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Why do some ethnic conflicts turn violent?

There is a prevalent view today that ethnic differences in and of themselves often lead to ethnic conflict, and that incidents of ethnic conflicts are rising exponentially (Ozkirimli 2010 & Laitin D. and Fearon J. 1996). However, “this picture of the worldwide proliferation of ethnic and nationalist conflicts needs to be seriously qualified” (Ozkirimli 2010: 1). Indeed, Ozkirimli states that the incidence of ethnic conflict has actually been declining since the early 90’s (Ozkirimli 2010). That they do happen, however, is indisputable – and when they do happen the results are often horrific (Brubaker and Laitin 1998). As Brubaker and Laitin point out “Ethnic violence warrants our attention because it is appalling, not because it is ubiquitous” (1998: 2). Ethnic conflicts are worth studying as phenomena so that they can be understood and prevented from happening in the future.

There are currently two broad perspectives on the causes ethnic conflicts (Wolff and Cordell 2010, Kaufman 2006, Laitin and Fearon 1996, Gurr and Harff 2003): The Instrumentalist/Rational Choice perspective that examines the structures at work in ethnic conflicts, and explains ethnic conflicts in terms of economic or material competition, security dilemmas and predatory ethnic elites who manipulate ethnic myths and symbols to convince ethnic groups to enter conflict in order to further their own goals; and the Primordialist/Social-Psychological perspective which explains ethnic conflicts in terms of ancient ethnic hatreds and as attempts to elevate individual worth through increasing relative group worth.

This essay will examine various explanations of ethnic violence from both schools of thought, and will then conclude that in order to get a more comprehensive account of the reasons that some ethnic conflicts turn violent it is necessary to integrate both perspectives and examine the factors emphasised by each.

Ethnic Violence and Genocide

Firstly it is important to distinguish between what can be described broadly as ethnic violence and what can be described specifically as genocide, as genocide constitutes a special case of ethnic violence the causes of which deserve exclusive focus - which is beyond the scope of this essay.

Ever since the term ‘genocide’ was first coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1944 to explain Nazi aims and actions towards Jews and other ethnically defined groups during World War 2 there has been much debate about how exactly the term should be defined (Fein 1993). The United Nations, modifying Lemkin’s term, defined it to say that “genocide is a criminal act intended to destroy an ethnic, national, or religious group, which is targeted for destruction as such” (Mann 2005: 17) however this definition isn’t widely accepted (Fein 1993). Indeed, as Eric Weitz notes “Nearly everyone who considers the [U.N.] definition finds it insufficient for one reason or another” (2003: 9). However, for the sake of brevity (and in the absence of another, widely accepted, definition), this essay accepts the U.N. definition.

The explanations for ethnic conflict examined in this essay can be used to explain conflicts in which genocide occurred (some of the authors of the explanations examined here do apply their models to explain cases of violence where genocide did occur - Gurr and Harff 2003, Kaufman 2006), however

they can't be used to explain why it did occur in some instances and not in others; so, as stated above, specifically explaining the occurrence of genocide isn't the focus of this essay.

This essay will employ Cordell's and Wolff's definition of ethnic conflict: "the term 'conflict' describes a situation in which two or more actors pursue incompatible, yet from their individual perspectives entirely just, goals. An ethnic conflict is one particular form of this: that in which the goals of at least one party are defined in (exclusively) ethnic terms, and in which the primary fault line of confrontation is one of ethnic distinctions." (2010: 5) and Brubaker's and Laitin's definition for ethnic violence: "we define ethnic violence as violence perpetrated across ethnic lines, in which at least one party is not a state (or a representative of a state), and in which the putative ethnic difference is coded - by perpetrators, targets, influential third parties, or analysts - as having been integral rather than incidental to the violence" (1998: 6).

Primordialist & Social-Psychological explanations for ethnic violence

Horowitz's Group Comparison explanation

Donald Horowitz explains that ethnic conflict often stems from the idea that people's own sense of worth and self-esteem is inextricably linked to the esteem with which the groups they belong to are held: "group worth is important, for self-esteem is in large measure a function of the esteem accorded to groups of which one is a member ... The assessment of collective merit ... proceeds by comparison. In the modern state ... the sources of ethnic conflict reside, above all, in the struggle for relative group worth." (1985: 143)

In examining the history of colonial countries in Africa and Asia, Horowitz shows how ethnic groups became more subjectively self aware of themselves as different groups with different group characteristics because of colonial policies "Measures taken by European rulers to make sense of a new environment, to create order, and to facilitate colonial administration had the effect of sharpening the contrasts and evaluations that emerged with group disparities" (1985: 149), and how they began to view their own and other ethnic groups comparatively as either "advanced" or "backwards". The elites of ethnic groups who consider themselves "backwards" will admonish non-elites for being lazy, and urge them to emulate the characteristics of their colonial masters, and of the more successful "advanced" ethnic groups in the same environment. This awareness of inferiority results in severe group anxiety - anxiety about being dominated, and even of being exterminated "usually expressed by reference to the fate of the 'Red Indians of America'" (1985: 176)

Horowitz then explains the social-psychological processes that are produced by this anxiety that can lead to conflict and violence. First, anxiety leads to disproportionate responses to stimuli, and extreme anxiety leads to extremely disproportionate responses. Next, Horowitz claims that feelings of self-esteem, prejudice and anxiety are related "prejudice allows a discharge of hostility, thereby reducing anxiety. A correlation has also been found between lack of individual self-esteem and degree of hostility toward outgroups, and the same relationship should hold for group self-esteem" (1985: 179). The exaggerated perception of threat allows the group to justify the persecution of another group; as far as they are concerned they are defending themselves from extinction.

Horowitz hypothesises that the fear of extinction is actually projection; “a psychological mechanism by which unacceptable impulses felt by oneself are imputed to others” (1985: 180). So groups desiring to overwhelm and dominate another group often feel this desire expressed as a fear of domination. Horowitz shows how this is demonstrated by the fact that the vast majority of instances of ethnic violence involve the “backwards” group being the aggressor and the “advanced” group being the target (1985: 180).

Horowitz’s explanation gives a compelling explanation of ethnic violence; he explains actions at both elite and mass level while giving a strong account of group motivation springing from group-psychological processes. However, in paying specific attention to the impact colonialism has on the eventual outcome of ethnic conflict, his model has limited applicability in explaining ethnic conflict that occurs outside former colonial areas, such as the Yugoslav wars. Also, Horowitz doesn’t give a full explanation of elites’ actions (Wolff & Cordell 2010); it is hard to explain Serbian and Croatian aggression in the Yugoslav wars without direct reference to Milosevic and Tudjman – and their actions don’t fit in with Horowitz’s description of elites who merely admonish their groups for being backwards or who encourage them to emulate the behaviour of more ‘advanced’ groups.

Kaufman’s Symbolic Politics model

Building on the work of Anthony D. Smith (1986: 15-30), Kaufman describes ethnic groups as consisting of a ‘myth-symbol complex’ which dictates which ethnosymbolist aspects of ethnic myths, symbols, values and memories define an ethnic group and differentiate it from other groups (Kaufman 2006: 51). Different ethnic groups’ myths differ in respect to how much they focus on another ethnic group as a natural enemy, which leads Kaufman to hypothesise that “the more a group’s myth-symbol complex focuses group hostility on a particular adversary, the greater the probability of a violent clash with that adversary, and the greater the likely intensity of the violence.” (Kaufman 2006: 52).

Kaufman goes on to explain how various studies have shown that people are more likely to be motivated on emotional, rather than rational, grounds. Following on from this, Kaufman says that people are more likely to follow leaders who employ powerful emotionally-laden national and ethnic symbols in their rhetoric, and who frame their arguments in a narrative of group survival (2006: 52). Indeed, leaders who try to rely on cold reason over emotional arguments of national or ethnic group survival are at a severe disadvantage, as was demonstrated in Yugoslavia by the fact that people responded much more positively to the ideas of “nationalist firebrands such as Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman instead of the interest-based appeals of economic reformers supporting the popular Prime Minister Ante Markovib” (2006: 53). The result in this case, says Kaufman, was a war that can only be understood in terms of the ethnic narratives of Symbolic Politics (2006: 53).

While myths of ancient hatred towards a group are necessary in explaining ethnic violence, says Kaufman, they are not sufficient to explain it on their own. There are two more preconditions which have to be present before ethnic violence can occur: (1) an ethnic group must fear for its survival, and (2) have the political opportunity and means to be able to carry out the violence (Kaufman 2006: 53).

If these three preconditions are in place, then an ethnic group will be mobilized for violence only if three processes work together to drive the ethnic group into a spiral of escalation with another

group: (1) mass hostility, (2) chauvinist political mobilization and (3) a security dilemma (Kaufman 2006: 54).

One problem with Kaufman's model is that if examples of ancient ethnic hatred are found, then all that has been proved is that these hatreds exist – not that they cause ethnic conflict. Furthermore, it would have to be demonstrated that the causal relationship is one of ethnic hatreds leading to conflict, and not the other way around (Grigorian 2007). Grigorian also notes that one could use an instrumentalist argument to explain the existence of ethnic hatreds, in that they are useful tools for elites to manipulate ethnic masses into a conflict which is beneficial to them, and it is psychologically necessary to have these ethnic hatreds to allow the killing of ethnic others “[t]his is not necessarily a denial of the possibility that hatred can cause a conflict. But any claim to that effect should involve a serious effort to rule out reverse causality” (Grigorian 2007).

Instrumentalist & Rational Choice explanations for ethnic violence

Hechter's Instrumentalist Argument and Solidaristic Theory of Social order

Hechter claims that, while violence occurs for both rational and irrational reasons, the evidence suggests that on the whole ethnic or national violence is “more instrumental than emotional” (Hechter 1995: 5). This has to do with the distribution throughout the populace of the factors leading to violence. Emotional factors such as “unhappiness in the spheres of family and work” (Hechter 1995: 5) are distributed randomly throughout the population, and so will have little effect at the aggregate level; whereas instrumental factors such as “material, political and cultural demands” (Hechter 1995: 5) are likely to be clustered in groups, like ethnic minorities; as such it seems likely that instrumental factors will be more crucial in leading ethnic groups to use violence.

Hechter then fleshes out this argument by sketching a theory of social order in which ethnic groups use violence as a rational tool to achieve their goals. Starting in a Hobbesian state of nature, Hechter argues that people form groups so that they can enjoy the fruits of the labour produced by the synergy of group (Hechter 1995). Institutions are created within the group to ensure that everyone is contributing to the group's success; intra-group monitoring mechanisms. This leads to solidarity within the group, and thus the group becomes ‘solidary’. Competition between groups could lead to some groups employing predatory tactics, so ‘solidary’ groups get together to create an inter-group monitoring mechanism: the state (Hechter 1995). With the state in place to make sure that everyone adheres to certain rules, ‘solidary’ groups don't have to divert their resources to defending themselves. However, with the creation of the state comes the creation of another type of group: “oppositional groups” (Hechter 1995). These ideologically based 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” (Hechter 1995: 9). The state, reacting to the challenge to its authority, might well employ violence as a means of dealing with the challenge. At this point, for oppositional groups “violence becomes instrumentally rational when they are dependent on a solidary group that has entered into prolonged conflict with the state” (Hechter 1995: 9). A solidary group, says Hechter, will enter into conflict with the state only if the state is vulnerable.

While Hechter's theory for explaining ethnic violence is certainly plausible, his emphasis on the instrumental causes of ethnic violence over the emotional ones makes it less so when applied to real-life cases. It would be difficult to explain the extreme violence in Rwanda without considering the long running hatred between the Hutus and Tutsis springing from the days when the Tutsis enjoyed the favouritism of their Belgian Colonial masters; or the violence in the Sudan without the ancient hatreds felt between the Muslim, Arab north and Christian and Animist Black south who still 'remember' when their ethnic groups were the target for slavers from the north; or the violence in the Croatian-Serbian war during the disintegration of Yugoslavia without the hatred and suspicion felt by the Serbians towards the Croats because of the atrocities committed by the Ustasha regime towards Serbs living in Croatia during World War 2.

The Collier-Hoeffler econometric model

According to Collier's and Hoeffler's rational choice 'econometric model', for ethnic violence to occur the two independent variables that must be in place are motive and opportunity (2002: 3). The opportunity is the financial ability of an ethnic organisation to man and equip an army (2002: 3), and the motives can be based on greed ("the income that can be achieved either during the rebellion from quasi-criminal looting and the benefits that ensue if the rebellion is victorious from control of the state revenues" 2002: 3) or grievance ("The opposition to perceived or actual injustice" 2002: 3).

Collier and Hoeffler use a dataset of 160 countries across eight five-year periods, and in countries where there has been ethnic conflict they examine economic characteristics (such as the countries' initial level of income and the rate of growth of the countries' income) which denote greed as a motivation, and "objective grievance: inequality, political repression, and social divisions" (2002: 6) (social divisions are measured using proxies such as religious segregation and ethnic dominance) which denote grievance as a motivation.

Collier's and Hoeffler's findings are that economic characteristics are much more decisive in determining the occurrence of ethnic violence than objective grievances; in short, greed is a greater contributory factor towards ethnic violence than grievance (2002).

However, Wolff and Cordell (2010) point out that there are some problems with Collier's and Hoeffler's findings. First of all, the dataset they use doesn't differentiate between conflicts fought along ethnic lines and non-ethnic conflicts – which "inevitably biases findings against specifically 'ethnic' explanations" (Wolff & Cordell 2010: 34-35). Wolff and Cordell also cite Ballentine and Sherman (2003) who have done in-depth qualitative studies into the relationship between the economic opportunities of rebel ethnic groups and the occurrence of ethnic violence; they conclude that, while resource availability is clearly a strong factor in some incidents of ethnic violence, the difficulty lies in knowing how to interpret this fact "as self-enrichment by rebels being an end in itself, or instrumental for funding a rebellion motivated by social, economic and/or political grievances" (Wolff & Cordell 2010: 36). Furthermore, as stated above, it seems extremely unlikely that the incidents of ethnic violence that occurred in Rwanda, the Sudan, the former Yugoslavia and many other places would have occurred without the deep-seated and historically-rooted animosity felt between the ethnic groups.

Conclusion

Laitin and Fearon note that “Both the rational-coalition and psychological theories are intuitively plausible and probably help explain a range of particular cases of inter-ethnic violence” (Laitin D. and Fearon J. 1996). Yet it seems that theories from both of the Instrumentalist / Rational Choice and Primordialist / Social-Psychological perspectives are convincing in explaining certain factors that contribute to the incidence of ethnic violence, but fall short of giving a full account on their own.

Primordialist / Social-Psychological theories tend not to pay enough attention to the structural or economic factors that lead to ethnic violence (such as an ethnic group’s ability to fund and equip an army) and often don’t give a satisfactory explanation of the motivations and actions of ethnic elites; Instrumentalist / Rational Choice theories rarely pay close enough attention to the part that genuine ethnic grievances often play in motivating an ethnic group to mobilize for violence. In order to fully explain why ethnic conflicts become violent it is necessary to integrate the two perspectives and pay attention to the factors emphasized by both sides. In so doing one would have a theory that scrutinized the history of the region and ethnic groups in concern, the economic abilities of an ethnic group to mobilize and equip an armed group, the strength of the state in which the conflict is occurring, the possible grievances felt by ethnic groups, the behaviour and motivations of ethnic elites, the economic benefits that could result in an ethnic group mobilizing for violence (such as from looting and/or actual victory over a government leading to secession and autonomous control of a region) and the possible social-psychological processes at work within and between ethnic groups.

Some scholars have already bridged the Instrumentalist / Rational Choice and Primordialist / Social-Psychological divide in developing theories which explain ethnic violence. Gurr and Harff’s (2003) model for analysing ethnic conflict and mobilisation identifies seven factors which contribute to the likelihood of ethnic conflicts becoming violent: **Discrimination:** the degree of discrimination endured by an ethnic group; **Group identity:** the strength of an ethnic group’s identity; **Ethnopolitical leadership and group cohesion:** The strength of an ethnic group’s leader, and the extent to which an ethnic group acts as a whole in following orders from the leader; **Political environment:** The type of state in which the conflict is taking place: Populist state, Socialist state, Autocracy or Institutionalised Democracy; **Use of violence by governments:** the extent to which a government employs violent tactics against an ethnic group; **External support:** support received by an ethnic group from any organisation external to the country they reside in; and **International economic status:** the economic strength of the state in which the conflict occurs, and thus the likelihood of the state being able to act as it wishes towards an ethnic group without external interference (Gurr and Harff 2003: 88-92). Gurr’s and Harff’s model seems to provide a more accurate account of the causes of ethnic conflicts because it examines the factors from both sides of the Instrumentalist / Rational Choice and Primordialist / Social-Psychological divide and also examines international factors such as the support an ethnic group might receive from a Diaspora community or the part an international organisation like the U.N. might play in intervening on one or another side’s behalf.

Wolff’s and Cordell’s ‘Levels of analysis’ (2010) approach is similar to Gurr’s and Harff’s in examining factors from across the Instrumentalist / Rational Choice and Primordialist / Social-Psychological divide and also in taking into account international factors. Wolff and Cordell (2010) examine the impact and behaviour of state and non-state actors and structures at four levels of analysis: the local or sub-state level (focusing on local elites, government representatives, rebel forces etc), the state or national level (focusing on national elites, religious groups and their elites, NGO’s operating

throughout the state etc), the regional level (focusing on neighbouring states, political and economic organisations, cross-border ethnic networks etc) and the global level (focusing on, amongst others, “Powerful states and IOs of global reach and their elites/leaders, INGOs, Diaspora groups, international organised crime networks” Wolff and Cordell 2010: 9). As well as this, they take into account factors which are unrelated to actors or structures and which don’t easily fit into any one of the four levels, such as environmental disasters and the outbreak of diseases (Wolff and Cordell 2010).

Wolff and Cordell apply their model to several case studies – Rwanda, Georgia, the Philippines and Macedonia – and demonstrate the strength of their approach in being able to examine the factors that are emphasized in the theories of both the Instrumentalist / Rational Choice perspective and the Primordialist / Social-Psychological perspective: “Such factors figure in different ways in existing theories of ethnic conflict and conflict settlement, which in turn are informed by assumptions about the nature of ethnic identity and inter-ethnic relations. These theories are normally presented in relatively exclusive ways. Using a levels-of-analysis model enables us to employ simultaneously different existing theories in a non-exclusive manner in order to develop more comprehensive accounts of ethnic conflicts” (Wolff and Cordell 2010: 21).

These two different approaches show that the reasons for ethnic conflict becoming violent are best explained by a holistic approach, which isn’t tied down by ontological commitments to the nature of ethnicity and ethnic identity. Ethnic conflicts turn violent due to a complex interplay of factors: predatory ethnic elites; group social-psychological processes; political and economic structures and institutions; deep-seated historical ethnic hatreds towards other ethnic groups and even non-social phenomena like diseases and environmental disasters can all contribute to ethnic conflicts becoming violent. Whereas theories firmly embedded in either of the Instrumentalist / Rational Choice or Primordialist / Social-Psychological perspectives will always be deficient in not taking into account the factors that are emphasised by the other perspective, more comprehensive approaches like Wolff’s & Cordell’s and Gurr’s & Harff’s are much better positioned to take into account more of the factors that contribute to the occurrence of ethnic conflict in order to more broadly understand and explain why some ethnic conflicts turn violent.

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