Can nationalism be understood as a cause of ethnic conflict?

https://www.e-ir.info/2011/07/25/can-nationalism-be-understood-as-a-cause-of-ethnic-conflict/

ANNA COSTA, JUL 25 2011

The vast majority of conflicts that have raged since the end of the Cold War have had ethnic or nationalistic dimensions[1]. This observation suffices to highlight the relevance of the initial question both to academics and policy-makers. This essay argues that nationalism can be understood as a cause of ethnic conflict and proceeds to qualify this claim. In particular, scepticism towards single-factor explanations suggests situating nationalism in a broader framework of multiple and multi-level explications of ethnic conflict. In terms of structure, this paper engages first with concisely defining the terms under discussion. Having done so, it suggests possible analytical paths one can take to unravel the complex genesis of ethnic conflicts, focusing on the role played by nationalism. This theoretical endeavour is integrated with empirical illustrations from the ethnonationalist struggles that marked the death of Yugoslavia[2] in the 1990s and the empowerment of ethnocracies[3] throughout the Balkans.

This paper starts with the unenviable but necessary task of defining the main terms under discussion, i.e. nationalism and ethnic conflict. The fact that nationalism is a complex phenomenon resisting a single method of investigation does not preclude the possibility of a general definition. Here, the focus is on the political dimension[4] of nationalism expressed by an ambition of congruence between state and nation[5]. In order to highlight its relationship with ethnic conflict, nationalism can be more narrowly defined as a political movement where individual members give their primary loyalty to their ethnic or national community[6], this allegiance constituting the main thrust of their political endeavors.

Defining ethnic conflict is problematic. It can be broadly understood as a situation entailing varying degrees of political competition, inter-state as well as intra-state, between at least two collectivities that understand themselves as ethnically different. A definition that accommodates both violent and non-violent conflicts has the practical merit of extending the focus from simply areas of violent ethnic conflict to areas where violence is latent but has the potential to erupt.

In looking at what type of causality exists between nationalism and ethnic conflict, this paper starts from the assumption that a strong nexus exists between ethno-nationalist claims and conflict[7].

In order to understand the nature of this nexus, starting with a puzzle can be helpful. Why is it that ethnic conflicts break out in some places and times and not in others, given identical levels of ethnic heterogeneity? This empirical observation makes explanations of ethnic conflict based on mere ethnic diversity unwarranted. In other words, no *significant* relation exists between ethnic demography and the likelihood of conflict[8]. What is it that makes divisions along ethnic lines salient to forms of opposition that can degenerate into levels of violence as extreme as genocide? Empirically speaking, what made the peaceful multi-ethnic neighborhoods of Sarajevo turn into battlefields? The short answer is the politicization of ethnicity and ethnic diversity. Insofar as nationalism is precisely a theory of political legitimacy requiring that ethnic boundaries do not cut across political ones[9], the nexus between nationalism and ethnic conflict is clear.

The above is only the short answer to the more interesting but extremely complex question of what factors lead to the politicization of ethnicity and the eruption of ethno-national conflicts. The literature offers a copious array of

Can nationalism be understood as a cause of ethnic conflict?

Written by Anna Costa

explanations of ethnic conflict that focus on different factors. Given that single factor explanations cannot account for significant variation in the incidence and intensity of ethnic conflict, it is helpful to introduce a more complex causality of conflict genesis that distinguishes between underlying causes (or permissive conditions), and proximate causes (or catalytic factors)[10]. In Brown, nationalism, understood as a political factor, constitutes an underlying cause of ethnic conflict alongside structural, economic/social and cultural/perceptual factors. The problem I have with Brown's framework is that after putting forth a hopeful strategy to disentangle the web of causality of conflict, he seems to conflate the two typologies of causes. Gagnon claims that violent conflict is caused by the dynamics of within-group conflict whereby elites provoke inter-ethnic opposition to create a domestic political context where ethnicity is the only politically relevant *identity.* This allegedly serves as a power retention strategy in the face of shifts in the structure of domestic political and economic power[11]. In the Balkans, the shifts originating from political and economic failures of the socialist utopia led to an acute social and identity crisis that saw nationalisms rise as the dominant response[12]. Insofar as nationalism is precisely this strategy of politicizing ethnicity it seems possible to see it as a proximate, and not just underlying, cause of conflict.

Van Evera's account illuminates the 'nationalism as underlying cause versus proximate cause of war' debate as I framed it above. He suggests that the type of causality between nationalism and conflict depends both on the *type* of nationalism and on a series of structural factors. Nationalisms characterized by unattained statehood, expansionist attitudes towards national diasporas, low national respect for minority rights, and asymmetrical ideology (only one or some nationalities deserve statehood) are more likely to cause war[13]. Pan-Serbian nationalism embodied at least some of these characteristics, given both its attempted diaspora-incorporation through territorial expansion, and its demagoguery of systematic denigration of other nations/nationalities depicted as 'bad', 'dirty' and 'dangerous'[14]. Is it all demagoguery and elite, top-down manipulation of the masses? Hardly. Actual grievances do matter. The Serbian case shows how supply (elite nationalist strategies) had to meet demand: paramount to Milosevic's success in mobilizing ethnic sentiment was the existence of a whole range of grievances between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo, which left the Serbian audience primed to accept his divisive message[15]. Nonetheless, since ethnic grievances are commonly felt and latent, it is the factors that turn them into violent actions in some cases and not others that should be considered explanatory for that violence[16].

The conventionally held view that manipulation of public opinion through a monopolized, biased media plays a crucial role in spreading and reinforcing nationalist messages, the obvious antidote to which would be a democratization of civil society, is only partly warranted and can be misleading. When waning authoritarian power is newly challenged by mass politics the opportunities for nationalist mythmaking abound: the absence of institutions to correct the imperfections of the 'marketplace of ideas' create openings for nationalist mythmakers to hijack public discourse[17]. The Yugoslav case illustrates the point: the democratizing content of Tito's decentralizing reforms in the 1960s, intended to assuage ethno-nationalism, put the media in the hands of regional leaderships and in the 1980s in the hands of nationalists like Milosevic[18].

In conclusion, this essay has suggested that nationalism can be understood as one of the causes of ethnic conflict. It has defined this causality in terms of 1) types of nationalisms that are more likely to engender violence, e.g. Pan-Serbian nationalism with its expansionist attitude towards its diaspora; and 2) in terms of conditions that actualize this violent potential. Preeminent amongst these is the adoption by political and intellectual elites of nationalism as a power retention strategy in a context of institutional weakness -in the Yugoslav case, brought about by political and economic systemic transition. To achieve ethnic mobilization, the supply side of nationalism has to meet the demand side, where the existence of historical and other grievances and a general sense of anxiety held by the population matter a great deal. The media and public discourse, as conduits of this encounter, have also been showed to be paramount. Under constraints, this paper has traded off greater scope of analysis for greater depth, which has unfortunately meant ignoring several important aspects of the relationship between nationalism and ethnic conflict.

Bibliography

Brown M.E. (ed.), 'Preface' in *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997)

Can nationalism be understood as a cause of ethnic conflict?
Written by Anna Costa

Cederman L. et al., 'Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel?' in *World Politics*, Vol.62, No.1, (January 2010), pp.87-119

Coakley J., 'Comparing Ethnic Conflicts: Common Patterns, Shared Challenges' in *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics,* Vol.15, No.3 (2009), pp.261-279

Gagnon V.P., 'Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict. The Case Of Serbia' in Brown (ed.), pp. 132-168

Gellner E., *Nations And Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983)

Green E. et al., 'Fifth Debate on David Laitin's 'Nations, States and Violence'' *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 15 (October 2009), pp.557-57

Hechter M., 'Explaining Nationalist Violence' in *Nations and Nationalism* Vol.1, No.1 (1995), pp.53-68

Ivekovic I., *Ethnic And Regional Conflicts In Yugoslavia And Transcaucasia. A Political Economy Of Contemporary Ethnonational Mobilization* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2000)

Laitin D.D., *Nations, States And Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

Silber L. and Little A., *The Death Of Yugoslavia* (London: Penguin, 1996)

Smith A., *The Ethnic Origins Of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986)

Snyder et al., 'Nationalism And The Marketplace Of Ideas' in Brown (ed.), pp.61-96

Van Evera S., 'Hypotheses On Nationalism And War' in Brown (ed.), pp.26-60

[1] Brown M.E. (ed.), 'Preface' in *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict* (Cambridge: MIT Press , 1997), p. xi

[2] expression borrowed from Silber L. and Little A., *The Death Of Yugoslavia* (London: Penguin, 1996)

[3] Ivekovic I., *Ethnic And Regional Conflicts In Yugoslavia And Transcaucasia. A Political Economy Of Contemporary Ethnonational Mobilization* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2000), p.119

[4] 'nationalism is above all about politics and politics is about power' Breuilly J., *Nationalism And The State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p.1

[5] Gellner E., *Nations And Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), p.1

[6] Smith sees ethnic communities as defined by a common name, myth of descent, shared history, culture, a link with a historic territory and common solidarity. In Smith A., *The Ethnic Origins Of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp.22-31

[7] Systematic analysis of improved data points in this direction, e.g. Cederman L. et al., 'Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel?' in *World Politics*, Vol.62, No.1, (January 2010), p. 88

[8] Laitin D.D., *Nations, States And Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.15

[9] Gellner, p.1

[10] Brown, p.4.

[11] Gagnon V.P. 'Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict. The Case Of Serbia' in Brown (ed.), p. 133-4

Can nationalism be understood as a cause of ethnic conflict?
Written by Anna Costa

[12] Ivekovic, p.104

[13] Van Evera 'Hypotheses On Nationalism And War' in Brown, pp.31-4

[14] Ivekovic, p.129

[15] Snyder et al., 'Nationalism And The Marketplace Of Ideas' in Brown, p. 76

[16] Laitin, p. 25

[17] Snyder, p. 63, 68

[18] Ibid., p. 77

—

Written by: *Anna Costa*
Written at: *London School of Economics*
Written for: *John Hutchinson*
Date written: *March 2011*