

# Linking Instrumentalist and Primordialist Theories of Ethnic Conflict

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Ethnic conflict constitutes a major challenge to international peace and security. The Balkans, Chechnya, Ukraine, India, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and most of sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the Great Lakes region, all bear vestiges of the danger of ethnic conflict. Extant explanations of ethnic conflict typically fall under two fundamental theories: primordialism and instrumentalism. However, neither theory has adequate explanatory and prescriptive power (Gurr 1994). Upon reiterating that no single theory is robust enough to explain ethnic conflict, Williams (2015, 147) recently called for the development of theoretical models that can explain how the different factors highlighted in extant theories of ethnic conflict 'interact to trigger ethnic conflict.' To contribute towards the construction of more balanced accounts of ethnic conflict, this article outlines a model wherein ethnic identity (at the centre of primordialism) and grievances/frustration (at the heart of instrumentalism) interact to increase the probability of ethnic conflict. To illustrate its empirical utility, the integrative model is employed to develop a revisionist account of the genocide and murderous ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and Burundi in the early 1990s. First, a brief reminder of the key assumptions of primordialism and instrumentalism about ethnicity and ethnic conflict is in order.

### Primordialism

According to primordialists, ethnic conflict fundamentally springs from differences in ethnic identities (Vanhanen 1999; Esteban, Mayoral, and Ray 2012). Ethnic identity is assigned at birth, inherent in human nature, and passed on genealogically from generation to generation. Thus, under primordialism, ethnic identity is fixed across time. As a function of (myths of) 'common blood' shared within each ethnic group, primordialists anticipate hospitality and cooperation among members of the in-group and hostility and conflict against out-groups (Harowitz 1985, 7; Smith 1996, 445; Hammond and Axelrod 2006, 927). Because ethnic differences under primordialism are ancestral, deep, and irreconcilable, ethnic conflicts arise inevitably from 'ancient hatreds' between ethnic groups and 'mutual fear' of domination, expulsion or even extinction (Geertz 1963). By emphasizing differences in ethnic identities as the foundational source of inter-ethnic hatreds, fear, and conflicts, primordialists suggest that, ethnically heterogeneous states will unavoidably experience ethnic conflicts (Vanhanen 1999, 58). However, even in sub-Saharan Africa, one of the most ethnic conflict-plagued regions of the world, some heterogeneous states, including Cameroon and Botswana, enjoy relatively peaceful inter-ethnic relations. The separate peace in some heterogeneous states could well be a function of special structural policies as argued by Mulinge (2008), but this highlights an even more serious weakness of primordialism: it is oblivious to varying political and socio-economic structural conditions within which ethnic conflicts develop.

### Instrumentalism

Within instrumentalist thought, ethnic conflict does not emerge directly from differences in ethnic identity. Rather ethnic conflict arises only when ethnic identities are politicized or manipulated to generate political and socio-economic advantages for an ethnic group at the cost of depriving or neglecting other ethnicities (Posen 1993; Collier and Hoeffler 1998; 2000; 2004; Chandra 2004; Ruane and Todd 2004). Accordingly, instrumentalists point to factors other than ethnic identity to explain ethnic conflicts. These include, security concerns (Posen 1993); competition and

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inequality (Gurr 1993a; 1993b and 1994); and greed (Collier and Hoeffler 1998; 2000; and 2004). Sentiments of discontent underlying these factors suggest that ethnic conflicts, under instrumentalism, are commonly motivated by grievances/frustration (Ellingsen 2000). Relative to primordialism, instrumentalism appears a more nuanced theory as it recognizes the relevance of political and socio-economic structural dynamics to account for temporal and geographical variations in the occurrence of ethnic conflicts. However, while instrumentalism highlights elite manipulation or politicization of ethnicity as the foundational source of grievances which induce ethnic conflicts, it cannot independently explain why people easily, cooperatively, and effectively mobilize along ethnic lines. It must draw on the wisdom of primordialism in recognizing the power of ethnicity to perpetuate a sense of 'common blood', a sense of shared values, shared interests, shared threats, and most fundamentally, a sense of solidarity, which is indispensable for collective action.

## Linking Instrumentalism and Primordialism

As outlined above, while primordialists emphasize mere differences in ethnic identities, instrumentalists accentuate ethnic grievances arising from the politicization of ethnic identity differences – to explain ethnic conflict. The following paragraphs show an interconnection between these juxtaposed standpoints in a 'model' wherein ethnic identity and grievances interrelate to increase insidious ethnic group cohesion and the likelihood of ethnic conflict. To illustrate the integrative model, the 'textbook cases' of mass ethnic violence in Rwanda and Burundi in the early 1990s are reconstructed as emanating from mutually reinforcing instrumentalist and primordialist sentiments. The model relates mainly, but not exclusively, to conflicts between dominant and discriminated ethnic groups (ethno-political conflicts). Also, while recognising the belligerent danger of ethnic group cohesion, the model draws on the received wisdom that perceived threats from out-groups engender solidarity within the in-group in response to the threats (Stein 1976).

### *(A) Grievances Crystallise Ethnic Identity (Instrumentalism Reinforces Primordialism)*

Ethnic identity is a universal feature of ethnic conflicts. However, the different theories of ethnic conflict attach disparate degrees of primacy to ethnic identity. Under primordialism, mere differences in ethnic identities constitute a direct source of mutual fear, mistrust, ancient antipathies, and conflicts between ethnic groups (Vanhanen 1999; Esteban, Mayoral, and Ray 2012). Conversely, under instrumentalism, ethnic identity becomes relevant to conflict outbreak only when manipulated for political gains. The politicisation of ethnic identity perpetuates grievances/frustration which in turn induces ethnic conflict (Ellingsen 2000). But as clarified in this section, grievances arising from the instrumentalisation of ethnic identities contribute towards crystallising primordial ethnic divisions when the grievances are aired and disseminated through informal and formal interactions, including media broadcasts. A shared sentiment of frustration against a perceived threatening out-group fosters cohesion within the in-group whilst crystallising divisions and enhancing hatred, fear, mistrust, and the danger of violent conflict between the groups.

As noted above, in-between grievances and mass ethnic conflict are salient familial and formal interactions which, though overlooked by the two classical theories of ethnic conflict, potently increase group cohesion and crystallise ethnic divisions (Stein 1976; Thompson 2007; Chandra 2012). Domestic and personal interactions in private settings, including homes, gardens, farms, provide members of rival ethnies opportunities to share their personal experiences and collective grievances (Lemarchand 1994, xvii; Mamdani 2001). Such informal chats potentially increase own-group consciousness and demonise the out-group as menacing to all members of the in-group, perilously perpetuating cohesion within and cementing divisions between the rival ethnies (Stein 1976, 144 – 145). As crucial as familial interactions are for the formation of ethnic identity (Umana-Taylor, Bhanot and Shin 2006), so they are for expressing and disseminating hatred and distrust of the perceived adversarial out-group. In addition to informal familial interactions, 'formal' hate ideologies may also be developed and disseminated via print and broadcast media and through ethnic political parties (Mamdani 2001; Chandra 2004). Formal and informal interactions increase 'ethnic bonding' (Umana-Taylor, Bhanot and Shin 2006), instrumentally emboldening primordial identities and facilitating mobilisation for collective action, including mass violence, to redress grievances. Without cohesion, frustration is less likely to cause severe and sustained large-scale rebellion. As instrumentalist grievances/frustration become part of the identities of rival ethnies whilst perpetuating cohesion within the ethnies, mere contrasting ethnic identities – which constitute a foundational source of conflicts under primordialism – become

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emboldened, increasing ethnic identity consciousness and raising the risk of ethnic conflict. Thus, by contributing towards crystallising differences between ethnic identities (at the heart of primordialism), instrumentalist frustration emerges relevant to primordial accounts of ethnic conflict.

## *(B) Cohesion Engenders Frustration (Primordialism Reinforces Instrumentalism)*

Having seen how frustration increases cohesion and by extension crystallises differences between ethnic identities, this section reverses the equation to show how contrasting cohesive identities engender frustration and the danger of mass ethnic conflict. As outlined in the summary of primordialism earlier, ethnic identity differences constitute a sufficient cause of intra-group cooperation and hospitality and inter-group competition and conflict, largely as a function of (myths of) 'common blood' within each ethnic group (Harowitz 1985, 7; Smith 1996, 445; Hammond and Axelrod 2006, 927). This socio-biological conception of ethnicity underlying primordialism implicitly highlights the indispensability of group cohesion and group consciousness to effective group action. Accordingly, group cohesion is intrinsically related to primordialist views of ethnic conflict which accentuate ethnic identity differences as foundational sources of inter-group hatreds, mistrust, and conflicts. While sharpening inter-group differences, in-group cohesion spurs out-group frustration, implicitly providing a primordialist connection to a concept at the centre of instrumentalist accounts of ethnic conflict.

Further to instigating frustration, group cohesion leverages effective mass mobilization for ethnic rebellion. Some scholars of ethnicity, including Posen (1993, 29), consider group cohesion as a proxy of 'offensive military potential.' Thus, grievance-borne solidarity among members of the out-group is likely to be perceived threatening by the in-group. Perceived threats render rebellious violence appealing to the in-group (Fearon and Laitin 2003). If out-group cohesion is accepted as a true source of in-group frustration, then the instrumentality of frustration in generating ethnic conflicts can be said to be symbiotically linked to crystallised identities. Together, (A) and (B) reveal an interdependent relationship between core concepts of primordialism (collective identity) and instrumentalism (grievance/frustration). To the extent that these concepts are concerned, the two main theories of ethnic conflict are not mutually exclusive.

## **An Application of the Integrative Model**

To illustrate the empirical utility of the integrative model, the mass ethnic violence of Hutus against Tutsis in the Rwandan genocide and Burundian murderous ethnic cleansing of the early 1990s following the assassination of those two countries' (Hutu) presidents are herein reconstructed as functions of mutually reinforcing primordialist identities and instrumentalist grievances. The genocide and ethnic cleansing following the assassinations of Rwanda's Juvénal Habyarimana and Burundi's Melchior Ndadaye have been explained along separate primordialist and instrumentalist lines of thought by different scholars. Ndikumana's (1998) 'Institutional Failure and Ethnic Conflicts in Burundi' and Uvin's (1999) 'Ethnicity and Power in Burundi and Rwanda' constitute, respectively, typical examples of instrumentalist and primordialist interpretations of the mass ethnic violence in the Great Lakes' countries as summarised below.

## **Instrumentalist Interpretation**

Instrumentalism attributes the genocide and ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and Burundi to the postcolonial domination of power by Hutus in Rwanda and Tutsis in Burundi. In Rwanda, the Hutu elite politicised ethnicity and narrowly defined democracy to mean 'majority rule and majority rule meant Hutu rule' (Kiwuwa 2005, 448). The postcolonial Hutu regimes of Kayibanda (1961 – 1973) and Habyarimana (1973 – 1994) adopted discriminatory and exclusionist policies against Tutsis, forcing many of them into exile in neighbouring countries. Tutsi grievances/frustration arising from discrimination fueled the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front's (RPF) insurgency and assassination of Habyarimana (Stedman 1997, 24; Lemarchand 2007, 6), which immediately triggered the genocide of Tutsis by Hutu loyalists. In Burundi, key institutions, including the executive, the military, the judiciary, and the education system were dominated by the Tutsi. Tutsi domination engendered sentiments of alienation and frustration among the Hutu (Ndikumana 1998, 31). Hutu grievances metamorphosed to mass murderous violence against the Tutsi following the assassination of Burundi's first post-independence Hutu president in 1993 in a coup by some Tutsi military leaders

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(UNICIB 1996, 26 – 33).

## Primordialist Interpretation

Conversely, primordialist accounts of the Rwandan and Burundian bloodbaths of the 1990s accentuate the role of ancient antipathies, mistrust and mutual fear between the Hutu and Tutsi identities in the build up to the post-assassination massacres. Past inter-group hatreds contributing to recurrent ethnic conflicts created a climate of 'permanent mutual fear' (Uvin 1999, 258). Following the assassinations of Habyarimana and Ndadaye, affection for the in-group and hatred for the rival group motivated inter-group violence in response to fears of suppression and extermination. The Hutu majority dreaded suppression by the Tutsi minority while the latter feared extermination by the former (Uvin 1999, 258).

## The Integrative Model

Both instrumentalist and primordialist accounts of the Rwandan and Burundian carnages are credible but are not mutually exclusive: In-between ethnic grievances (emphasised by instrumentalists) on the one hand and the bloodbaths on the other were divisive informal chats and inflammatory formal broadcasts which emboldened the Hutu/Tutsi divide and revived memories of ancient hatreds (emphasized by primordialists) between the two groups. The Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies (MIGS) harbours a databank of transcripts of several divisive and hate broadcasts that were propagated by local pro-Hutu media outlets, including Radio Rwanda, Radio Télévision Libre Milles Collines (RTLM), Radio Muhabura, and the extremist paper, Kangura. The role of the media in projecting Hutu power as democratic rule, in perpetuating Hutu solidarity against the Tutsi, and effectively crystallising Hutu/Tutsi identities – which, prior to colonialism, were loosely associated with subsistence farming and cattle rearing – is well documented in international scholarly and media circles (Thompson 2007; Smith 2003).

By fostering cohesion within each group whilst cementing differences between them, the local media effectively used ethnic grievances at the heart of instrumentalism to reinforce primordial identities. When Habyarimana and Ndadaye were assassinated, extremists within the power-holding Hutu majority felt frustrated by the threats posed by cohesion among the Tutsi minority and its quest for state power championed by Tutsi-led rebel groups such as the RPF (Lemarchand 1994, xiv; 2007, 6; Mamdani 2001, 211). As the emboldened Tutsi identity induced frustration among Hutu power loyalists, a primordial identity had effectively engendered instrumentalist sentiments. The interplay between primordial identities and instrumentalist frustration in the Great Lakes' countries culminated in genocide and murderous ethnic cleansing of Tutsis after the pro-Hutu media dehumanised Tutsis as 'cockroaches', making it easier to kill them (Smith 2003).

## Conclusion

Extant wisdom on ethnic conflict is classified under two main theories: primordialism and instrumentalism. However, neither can independently explain ethnic conflicts satisfactorily. In response to Williams' (2015, 147) proposal for the development of more integrative and comprehensive theoretical approaches to understanding ethnic conflicts, this essay has outlined a model showing a possible interaction between core concepts under primordialism and instrumentalism. According to the integrative model, informal and formal interpersonal interactions about grievances/frustration arising from the instrumentalisation of ethnicity enhance ethnic cohesion whilst crystallising primordial identities. Ethnic cohesion within dominated groups in turn induces a sense of insecurity and frustration among dominant ethnies, motivating mass violence by the latter as the power-holding Hutu did in the genocide and murderous ethnic cleansing of Rwanda and Burundi in the early 1990s following the assassination of those countries' Hutu presidents. By developing and adopting more integrative explanatory models that build on the strengths of the different extant theories of ethnic conflict, the scholarly and policy worlds stand a better chance of understanding the multidimensional nature of ethnic conflicts and of making effective holistic interventions for perpetual peace. The onus therefore is on the academic community to continue to reflect on ways in which different factors highlighted in different theories interact to trigger ethnic conflict.

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