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Ethnopolitics
Formerly Global Review of Ethnopolitics

ISSN: 1744-9057 (Print) 1744-9065 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/reno20

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**To cite this article:** David A. Lake (2017) Why Does Ethnicity Increase in Salience as Political Order Decays?, Ethnopolitics, 16:1, 82-88, DOI: 10.1080/17449057.2016.1235826

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2016.1235826

Published online: 25 Nov 2016.

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*Ethnopolitics*, 2017
Vol. 16, No. 1, 82–88, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2016.1235826

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# Why Does Ethnicity Increase in Salience as Political Order Decays?

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ABSTRACT We know more about the sources of political violence than we sometimes admit. Conflict scholars now have a reasonably well-developed, if still largely informal, spiral model of ethnic mobilization, fear, and escalation that accounts for the breakdown of bargaining and the turn to violence. The key question for future research, however, is Why does ethnicity increase in salience when political order decays or is threatened? Addressing this puzzle will likely require delving into the social psychology of identity formation.

In this symposium, authors were asked to address four questions, which form the sections of this brief essay. In particular, we were asked to identify the question that, with 5 million euro, we would most like to see addressed in the literature. My question forms the title of this contribution and is explained in the final section below.

My own research on ethnic conflict examined its international spread and diffusion (Lake & Rothchild, 1998). More recently, I have focused on international trusteeship and statebuilding in the aftermath of civil wars and as solutions to problems of ethnically divided societies (Lake, 2010, 2016; Lake & Fariss, 2014). Although I have not attempted to tackle the 5 million euro question myself, it is through these studies that I have come to recognize its importance in addressing the sources of political violence.

## The Causal Determinants of Ethnic Conflict

As a field, we have a plausible (though by no means full) understanding of the basic dynamics of ethnic conflict. Ethnically defined identity groups are one vehicle for the articulation of political demands on the state. Competition for resources can heighten ethnic tensions for both more prosperous groups, who may desire to secede to insulate themselves from the redistributive demands by others, and less prosperous groups, who may prefer a different policy package of taxes and services than their richer counterparts (among others, Alesina & Spolaore, 2003; Gourevitch, 1979). The more divided each

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group is, the more difficult it is to assemble and make credible a cross-group compromise (D. E. Cunningham, 2011; Cunningham, 2014).

Ethnic extremists can initiative a vicious circle of fear and uncertainty, which in turn leads to bargaining failures and widespread violence (Lake & Rothchild, 1996). Given the mobilization of ethnic cleavages, and perhaps playing on historic memories of past exploitation, extremists engage in acts of violence that strike fear for their physical and political safety into the members of at least one community (including their own).[1] When the state is incapable of protecting individuals or, worse, the state is a partisan in the emerging conflict, frightened individuals retreat into their ethnic communities and groups begin to arm in self-defence (or for offence) (DeFigueiredo & Weingast, 1999; Posen, 1993). As the vicious circle takes hold, problems of information and credible commitment lead to inter-group bargaining failures and actual violence.

Once begun, the same factors that ignited the vicious circle prolong the conflict until one side emerges victorious or some external power intervenes to halt the violence (D. E. Cunningham, 2011; Walter, 1997). Even external intervention may fail to end the killing if the outside power is itself partisan.[2] Even when ostensibly neutral in motive, peacekeeping forces may not be able or willing to create effective security or repress extremists (Fortna, 2008). Once groups turn violent, ethnicity is always heightened and fear and distrust loom even larger than before. Peacemaking is not just a return to the status quo ante, but requires a new social contract (Hartzell & Hoddie, 2010; Roeder & Rothchild, 2005).

As this is a long-term, iterative process—though in some cases the final stages unfold quickly—identifying causal determinants is difficult. However much we may understand the process as a whole, the effects of individual causal variables remain elusive. Feedback effects make systems chaotic, prone to 'tipping' or diffusion, and, thus, unpredictable.[3] Researchers have not been as attentive to issues of research design as, perhaps, they should be (see question three below). Moreover, though the general model appears to hold, the particulars of each conflict are different. Without well-specified theories, the idiosyncratic details of conflicts do not 'add up' into variables for further testing. Nonetheless, as a field, we know more in terms of the general process of ethnic breakdown and violence than we sometimes think we do.

## Recent Innovations

The most useful development, albeit tentative and still emerging, is to shift the focus of inquiry from ethnic conflict to political violence (for an early bridge, see Cunningham & Lemke, 2013; Lake, 2003). Scholars have in the past studied conflicts divided along what are now recognized as arbitrary lines. Researchers distinguished between interstate and intrastate wars, although the existence of transborder ethnic groups often made a shambles of any such distinction (Salehyan, 2009). Ethnic conflicts were, in the early 1990s, examined separately from civil wars.[4] Terrorism, a particular strategy of violence, remains a largely separate subject even though it is found in virtually all types of conflict.[5]

Increasingly, scholars are now studying violence in all its manifestations as a common political subject. Of course, we do not yet have a unified theory of political violence, and the boundary with criminal violence remains hazy. Movement in this direction, though, has been facilitated by the bargaining theory of war that, despite its flaws, applies equally to any analytic unit, including states, (sub-state) regions, ethnic groups, and even individuals (Fearon, 1995, 1998).

Also essential to this movement is the erosion of the intellectual distinction between the supposed anarchy of the international system and the hierarchy of domestic politics (see Lake, 2009; Milner, 1991). The distinction has been attacked from both sides. Most important for the study of ethnic conflict is the insight that 'constitutions'—the basic laws of any polity—must themselves be self-enforcing (e.g. Weingast, 1997). This is a fundamental point of non-cooperative game theory as applied to political institutions. If the supposed anarchy of the international system means anything, it means that there are no third parties to enforce agreements *within* countries, and thus any set of domestic political institutions must be in equilibrium. That is, though there may be a 'rule of law' within countries, such a condition holds only so long as all parties respect the law and, importantly, expect others to respect it as well. If one or more groups challenge the basic rules of politics, the constitution can collapse and throw the country into a condition of 'anarchy' conducive to the outbreak of a vicious circle (as above).

A third pillar supporting this view of political violence as a unified phenomenon has been a greater appreciation for and understanding of rebel groups, including ethnic extremists, as political actors who need to build support for their movements (see Berman, Shapiro, & Felter, 2011; Heger, Jung, & Wong, 2012; Staniland, 2014). Whether choosing to compete in the legitimate political arena, or not, and to resort to violence, or not, all subnational groups must build, satisfy, and mobilize their supporters.[6] Indeed, in the absence of external support, such groups must also extract resources from their supporters through the equivalent of taxes and requisitions. Rebel groups must perform many of the same functions as states to earn legitimacy from their base (see Berman & Matanock, 2015). Thus, many of the same theories of political competition that guide our understanding of political parties and states apply to subnational groups, including ethnic groups (see Cunningham, Bakke, & Seymour, 2012).

Ultimately, a clearer understanding of political violence will help us understand better the particular forms of violence. Germ theory transformed biology and medicine, but did not immediately explain differences between one virus or bacterium and another. It did, however, lead over time to knowledge of how to treat different diseases. In similar ways, a theory of political violence will help us understand basic processes. At the same time, it will take time and effort to explain particular types of conflicts and devise effective interventions.

## Least Useful Developments

The study of ethnic conflict typically suffers from poor research designs. This is nothing new, but is a continuing problem. The process of ethnic conflict outlined above is complex. Partly as a result, the field is still highly dependent on case studies that, at best, illustrate common factors but cannot test causation in any meaningful way. Observational studies are also inherently limited in identifying causal processes.

But even the rapidly growing number of large-*n* statistical studies, made possible by new data sets on low-level violence (Gleditsch, Wallenstten, Eriksson, Sollenberg, & Strand, 2002), also typically suffer from weak identification. Since each causal variable is implicated in a complex causal process leading to violence, identifying the *independent* causal import of any is difficult. Even if we know that the number of factions within groups increases the risk of violence, for instance, the number of these factions at any moment in time is likely a function of past conflict or other political processes (K. G. Cunningham 2011). Though I confess

that this conclusion is only impressionistic and not the result of a careful inventory, I suspect that no causal variable in the literature today can reasonably be assumed to be randomly assigned to different countries, regions, or groups around the world. Indeed, even the ubiquitous 'rough terrain' variable central to Fearon and Laitin (2003) and replicated as a control in many other studies might seem exogenous but is actually a proxy for the political structure of groups.[7] This problem requires that we, as a discipline, pay more attention to causal inference. Given the endogenous nature of most variables of concern, we should be using instrumental variable models, though good instruments are hard to find; selection models that, say, explain the salience of ethnic cleavages and then use those cleavages to explain violence; and, ideally, matching designs that limit tests to sets of observations that are equally likely in principle to be 'treated' or not.[8]

## The 5 Million Euro Question

Political violence remains the scourge of humanity, one of the leading causes of death and misery in the world. As a product of human choice and interaction, it seems that it should be eminently preventable, but solutions have proven elusive. A better understanding of the causes of political violence appears essential to its eradication or, at least, mitigation.

For ethnic conflict, the biggest question for research remains *Why does ethnicity increase in salience when political order decays or is threatened?* As we know, in countries of stable governance, ethnic identity may be present and even a source of joy and pride for individuals. Feelings of attachment to some community larger than oneself can be a positive feature of the human experience (Smith & Silva, 2011). The goal is not to homogenize all individuals into some indistinguishable mass. But under stable governance, ethnicity is typically only one of many possible identities. Before the breakup of Yugoslavia, we now know, individuals identified in a variety of ways—often simultaneously—as Europeans, socialists, Yugoslavs, and yes, Muslims, Croats, and Serbs. 'Cosmopolitanism' was growing, by which was meant narrow identities might persist but they were increasingly supplemented by 'larger' identifies that did not all align in the same way (Woodward, 1995). Yet, as soon as the conflict is Bosnia ignited, people quickly retreated into their prior ethnic groupings. The same appears to be happening today in Europe as a result of the Great Recession and fiscal meltdown in the southern European countries (Sambanis, 2012). Europeans are once again becoming Germans and Greeks—and calling one another vicious and sometimes insulting names (Adler-Nissen, 2015). When the going gets tough, why does ethnicity seem to trump other possible identities?

Primordialism is rejected by most scholars today, even if it persists as an idea among extremists themselves. Nearly all analysts now treat ethnicity as a social construct (see Chandra, 2012). What it means to be a 'Yugoslav' or a 'Serb' is the product of many individual beliefs and associated social interactions, and is contingent on the environment in which these identities are assessed. Even though an individual might identify as a Yugoslav, if others treat her as a Croat she is indeed, within that society at least, a Croat. One's identity is not fully under one's control. Alternatively, if in Nigeria a person identifies as an Ibo, as an expatriate living in London, he might well identify with and associate with Nigerians of all backgrounds as a Nigerian. Because identities are social, and require changing many minds at the same time, such 'facts' are sticky, sometimes even static. Yet, identities change and, especially, rise and decline in salience. Given that ethnic identities

are at least somewhat fluid, why are they nonetheless so robust in so many societies? More important, when extremists threaten social order, why do ethnic identities resurface so quickly and become so salient in politics despite their malleability?

To address this question will require a turn to individual-level theories and data. Somewhat paradoxically, to understand ethnic conflict may mean not actually studying conflict itself, but rather examining how and why people identify with whom when—and how much freedom of choice in their identities they perceive themselves as having under what circumstances. One way to approach this question is through social psychology and, likely, laboratory experiments. Individuals vary in their moral beliefs (Haidt, 2012). Although everyone appears to have some basic trait of empathy towards others (Churchland, 2011), who warrants care and who does not varies considerably.[9] The salience of in-group and out-group distinctions differs quite dramatically across individuals (Haidt, 2012), as does a willingness to trust others within and outside of one's self-defined group (Criado, Gerreros, Miller, & Ubeda, 2015). Most of what we know about such individual traits comes from experiments on college students in the United States, although ultimatum or trust games have now been played around the world (Henrich et al., 2004). We have very little insight as to whether social psychological traits differ systematically across cultures and societies, and before, during, or after conflict (Gilligan, Pasquale, & Sami, 2013). If identity matters, we need to understand how people draw associations between themselves and others and, importantly, how relationships might be framed differently to minimize group animosities. This promises to take the study of ethnicity and ethnic conflict in new and, I think, productive directions.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes

1. Eck (2009). On ethnic alliances, see Christia (2012) and Ash (2016).
2. See Regan (2002). On bias in mediation and its effects, see Kydd (2003).
3. For one application of chaos theory to ethnic conflict, see Davies (2004). On complexity and politics more generally, see Jervis (1997).
4. On differences in what are now seen as ethnic and non-ethnic civil wars, see Sambanis (2001). For a new integrated data set, see Vogt et al. (2015).
5. On terrorism and civil wars, see Sambanis (2008) and Fortna (2015).
6. On the decision to compete in the legitimate arena or use violence, see Chenoweth and Lawrence (2010) and Cunningham (2013).
7. On how groups with particular characteristics select into different terrains, see Scott (2009).
8. For experimental and quasi-experimental studies that focus mostly on post-conflict stability, see Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein (2009), Gilligan and Sergenti (2008), and Gilligan et al. (2013).
9. Adam Smith was devoted to this problem before tacking political economy (see Forman-Barzilai, 2010).

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