The Symbolic Politics Theory of Ethnic War

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KATHERINE GREEN, MAR 13 2012

Since the end of the Cold War ethnic conflicts have become the most prevalent type of violent conflict, both in occurrence and, consequently, in the dialogue between political theorists. Scholars that investigate the "new" civil war that emanates from ethnic dissimilation have engaged in a debate that seeks to explain the cause of this phenomenon. The divided camps within this debate are rationalist choice theory and symbolic politics theory. The latter of the two opposing schools of thought derives from social psychology. It occupies a constructivist stream of conscience that justly alleges that intangible variables—narratives, identities, and primal emotions—facilitate the hostile environment amongst competing ethnic groups. On the other hand, rationalist choice theory argues that ethnic conflict exists when International Relations theory—the security dilemma—enters the state level when domestic politics fails to legitimately distribute the commitment of security to minority groups.

Symbolic politics theory is the more accurate account of ethnic conflict as this model, unlike the limited rationalist theory, attributes the outbreak of extreme violence to both elite politics *and* the socialization of competing identities. Symbolic theory's assumption, which builds on psychological human motivations over pure rational calculation, prevails across three core concerns within the study of ethnic conflict. Firstly, rationalist theory fails to identify the origin of why contending political parties are organized and defined along hardline ethnic cleavages. It is the psychological nature of human beings to organize into groups based on a constructed perception of their communal identity, which resounds around a common plight and narrative that must be championed against adversaries. Secondly, symbolic politics theory explains the motivations of elite political actors who enact popular policy that seeks more than the outcome of survival; therefore it provides cause for ethnic policy that seeks predatory ends—genocidal and irredentist campaigns—not merely as avenues to reconcile insecurity, but as avenues to exercise mass hatreds. Thirdly, the validity of symbolic theorists' prescription of ethnic conflict promotes a much greater substantive resolve that targets both the state and individual level, where dissimilation originated; whereas rational theory misguidedly limits accountability to elite politics. Overall it is through the symbolist's lens that ethnic politics can be appropriately understood. The goals and obligations, the distribution of goods and services, of a body politic that is engaged with ethnic conflict are perverted first and foremost by the protracted survival narrative based on group myth and the relentless motivation to deny "them" their humanity.

Symbolic politics offers a complete model of ethnic conflict as it provides substantive reasoning of dissimilation and how it translates into identity specific political representation. Polarization is the predisposition for large-scale violence; however polarization is not a rapidly occurring phenomenon, as claimed by rational choice scholar James Fearon.[1] Ethnic linkages have already formed and ripened group notions of adversarial identities long before elite politics defined the cleavage. Rational choice theory stipulates the contrary that ethnic opinion is a rapid schism appearing at the onset failed domestic politics to provide a credible guarantee of one group's security, otherwise known as Fearon's commitment problem.[2] Therefore the two theories differ at the point in which symbolic theory claims identities and hostility existed before politics, meanwhile rational choice claims politics manifested hostile identities. The study of ethnic conflict must venture beyond the limited sphere of IR theory and attempt to investigate the domain of group comparisons prior to political breakdown. Stuart Kaufmann and Donald Horowitz, two theorists of the social-psychological school, advocate the undeniable role that adversarial group myths play in the spectacle of ethnic conflict.[3] Horowitz stipulates that two groups that are placed in the same environment have a natural tendency to cleave and compare as no two groups are seen to possess the same behavioural qualities.[4] Furthermore, Horowitz traces the historical roots of these group narratives back to colonial rule when foreign

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occupiers facilitated the division of juxtaposing group qualities and labels.[5] As Horowitz states "the colonists thus set in motion a comparative process by which aptitudes and disabilities imputed to ethnic groups were to be evaluated."[6] These labels have matured into counterpoised stereotypes and myths that now are recognized as part of a universal "us" versus "them" experience. Emotional attachment to the symbolic politics' group myth variable is by necessity a source of conflict to ensure one's survival and bring to execution the demise of the other. Rational theory's narrow attribution of polarization to a commitment problem thus fails to explain why in fact extremist political parties and subsequent policies are defined by *preexisting* ethnic identities rather than ideology.

To engage the concept of group comparison, the investigation of the Rwandan ethnic conflict case study effectively demonstrates the significance of identity narratives postulated by symbolic politics theory. The outbreak of ethnic violence was not an outcome of a weaker group's uncertainty of their guaranteed political status and physical security. Rationalist theory cannot be applied to one of the most notable cases of ethnic violence because it lacks the explanation of why ethnic cleavages are so prominent. When Rwanda was under colonial occupation the Tutsi minority was favoured as a higher caliber group thus solidifying cleavages between a privileged Tutsi minority and a power-disabled Hutu majority.[7] As power dynamics shifted, over thirty years prior to the outbreak of ethnic warfare, polarization was irrevocably settled on the basis of symbolist theory's hypothesis of hostile mass attitudes.[8] This ethnic war, similar to Sudan, was one of cultural discourse in which incompatible values facilitated two opposing visions of a country that left it resilient to diplomatic peace bargaining.[9] Ethnic war in Rwanda was in fact an inevitable certainty far from the IR model of a rational calculated defection based on uncertainty.

Having determined that it is from the mobilization of these group myths that hatreds are manifested into elite political organizations and policy, the study of ethnic conflict must then focus on which theory can explain the outbreak of violence. Symbolic politics not only promotes the necessity of group myth, but also the chauvinist politics that eventually epitomize the existing adversarial group comparisons. As previously alluded to, Fearon's commitment problem asserts that the outbreak of ethnic conflict is an outcome of a feared uncertainty that group "B" will lose access to a guaranteed security and status; hence, it is the rational calculation for group "B" to defect on the commitment of peace with group "A" in order to reconcile uncertainty and secure benefits such as political status, economic rights and physical security.[10] The assumption is that competing ethnic groups recognize war to be costly and unnecessary, but information failures and credible commitment failures are cause for a suboptimal outcome to be viable.[11] The problematic approach with adopting IR logic within the state level is that several cases of ethnic violence were outcomes of the dominant group as the aggressor when no immediate threat existed. Group "A" engages in violence to seek ends that are beyond that of safeguarding their security. Violence is an avenue to exercise mass hatreds and hostilities in a campaign to bring a demise to group "B".[12] What Kaufman labels as chauvinist politics is in practice a method of predatory politics created from oppourtunistic elites who capitalize on the preexisting invidious ethnic dynamic of a state. The ethnic conflicts that include massacres, irredentist campaigns, and genocides are normative outcomes of the symbolic theory's assumption that predatory politics offer a pressure valve for the ripened emotional reserves an ethnic group.

To further outline the strength of the symbolic politics theory as an understanding of political motivation to invite the outbreak of violence, it is imperative to study two ethnic genocides—the Rwandan genocide and the Srebrenica genocide. Rationalist politics is incapable of accurately serving the question of "what motivates political actors in ethnic conflicts?" because it does not bridge the gap between the assumption of pragmatic calculations and the reality of the extremity of violence. The act of genocide, such as the 1994 massacre of half a million Rwandan Tutsi's and the 1995 massacre of 8,000 Bosniaks in Srebrenica, is a plausible outcome of several ethnic conflicts because in the hostile environment of ethnic dissimilation menacing possibilities of ethnic brutality cannot be constrained by rationality.[13] The Srebrenica genocide of Muslim Bosnians by Serbian militia proves that the mentality of the Serbs was not consistent with the aim of achieving their own security, but with aggressive innate nature serving as emotional pressure valve. The Croats treatment of the Serbian population was executed with brutality and the hatred from the violation of the Serbian group narrative manifested itself through the Serbians carrying out their own ruthless ethnic cleansing of a Bosnian Muslim population that was isolated and vulnerable.[14] Kaufman's chauvinist politics demonstrates why oppourtunistic elite politics play the ethnic card so effectively. It provides the respective group with predatory leadership that enables decades worth of conceptualized group myth to finally be championed. On the other hand, however, it is crucial to recognize genocidal variants as exceptional cases and scholars must also pay

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tribute to the fact that most ethnic conflicts engage in violence as an act not of hate, but of fear—fear being the primal emotion in a survival narrative of a group myth, Serbian victimization, and not the fear stemming only from uncertainty of credible commitment failures. As Kaufman quotes "the emotion of fear was present; the rationality of fear was not."[15]

The two former critiques of rationalist theory, the mistaken conception of ethnic polarization and a weak justification for political motivations within ethnic conflict, demonstrate that Fearon's argument is incomplete; moreover, as the argument of commitment problem does not identify the correct malfunction of a state afflicted with ethnic conflict then its prescription cannot properly remedy the misunderstood phenomenon. Both Fearon and scholar Stephen Saideman stipulate that third party institutions, international organizations, must be a present actor to both dull ethnic insecurities as well as moderate the elite politics.[16] On the other hand, as symbolic politics offers the more thorough understanding of ethnic conflicts, the resolution of international amelioration of credible guarantees is implausible because it is not curing the root of the conflict, which is an intangible cultural conception. A proposed resolution needs to penetrate society itself, as well as the regime, to dilute symbolic theory's hypothesis of group myth fears that spawn mass hostilities.[17] Throughout these critiques it is not stated that rational theory is the wrong theory, but the incomplete theory, thus it is fair to access validity to their suggested resolution, however, again it is incomplete. Kaufman's prescription of partition reflects too great a pessimistic vision of reconciliation, thus a more moderate symbolist theory prescription is warranted.[18]The symbolist argument suggests third party mediation, nevertheless it must be applied to more than the bargaining dynamics of elite politics and the mediation must attempt a promotion of group reconciliation. Group insecurities and predatory politics are more pertinent than external influences therefore the role of international organizations cannot merely police the conflict.[19] Third party participation must actively pool resources to re-educate the competing ethnic groups, and deactivate learned and deeply embedded conceptions of "us" and "them." The prescription does not encourage abolishing ethnic affiliations that are socially harmless behaviours rooted in individual personalities.[20] As Kuran asserts, ethnic dissimilation can be rectified if the extremist cleavages are barred from being glorified through discriminate government policies.[21] Ultimately the prescription rests in moderated politics as well as newly directed group narratives that will not converge but will coexist.

The existence of the group myth is at once the prevalent cause of ethnic conflict and simultaneously contains the seed for resolution of the conflict. The assumption of group myth validates the known fears, the survival insecurities and the elite predatory politics that facilitate the extreme violence. Rational choice theory, which rests its hypothesis of credible commitment solely on pure uncertainty, cannot account for the preexisting ethnic polarization that chauvinist politics is conducted through. In the provided case of Rwanda it is clear that at one point in time both ethnic groups' prioritized policies of aggression and dominance, which was void of uncertainty and void of a survival campaign, in order to offer a pressure valve for fixed hatreds. At the centre of symbolic politics theory is the social phenomenon of 'us' versus 'them' and hence the centre will not hold. Symbolic politics theory correctly posits that socially constructed hostile ethnic affiliations are at the root of the ethnic conflict and will remain as a bulwark of violence, incapable of offering resolution, until pervasive mediation cures groups of "us" versus 'them" mentality.

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[1] James Fearon, "Commitment Problems and the Spread of Ethnic Conflict" in *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict,* ed. David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 116.

[2] Ibid., 116.

[3] t Stuart J. Kaufman, "Symbolic Politics or Rational Choice? Testing Theories of Extreme Ethnic Violence," International Security, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Spring 2006), 48.

[4] Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict.* (California: University of California Press, 1985),143.

[5] Ibid., 160.

[6] Ibid., 164.

[7] Kaufman, *Symbolic Politics or Rational Choice?,* 69.

[8] Ibid., 82.

[9] Ibid., 82.

[10] Fearon*,* "Commitment Problems," 116.

[11] Ibid., 117.

[12] Kaufman, *Symbolic Politics or Rational Choice?* 83.

[13] Donald Rothchild and David A. Lake, "Containing Fear," in *International Spread of Ethnic Conflict* ed. David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 204.

[14] Ibid., 105.

[15] Kaufman, *Symbolic Politics or Rational Choice?* 83.

[16] Stephen Saideman, "Is Pandora's Box Half-Empty or Half-Full? The Limited Virulence of Secession and the Domestic Sources of Disintegration," in *International Spread of Ethnic Conflict* ed. David A Lake and Donald Rothchild (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 149.

[17] Kaufman, *Symbolic Politics or Rational Choice?* 47.

[18] Ibid., 85.

[19] Saideman, "Is Pandora's Box Half-Empty of Half-Full?" 150.

[20] Timur Kuran, "Ethnic Dissimilation and Its International Diffusion," in *International Spread of Ethnic Conflict* ed. David A Lake and Donald Rothchild (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 59.

[21] Ibid., 59.

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Written by: Katherine Green
Written at: McGill University
Written for: Stephen Saideman
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