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R. M. Williams

Ethnic Conflicts and Ancient Hatreds: Cultural Concerns

The view that ethnic conflicts today can be traced back to ancient group hatreds is known as essentialism, sometimes also called 'primordialism.' It is very popular in nonscholarly circles, but has very few proponents in the scholarly world.

Essentialism relies on two interconnected arguments, sometimes made together. It refers to 'primordial' or 'ancient animosities' as a cause of contemporary conflict. The animosities are said to be based on inherent differences of race, religion, or culture, going back into ancient times; and it is further contended that individuals acquire the characteristics of their races, religions, or cultures. A second essentialist argument is that ethnicity inheres in human beings, meaning that all of us inevitably search for, or can easily be made to care for, our ancestry and blood. Either way, conflict results, for a rational calculus is superseded by the emotional ties of blood, or by ancient hatreds. Human beings live out not only the positive attributes of the collectivity to which they belong, but also its prejudices with respect to other groups. Again and again in history, intrinsic group differences activate prejudices and trigger violence.

More than any other view discussed below, this perspective dominates the portrayals of ethnic conflict in newspapers and magazines. Almost any popular account of conflict between Hindus and Muslims, Serbs and Croats, Arabs and Jews, Whites and Blacks, Catholics and Protestants, Hutu and Tutsi is marked by phrases such as 'old animosities,' 'tribalism,' and 'ties of blood' (Kaplan 1993). In the academic world, too, this view has had its exponents. Clifford Geertz (1973) was among the first scholars after the Second World War to popularize the term 'primordialism.' More than Geertz, however, Walker Connor has been a leading and consistent advocate of the essentialist view. Man, argues Connor, is a 'national, not rational animal' (Connor 1994). So powerful is the search for origins in human beings that both Hitler and John Jay, says Connor, were driven to emphasize common ancestry to build their nations. 'Blood binds more firmly than business,' argued Adolph Hitler; and the Americans, contended John Jay, are 'a people descended from the same ancestors,' 'despite,' adds Connor, 'the presence of settlers of Dutch, French, German,…. Scottish and Irish extraction' on American soil in the eighteenth century.

Few academic scholars subscribe to the essentialist view today. On the whole, essentialism tends *not* to make a distinction between ethnic (or national) identity on the one hand and ethnic (or national) conflict on the other. Though it is a problem not confined to essentialism alone, as explained below, essentialists do tend to conflate the two. It may well be that for building community feelings, leaders tend to, or have to, emphasize ancestry. Conflict, however, does not necessarily follow. It is one thing to call up an imagined common ancestry *across* ethnic groups, in which case the attempt would be to build bridges. John Jay's example above would illustrate a bridge-building invocation of an assumed ancestral commonality. It is, however, something quite different to summon the common ties of blood explicitly against an ethnically distinguishable group, in which case the result could well be ethnic hatred and violence. Hitler's attempt would clearly belong to the latter category, not the former.

That both John Jay and Hitler had to invoke common ancestry implies neither that man is a national animal, nor that he is a rational agent—he could be both. Nor do such attempts inevitably reignite ancient animosities. Ethnic, or national, identity can well be a source of meaning and security, without implying hatred for another ethnic or national group. These two aspects of ethnic or national identity—positive and negative—are by now well understood and clearly distinguished (Taylor 1997).

Those who came to be known as 'instrumentalists' launched the first systematic attack on the essentialist view. Indeed, going back to the late 1960s and 1970s, 'essentialism vs. instrumentalism' was the first big theoretical axis around which scholars sought to formulate their views and understand the virulence of ethnic animosities and violence (Young 1995). The key proposition of instrumentalism rests on the purely instrumental use of ethnic identity for political or economic purposes by the elite, regardless of whether the elite themselves believe in ethnicity (Hardin

1995). The two views are presented as being fundamentally at odds; one focuses on the intrinsic power of ethnic differences, the other concentrates on their instrumental value, political or economic.

The emphasis of on how leaders strategically manipulate ethnicity for the sake of power has an intuitive appeal because the behavior of many, if not all, political leaders can be cited in support. But this view also runs up against a fundamental difficulty. The elite may indeed gain power by mobilizing ethnic identity, without actually believing in it, and may therefore behave instrumentally. But if the masses were only instrumental about ethnic identity, why would ethnicity be the basis for mobilization at all? Why do the leaders decide to mobilize ethnic passions in the first place? Why do they think that ethnicity is the route to power, not the economic interests of the people? And if economic interests coincide with ethnicity, why choose ethnicity as opposed to economic interests as a central symbol for mobilization?

In principle, an instrumental resolution of these problems exists. Ethnicity can serve as a 'focal point,' which is defined as set of symbols so obvious, unique and easily comprehensible by the members of a group that it can facilitate convergence of individual expectations, and hence be useful as a mobilization strategy. The idea of 'focal points' comes from Schelling's seminal treatment of the coordination problem in bargaining. In the famous Schelling example:

> When a man loses his wife in a department store without any prior understanding on where to meet if they get separated, the chances are good that they will find each other. It is likely that each will think of some obvious place to meet, so obvious that each will be sure that the other is sure that it is obvious to both of them (Schelling 1963).

Ethnicity, in other words, can be viewed as one such focal point for mobilization; it is not valued for its own sake. Its potential for mobilization may be deployed to extract goods and services from the modern sector, or to establish power, by some leaders (Bates 1974).

However, the idea of a 'focal point' is also not sufficient to explain ethnic mobilization, for it does not distinguish between different kinds of collective action and what their respective costs might be. Ethnic *mobilization* for political action is not the same as ethnic *coordination* for economic and social activities. By providing a social occasion, festivals may indeed bring people together even if not every one appreciates the ritual meaning of celebration or mourning; and by forming mutually converging trust, geographically spread ethnic kinsmen are also known to have supplied credit in long-distance trade without a prior explicit contract between trading partners.

But the analogy of a focal point cannot be extended to group action when the costs of participation for the masses are very high. By its very nature, ethnic mobilization in politics is group action not only in favor of one's group *but also often against some other group*. An increase in the rights and power for one group often means a diminution in the ability of some other group(s) to dictate terms, or a sharing of power and status between groups, where no such sharing earlier existed. Ethnicity in intragroup, social or economic transactions is thus very different from ethnicity in intergroup political conflicts. The former illustrates the value of ethnicity as a focal point; the latter presents problems of a different order. When an individual provides credit to ethnic brethren without an explicit contract, incarceration, injury, or even death is not the likely cost he bears in mind. Such costs are not unlikely in ethnic or national conflicts. For something to be manipulated by a leader when death, injury, or incarceration is a clear possibility, it must be valued as a good by a critical mass of people, if not by all (Horowitz 1985). A purely instrumental conception of ethnicity cannot explain why ethnic identities are mobilized by leaders at all (Elster 1988).

Does this mean that essentialism is right after all about the primordial character of hatreds. Do such hatreds indeed play an important role in contemporary ethnic conflicts? Are there any other approaches to answering this question beyond essentialism and instrumentalism?

Since the mid-1980s to early 1990s, the study of ethnicity has been profoundly influenced by constructivism (Varshney 1997). Part of the constructivist inspiration has come from postmodernism, but postmodernists are not the only constructivists. At varying levels, scholars as diverse and 'unpostmodern' as Eric Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), Linda Colley (1992), and Benedict Anderson (1983) have shared the constructivist view, and demonstrated how so many identities that we take for granted today were quite recently constructed in history.

The central claim of constructivism is that the formation of ethnic or national identities is a modern phenomenon. Does this claim by any chance imply that there were no Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Christians, Tibetans, and Han Chinese in premodern times?

Such a claim would obviously be quite absurd, and that is not the constructivist contention either. The claim simply is that identities in premodern times tended on the whole to be face-to-face and operated on a small scale. Ordinary people rarely interacted beyond their local environments. Conflict, when it emerged, was managed locally and identities were considerably flexible. Extralocal communities did not include 'the people'; such larger communities consisted primarily of the ecclesiastical elite and the court-based aristocracy and nobility.

Modernity changed the meaning of identities by bringing the masses into a larger, extralocal, framework of consciousness. It made identities and communities wider and more institutionalized. In what has become a classic constructivist argument, Colley shows how shared Protestantism, opposition to

France, and the benefits of empire managed to dissolve the bitter historical disputes between the Scots and the English, and led to the construction of a British identity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, one of the most influential texts in the field today, the emphasis is on how modern technology and a modern economic system—the printing press and capitalism, to be more precise—made it possible to have imaginations about large, popular, and secular communities based on language, which overtook the premodern, extralocal, religious communities of the clergymen on the one hand and the aristocratic dynasties on the other.

The constructivist emphasis is on the construction of group categories by the knowledge-elite, its promotion by centers of power, and its effects on 'the people.' For example, the Census, a modern instrument of categorization, would typically ask the masses whether they were (a) Hindu, (b) Muslim, or (c) Christian, even if in their self-image the masses felt their culture borrowed from all three and their identities were an intersection of (a), (b), and (c). Fuzzy identities, even when real, were not registered as such and were instead split into lucid, modernist boundaries. Furthermore, if public policy, based on such census categorizations, allocated patronage, public office, or state grants, then the very act of census categorization would begin to create larger identities.

Such categorization, according to constructivists, was not innocent or scientific. The power elite created some categories, not others. The selectivity was based on their preconceptions of what the building blocks of a society were, or on a calculation of what divisions would maintain their power. Thus, only those narratives acquire staying power that get promoted by the elite.

On postcolonial societies, the principal constructivist claim is that the major contemporary ethnic cleavages were a creation of the colonial power and, given the immense power of colonial masters, such divisions have endured, and will last for a long time. Of course, the power of the colonial masters was not unlimited. They did require local alliances and the new categories were established with co-optation of the indigenous elite in the colonial framework of power. In a sense, thus, the argument is about the nature of the colonial *system*, not about the evil intentions of the colonial masters. 'Modern colonialism,' writes one of the best practitioners of the constructivist genre, 'instituted enduring hierarchies of subjects and knowledges—the colonizer and the colonized, the Occidental and the Oriental, the civilized and the primitive, the scientific and the superstitious, the developed and the underdeveloped. …(T)he colonial rulers enacted their authority by constituting the "native" as their inverse image…not because of the colonizer's bad faith but due to the functioning of colonial power…' (Prakash 1994).

Let us take a concrete example of this abstract claim. On India's Hindu–Muslim conflict, constructivists argue, there is no universally acceptable theory about the origins, rise, and spread of Hindu–Muslim antagonisms; rather, there have only been 'discourses' or 'narratives.' In the hands of the British, a primordial antagonism between Hindus and Muslims dating back centuries became the 'master narrative,' even though there was enough evidence of Hindu–Muslim coexistence. Primordial antagonism was not the 'truth' about Hindus and Muslims. It was constructed and promoted as such by the British, partly because it suited them to split India into its two largest religious groups, and partly because the 'natives,' argued the British, could not constitute a 'modern' nation—they could think only in terms of premodern religious communities. Hindus and Muslims may have existed before the British came to India, but being a Hindu or Muslim did not refer to large, political identities. It only signified small, personal, and village-based cultural identities.

In what ways are these arguments a challenge to essentialism? Do they advance our understanding of ethnicity or ethnic conflict? What might their pitfalls be?

To explain the contemporary power of ethnic cleavages, essentialism either referred to old animosities or to the pull of ancestry. It was unable to see how the episodes suggesting old animosities might have been selectively retrieved by the knowledge elite, ignoring the many instances of cooperation and coexistence. The argument, one might parenthetically note, is also different from instrumentalism. For instrumentalists, ethnicity is basically a mask for a core of interests, and as interests change, the masks also do. Constructivists show why some identities, striking roots in popular consciousness, endure and do not easily change. To call such identities a mask is to undervalue their endurance and not understand their historical roots. The fact that they are constructed does not mean that they are not *deeply* constructed. Identities do not often, or automatically, change as interests do.

Has constructivism won the battle of arguments, defeating essentialism (and instrumentalism)? There are significant unresolved problems in the constructivist claim as well. After all, the basic constructivist argument for ethnic conflict in developing countries is that the colonially created master narratives, emphasizing cleavages between communities, led to conflict. The explanation provided for the formation of ethnic *identity* is thus also extended to ethnic *conflict*. Whatever one may say about the constructivist explanation for modern identity-formation, its extension to conflict does not make sense.

To illustrate this point, let us return to the example of Hindu–Muslim conflict. Is Hindu–Muslim conflict ubiquitous in India, or is it concentrated in some pockets? One could also ask the question more

generally: does ethnic conflict tend to get evenly spread through the length and breadth of a country, or does it develop local or regional concentrations? If it is true that ethnic violence tends to be unevenly distributed and pockets of violence coexist with vast stretches of peace, then invoking the ubiquitous power of a system-wide, nationwide, master narrative as an explanatory device will not do. Either there are several master narratives in a country, one hegemonic in some regions, others powerful elsewhere; or some other, locally based, factors intervene between the potential power of narratives to cleave society and generate violence, and the actually observed patterns of violence. To the detriment of constructivism, it turns out that ethnic conflict indeed tends to be locally concentrated, not evenly geographically spread, even though ethnic identities may be ubiquitous. This is as true of India, as of the US, and Northern Ireland, countries with such remarkable divergences otherwise.

Essentialism thus may have lost out to other ways of looking at ethnic conflicts, especially its claim that contemporary ethnic conflict is based on ancient hatreds which the scholars of ethnicity simply don't find acceptable any more. But we should note that other alternatives are also riddled with some serious problems of evidence and explanation. It may be that as knowledge of ethnic consciousness evolves further, a new approach that somehow combines the strength of each approach and seeks to eliminate the weaknesses of each will come about. It is hard to tell what this syncretistic approach would look like.

See also: Conflict and War, Archaeology of; Conflict: Anthropological Aspects; Ethnic Cleansing, History of; Ethnic Conflicts; Ethnic Groups/Ethnicity: Historical Aspects; Ethnic Identity, Psychology of; Ethnicity, Sociology of; Gender, Class, Race, and Ethnicity, Social Construction of; Internal Warfare: Civil War, Insurgency, and Regional Conflict; War: Anthropological Aspects; War, Sociology of

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A. Varshney

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Ethnic Groups/Ethnicity: Historical Aspects

1. Is 'Ethnicity' Ancient or Modern?

From one point of view, ethnic groups, and the conflicts between them, are as old as humankind. The ethnopsychiatrist Devereux (1975) therefore used examples from Homer, Herodotus, Sophocles, Plutarch, and Xenophon to the Bible to develop his conceptual approach to *Ethnic Identity: Its Logical Foundations and Its Dysfunctions*. Among a total of 56 groups on whose basis Devereux develops his theories are ancient Hebrews, Spartans, Sedang, Arunta, Mohave, Hipa, Yuma, and numerous examples from modern Europe, especially from the time of fascism.

From another vantage point, ethnic identity is a feature of modernization. The sociologist Glazer (1975), for example, noted in his essay on the *Universalization of Ethnicity* that while processes of modernization could be expected to weaken primordial ethnic identities, in fact, mass societies had created a new need for 'some kind of identity—smaller than the State, larger than the family, something akin to a 'familistic allegiance.' Hence the production of ethnic difference could be expected to intensify and increase under modern conditions.

What speaks for the first assumption is the impressive array of social conflicts involving differences in the sense of belonging and of group membership. There is also the history of the word 'ethnos' which goes back to antiquity and contains an interesting doubleness of standing for people in general as well as for people who are different from the speaker (the Greek *ethnikos* was a translation of Hebrew *goy*), making 'ethnos' available as a term of in-group self-description and of out-group ascription.

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