

ETHNIC CONFLICT AND THE STATE

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INTRODUCTION

The large majority of countries in the world are multi-ethnic, and ethnicity remains the most important collective identity of relevance in the competition for and the constitution of state power, particularly in developing countries.

The state is the terrain over which ethnic conflict is fought, and it features significantly in the theorization of ethnic conflict in a variety of different assumptions and levels, both in the cause and consequences of conflict, and as the central element in its resolution.

The classical liberal conception views the state as a neutral arbiter suspended above society and adjudicating competing demands from rival interest groups. However, empirical research on the political sociology of conflict frequently describes a very different picture: of the hegemonic control of the state by dominant ethnic groups; of strong states generating insecurity rather than security; and of the deployment of violence and disorder as instruments of control by state elites.

The literature on ethnic conflict and the state dwells largely in this domain of tension between the reality of the embedded, ethnicised state and the useful fiction of the neutral, dis-embedded, liberal state. Following a brief overview of the conceptual terrain, this essay explores the relationship of ethnic conflict to the state across by drawing on each of the state's three putatively core functions: welfare, representation, and security.

While the more widely known cases of ethnic conflict are those that have involved large-scale, protracted or demonstrative episodes of violence such as the Lebanese civil war (1975-90), urban riots in Kenya (2007), or ethnic massacres in Rwanda (1994), it is important to note that conflict and violence are conceptually distinct. Ethnic conflict is commonplace, but ethnic violence is more rare. Most multi-ethnic countries in the developing and developed world experience ethnic tensions of some form or another - but these are for the most part either peacefully channeled through formal or informal institutional mechanisms, or they remain latent and suppressed.

The term 'ethnic group' entered contemporary academic discourse through social anthropology on the one hand (where it displaced the term 'tribe'), and North American sociology on the other, where it referred to recent immigrant communities. In common use, ethnicity is widely understood to imply a primordial attachment - an ancient, cultural-biological identity that is rigid, impenetrable, and inescapable. However, primordialism has been viewed with skepticism in the academic literature, and has been the subject of intense critical scrutiny by constructivist and instrumentalist scholars who have challenged its fundamental claims. As a result, ethnicity is now understood to far less immutable, ancient, or rigid than primordial claims suggest, but more contingent, plastic, and open to manipulation and re-definition.

Primordialism continues to have significance in the study of ethnic conflict because it forms the cognitive basis on which ethnic consciousness and powerful ethnic attachments are based. It helps to explain how ethnic groups cast themselves, frame belief structures of group self-consciousness, construct origin myths, cultivate group solidarity and enforce loyalty.

It is also important to consider that the usage of the term ethnic conflict has changed considerably since the 1970s, particularly with respect to its conceptual overlap to related terms such as race, religion, caste or nation. While some of these terms had specific disciplinary pedigrees, they were frequently used in an inconsistent and idiosyncratic way. For example, 'confessionalism' in Lebanon, 'sectarianism' in Northern Ireland and 'communalism' of India are all localized monikers for religious group conflicts. As Donald Horowitz describes, these diverse concepts display a 'family resemblance',¹ and in the context of their transformation into political identities, refer to a common set of problems relating to the management of inter-group conflicts in pluralistic societies.

With this in mind, many scholars working on this topic, particularly in comparative political research, have opted to use ethnic conflict as the over-arching term of convenience that conceptually equates and conflates these different terms. As such, ethnic conflict has to some extent superseded theories and definitions of ethnicity, and now commonly describes a range of contentious and violence-prone socio-political inter-community engagements between ascriptively defined communities who cohabit the territory of a given state.

REPRESENTATION:

The quantum and quality of ethnic group representation in the structure of state power is the most important problem in the political resolution of ethnic conflict. At its core is the issue of power-sharing, and the design of constitutional provisions that structurally distribute power in an appropriate manner between ethnic groups.

The issue of representation traditionally refers to the aggregation of individual voters' choices into democratically elected representatives in a legislature. However, when the unit at stake is the ethnic group rather than the individual citizen, democracy and elections may not always be relevant or even appropriate. Liberal democracy can be counter-productive in ethnically divided societies if the principle of majority rule translates the crude demographic advantage of a majority community into the 'hegemonic control',² by one ethnic group.'

The Westminster system, which was widely adopted in many former British colonies is particularly problematic in this respect. Under its 'first past the post - winner-takes all' electoral system, smaller, territorially dispersed ethnic groups are systematically under-represented in the legislature, and can be completely excluded from the executive. In contrast, the more recently designed electoral systems and constitutions in post-conflict societies such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Guatemala, El Salvador, Northern Ireland,

¹ Horowitz, D. (2000), *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. University of California Press.

² McGarry & O'Leary (1994), 'The Political Regulation of National and Ethnic Conflict. Parliamentary Affairs' 47(1), pp.94-115.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Timor Leste, have all adopted institutional features that moderate the principle of majority rule in order to ensure greater ethnic representation.

At the electoral level, this involves mechanisms such as proportional representation, multi-member constituencies, or preferential voting, that are calibrated to ensure that the legislature better represents all ethnic groups. The contemporary approach to ethnic power-sharing has been influenced by Arendt Lijphardt's writings on consociationalism, which marries the principle of ethnic proportionality in the legislature and bureaucracy, with carefully engineered constitutional requirements for ethnic power-sharing in the executive. For example, under Lebanon's 1989 Ta'if Agreement, the post of prime minister is reserved for a Sunni Muslim, the presidency for a Maronite Christian, and the speaker of parliament for a Shi'a Muslim. In addition, the consociationalist approach also involves two other key principles intended to protect minority groups: each ethnic group retains the right to veto key legislation, and has a measure of self-government and internal autonomy over their community affairs.³

The second major problem that relates ethnic conflict to democracy is that the process of democratization is frequently violent and destabilising. In the historical literature on ethnicity and colonialism, democratization has been associated with the construction of hostile ethno-nationalist ideologies, ethnic violence and ethnic cleansing.⁴ The more contemporary, policy-focused literature has found that democratization in poorly institutionalized post-conflict states is conflict-inducing and results in a reversion from 'ballots to bullets', or in the ascendancy of ethnic extremists, and former warlords to power.⁵ As Marina Ottaway describes:

*Democratization ... encourages the conflicts that exist in a collapsing state to manifest themselves freely, but without the restraint of the checks and balances and of agreement on the basic rules, that regulate conflict and make it manageable in a well-established democratic system.*⁶

SECURITY

The application of realist international relations theory has explained ethnic conflict as the outcome of a Hobbesian 'security dilemma' faced by vulnerable ethnic groups within collapsing states. As Barry Posen describes, 'the condition of anarchy makes security the first concern,'⁷ and the weakening of centralized authority effectively gives rise to ethnicised militias and violence. Indeed,

³ See Lijphart, A. (1977) *Democracy in Plural Societies*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

⁴ Mann, M. (2005), *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*. Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Snyder, J. (2000), *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict*. W.W. Norton, Reilly, B. (2001) *Democracy in Divided Societies: Electoral Engineering for Conflict Management*. Cambridge University Press, Jarstad, A. and T. Sisk (2008), *From War to Democracy: Dilemmas of Peacebuilding*. Cambridge University Press.

⁶ Ottaway, M. (1995), 'Democratization in Collapsed States', in Zartman, W. (ed.) *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority*. Lynne Rienner, p.235.

⁷ Posen, Barry R. 1993. 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict'. *Survival* 35 (1):27-47. See also Walter, B. (1999), 'Introduction' in Walter, B. and J. Snyder (eds.) *Civil Wars, Insecurity and Intervention*. Columbia University Press, Snyder, J. and R. Jervis (1999), 'Civil War and the Security Dilemma', in Walter, B. and J. Snyder (eds.) op.cit..

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the evidence from the Caucasus, Yugoslavia, Somalia, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, or D.R. Congo demonstrates how the collapse of state authority is accompanied by protracted violence, territorial fragmentation and ethnic militias.

The most important prognosis of the security-centric view of ethnic conflict is that it persists not only until the re-establishment of physical security, but until this security is monopolized - i.e. provided and guaranteed by a single hegemon. The implications are that conflict resolution requires either a decisive military victory by one side (rather than a negotiated settlement), or in its absence, external military intervention to provide firm and unilateral security guarantees. Indeed, the empirical evidence on civil war termination broadly supports this conclusion, as decisive military victories are found to be more durable in resolving civil war and less prone to reversal than negotiated settlements.⁸

Nevertheless, the security-centric view of ethnic conflict has some significant shortcomings. Firstly, it is a theory of violence rather than conflict. A decisive military victory by one group of combatants may well end a civil war and restore order, but is unlikely to address the political issues that animate the ethnic conflict such as power-sharing, territory, or resources, in an equitable way.⁹

Secondly, deadly ethnic violence is not just a function of absent or weak states, but is frequently observed in many strong states where dominant ethnic groups appropriate state power, and where state is a partisan participant in the violence.¹⁰

Thirdly, it makes the assumption that violence is the default condition of inter-ethnic relations, and that peace is little more than an ephemeral, externally enforced cease-fire by an external agent. However, the work of diverse scholars, including David Keen, Will Reno, Paul Brass, and Chabal & Daloz shows that violence is not necessarily reflective of an absence of state control, but can be instrumental to the 'normal' exercise of power by elites.¹¹

WELFARE:

The material basis of conflict is a well established subject of research in the social sciences, although it has emerged in its present form into the study of contemporary ethnic conflict largely through development economics. Here too, there is a familiar division between research that identifies the problem as arising from the ethnically-neutral incompetence of the state versus conscious ethnic favouritism.

⁸ Walter, B. (1997), 'The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement', *International Organization*. pp.335-364, Licklider, R. (1995), *The Consequences of Negotiated Settlements in Civil Wars, 1945-1993*. *American Political Science Review*. 89(3), pp.681-690,

⁹ Indeed, as Licklider, op.cit., finds, one-sided military victories do not even necessarily restore security, as they are far more likely to be accompanied by acts of genocide.

¹⁰ Sluka (2000), *Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

¹¹ Keen, D. (1997), 'A Rational Kind of Madness', *Oxford Development Studies* 25(1), pp.67-75, Brass, P. (2003), *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*. University of Washington Press, Reno, W. (1995), *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone*. Cambridge University Press, Chabal, P., and J.P. Daloz (1999) *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*. James Currey.

Cross-country research into the sources of economic growth and poverty in the 1990s found robust evidence that the incidence of armed conflict correlates with poverty and under-development, although there are three problems in interpreting this finding.¹² Firstly, the direction of causality is often difficult to establish, so that it is uncertain whether conflict was the cause or consequence of economic failure. Secondly, poverty and conflict are too heterogeneous as analytical categories, and more precise causal pathways need to be elaborated in order to make this plausible - in particular to explain why a general problem such as poverty leads to the specific form of conflict that is prevalent, which is between ethnic groups. Thirdly, there is a need to account for the large number of poor countries that have escaped armed conflict.

In response to this, Paul Collier advances a fairly radical instrumentalist position, that poverty is indeed a factor because it reduces the opportunity cost of rebellion by making it cheap to recruit insurgents. In common with earlier generations of economic reductionism, it holds that ethnicity is merely the form or the ruse through which economic incentives, primarily the pursuit of private economic self-interest, are manifest. In contrast, Frances Stewart argues that ethnicity and group-based grievances are indeed relevant. Rather than poverty, she finds that it is inequality, and specifically, inter-group or 'horizontal' inequalities in terms of economic welfare, public service provision, political access, and other such variables which are critical both in the cause of conflict and in its resolution.

Both lines of argument have important consequences for the role of the state. The former holds that ethnic conflict can be addressed by accelerating economic growth to escape the poverty trap, and by strengthening state institutions of governance, security and natural resource management. The latter argues for a far more ethnically conscious form of intervention: that the state needs to actively redress inter-group inequalities by expanding service provision to deprived regions, and target welfare, employment and education towards deprived ethnic groups.

EPILOGUE:

For the purpose of policy-relevant analysis, the state is often deliberately de-ethnicised in order to evaluate it technocratically in terms of its putative functions as a provider of welfare, security and representation. This analysis suggests that ethnic conflict results from states that are incompetent in providing welfare, poorly designed to adjudicate conflict, or too weak to provide security. In contrast, by looking at each of these functions in terms of processes rather than outcomes, it becomes clear that not only is ethnic conflict shaped by the state, but that the process is two-way such that as Charles Tilly describes of another context: 'war makes the state, and the state makes war'¹³.

¹² Stewart, F., and E. Fitzgerald (2001), *War and Underdevelopment*. Oxford University Press.

¹³ Tilly, C. (1975), 'Reflections on the History of European State-Making,' in Tilly, C., (ed.), *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*. Princeton University Press, p. 42.