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Ethnicity and Violent Conflict

Ethnicity is one of the most pervasive of the socially constructed groups that society has employed to distinguish between individuals and allow certain people to set themselves apart from other people. Social categories are created to group people based on characteristics that they possess as a result of physical, cultural, or economic inheritances. Usually these categories are not defined by attributes that individuals have a direct control over determining for their lives. Not only do social categories possess these rules for membership, but they exist because they carry some social meaning that tell you what it means to yourself and to others that you are in this particular category. Ethnicity is a particular kind of social category in that it is often based on attributes that individuals inherit, either physically or culturally. These include race, nationality, religion, and language. Because of the nature of these attributes, as both visible and resistant to change, ethnicity has a tendency to become more politically salient than other social categories.

When considering ethnicity as a basis for violent conflict there are several assumptions that attempt to explain how those differences motivate violence that have not held up when tested. A common assumption is that when there are multiple ethnic groups living under some unifying force or government, such as the communist government in Iraq, that unification is all that is keeping ancient hatreds between the groups from breaking into conflict. In reality, this is far from true. There may be instances of prejudice between various groups but that is a very different phenomenon from the mass killings many attribute to ethnic hatred. In Iraq, despite a history of differences between the Sunnis and Shi'as, the Shi'as were not oppressed until the 1970s during the Iranian War. Instead, that research has shown that such oppression occurred not because of ethnic hatred, but because of the opportunity for political gain available to the Sunni elite as a result of doing so. The degree of division between many ethnic groups is often overstated as well. Particularly in parliamentary systems, electoral rules can distort how the vote share of the population is actually represented in the legislature.

The popular conversation around "ethnic wars" have greatly distorted the reality of those conflicts. According to the Mueller's *The Banality of "Ethnic War,"* when people discuss interstate wars the common, and correct, public opinion is that those instigating and carrying out the tasks of war are the political elite, the military, and other logical actors. However, when some conflict is categorized as an ethnic war, there is a common false assumption that all members of that ethnic group must be involved in the violence. The distinction between who is a combatant and who is a civilian in that conflict is lost. The banality argument suggests that "ethnic" wars are actually not motivated by any factor of ethnicity. Elites utilize existing prejudice between various groups, or simply create some manufactured display of prejudice, and use that window of opportunity to instigate violence against the other group in order to secure more power. Furthermore, most participants are not motivated by political gain or animosity towards the targeted out-group. Rather, on the ground participants carry out violence for the possibility of some personal gain. According to Mueller, many of the most violent Serbian units in Croatia were criminals recruited from prisons, rather than dedicated nationalists or prejudiced Serbs (49)--their motivations were to gain their freedom, and carrying out such violence provided that opportunity.

Research has shown that civil war is not more likely in countries with high ethnic diversity. However, it is important to consider the ways in which ethnic diversity is measured to fully understand whether or not ethnic diversity makes violent conflict more likely. Actual diversity measures the number of ethnic groups while considering their size. There is no evidence that connects high levels of diversity with civil war. With more ethnic groups, those groups have more incentive to cooperate with each other and in most governance systems they must form coalitions to govern. However, ethnic polarization, when there are a small number of groups that are roughly equal in size, has shown links to civil war. When there is a majority group in this context they will have less incentive to cooperate and more incentive to exploit the minority group. A state with two ethnic groups that are each roughly half of the population will be the most likely to see violence as the group in power attempts to consolidate and increase their control. However, this still does not account for the nature of the relationship between the groups. In theory when there are horizontal inequalities between the groups, out-groups will experience grievances based on discrimination or exclusions that keep them from fully enjoying the benefits of a state's development. When those political exclusions are tied to specific grievances the out-group becomes more likely to participate in violence as its size increases. When considering the likelihood of such violence the bargaining model is a useful tool.

If an ethnic group is experiencing the level of political exclusion that creates grievances associated with their enjoyment of the benefits of the state's development, both sides will consider their possible chances of achieving some acceptable compromise. If the two sides making offers to each other have varying levels of power, as is usually the case in these ethnic scenarios, the stronger government will demand more while the weaker out-group will have to accept less. In this bargaining scenario, either side could move towards violent conflict for two reasons. First, there is an information problem--they have incorrect information regarding how they and the other side will perform in conflict. If the bargaining range is off they might move towards a conflict resolution. Second, the credible commitment problem. If one side cannot commit to sticking to the terms of the agreement today because they could possibly use an increased threat of force to renegotiate better terms in the future they might be less willing to reach an agreement that is favorable to both sides. If they go to war, this problem will carry into the settlement. In civil war the winner is always the absolute victor. Because of the credible commitment problem, the loser has to place absolute trust in the victor in order to maintain peace. This translates into even more power for the victor, who consequently will be even less willing to negotiate possibly favorable deals for the loser because they will have only increased their power. In general, I would not suggest that ethnic diversity will make violent conflict more likely to occur. However, in the situation of a polarized population with an out-group experiencing political exclusion and grievances, there is evidence in the bargaining model that the two groups might not be able to reach a peaceful settlement and that disconnect could escalate into war. However, it is key to understand that in these situations the out-group instigates possible conflict because of political exclusion and the associated grievances, not because of ethnic hatred. Furthermore, the political elite creating those exclusions are not doing so because of ethnic hatred, but because of the opportunity to exploit some social categorization at its face value in order to achieve more political gain.

Works Referenced

Mueller, J. (2000). The Banality of "Ethnic War". *International Security*, 25(1), 42-70.

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