far better indicator of values than the contents of letters drawn from biased pools of writers, which social historians often rely on for evidence of nationalist sentiment.

6 Although when it does exist in its charismatic form, it may have world-historical significance.

7 How are predatory groups distinguished from productive ones? Principally, by their means of production. A group is predatory to the extent that the inputs it routinely relies upon for the
production of its joint goods are taken from others, rather than endogenously generated or acquired through voluntary exchange.

8 In a pastoralist mode of production, where the major part of wealth is on the hoof, there are no economies of scale in protection. As a result, statelessness often prevails (see Gellner 1988 on statelessness among the pastoralists of the Mahgreb).

9 Thus the threat posed by urban merchants to dominant agrarian producers led to the emergence of absolutist states in early modern Europe (Hechter and Brustein 1980).

10 For example, during the Cromwellian Settlement of Ireland the land of Catholics often was confiscated (Hechter 1975: ch. 4).

11 Since membership in an oppositional group is a higher cost decision than membership in a productive group, some individuals who desire the group's joint good might nonetheless fail to participate. This suggests the need for specifying heterogeneous interests among the potential members of nationalist groups (Blalock 1989: ch. 8). Instrumental logic would lead us to expect young people to be disproportionately represented in their ranks, for the opportunity costs of membership are lowest for youth (see also Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983). Hence groups made up of a mix of ages are less likely to be oppositional than those exclusively made up of young people; this may be partly responsible for the greater violence of Basque as against Catalan nationalists (Johnston 1993). More fundamentally, adolescents only have a limited number of ways of leaving home and establishing independent identities. They can do so by attending universities, getting married, or by joining oppositional groups. When their opportunities to go to school and marry are limited, the last option becomes more attractive.

12 A similar tale no doubt could be told about the use of violence in the continental Resistance movements during the Second World War.

13 I am indebted to Christine Horne for pointing this out to me.

14 Note that the use of violent means will tend to attract members who are skilled or specialised in violence, and will discourage others who are neither skilled nor interested in it.

15 Elsewhere, I have argued that the literature on nationalism is beset by inadequate evidence (Hechter 1992b).

References


