Is Ethnic Conflict Rational

Introduction

There are many explanations for the causes of ethnic conflict; they range from rational to non-rational. They inhabit four main theories: rational-choice theory, constructivism/interpretivism, structuralism and essentialism/primordialism. In addition there are also many types of rationality. This essay argues that ethnic conflict can be best explained using a combination of rational-choice theory and interpretivism as displayed in Bates, de Figueiredo and Weingast (1998). The essay uses this approach because it argues that ethnicity is constructed and therefore subjective, as a result ethnic conflict must be viewed in the same light. Rationality is also subjective as described by Weber (1978) and his four ideal types of rationality. The approach this essay champions is supported by the theories of elites gambling for resurrection, as seen in Fearon and Laitin (2000), which then escalates into a security dilemma, argued by Posen (1993). It criticises Kaufman's (2006) symbolic politics theory and Oberschall's (2000) cognitive frames as irrational and primordial. This argument is supported throughout with examples from Yugoslavia and Rwanda, to show that the theories used can be generalised across cultures. The essay is divided into four sections. The first section looks at definitions of ethnicity, ethnic conflict and rationality. The second explores rational-choice theory and interpretivism. The third section analyses irrational theories and critiques them. The fourth section analyses rational explanations and concludes that ethnic conflict is rational when looked at through the lens of an amalgamation of rational-choice theory and interpretivism.

Definitions: Ethnicity, Ethnic Conflict, Rationality:

Before starting an analysis of non-rational explanations of ethnic conflict we must first define what is meant by ethnicity and ethnic conflict. Horowitz (1985-17-18, as cited in Sambanis, 2001:261) states that 'ethnic groups are defined by ascriptive differences, whether the indicum is colour, appearance, language, religion, some other indicator of origin, or some combination thereof.' However, Fearon and Laitin (2000:847) argue that 'ethnicity is socially constructed'. Therefore, ethnicity is a product of human action and speech over time meaning that they do not remain constant. The first definition can be regarded as 'everyday primordialism' (2000:848), and the second a constructivist view. The same problem appears when trying to define ethnic conflict. For purposes of clarity this essay uses the definition given by Sambanis (2001:261) in that 'ethnic war is war among communities (ethnicities) that are in conflict over the power relationship that exists between those communities and the state'. The problem of using one theory to explain all ethnic conflict, however, is that what works for one war may not explain all wars, therefore ethnic conflict must not be put into a signal category which 'implicitly suggests that there are no differences' (Sambanis, 2001:265). Therefore this essay uses a combination of social construction by elites and the security dilemma to define ethnic conflict as rational.

After defining ethnicity and ethnic conflict, we must define "rationality". Weber (1978) cited four types: instrumental-rationality, value-rationality, norm-oriented rationality, and affective or impulsive rationality. The standard use of the term is economic- instrumental rationality which has two meanings, first: consistency of choice, and second: action is rational if it is aimed at realising self-interest. The later is cost-benefit analysis. Instrumental rationality is typically related to rational choice theory. However, most scholars who use rational-choice theory remain sceptical of the view that individual action can be rooted in group interests, and not purely self-interest. 'Value-rational behaviour would not find identification with group interest irrational' (Varshney, 2003:87). Because of Weber's (1979) distinction and

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Varshney's (2003) qualification, this essay will use the concepts of instrumental-rationality and value-rationality to class explanations of ethnic conflict as rational. Therefore, this essay is not limiting rational explanations to "rational choice theory", but it also considers the approaches used in constructivism and structuralism. (Kaufmann, 2005)

Combination of Rational-Choice theory and Interpretivism:

Rational-choice theory is normally applied to the developed world and little effort was made to apply it in areas such as ethnic conflict before the 1980s and 1990s. 'As identity politics inflicts costs that appear to outweigh any reasonable estimate of the gains, the politics of culture appears to challenge the premise of rationality. Scholars such as Weiner and Huntington, at least, therefore see reason for rejecting "political economy"- including, presumably rational-choice theory- and call for a return to approaches more attuned to the significance of non-instrumental forms of behaviour' (Bates et al, 1998:604). This is because as Przeworski (1991, as cited in Bates et al, 1998) rightly states, moments of transition constitute moments of maximal uncertainty, thus people may "not know" where their interests lie, therefore defying rational forms of analysis. As a result, rational-choice theory has to contend with significant limitations when applied to the study of ethnic conflict, as it concerns unstable politics. However, when combined with interpretivism this approach overcomes many of its limitations. This is because interpretivists succeed where rational-choice theory fails. 'By focusing on the role of culture and the creation of political communities, they address the kinds of issues that pose challenges to rational-choice analysis' (Bates el al, 1998:605). They stress the power of rhetoric, gesture and metaphor. Thus, viewing politics as a kind of theatre in which bonds are forged, expectations formed, and direction given by expressive acts. Game theory is used as 'the hallmark of rational choice theory' (de Figueiredo and Weingast 1997:1). Game theorists often ignore the fact that they need a "cultural" knowledge: knowledge of individual's values, expectations of actions and reactions and how these have been shaped over history, to complete their explanation. As a result, Ferejohn argues that 'rational choice theory is, in a sense, an interpretive theory that constructs explanations by "reconstructing" patterns of meanings and understands (preferences and beliefs) in such a way that agents' actions can be seen as maximal given their beliefs' (1990, as cited in Bates et al, 1998:628). Therefore, when game-theory and interpretivism are combined they are extremely complementary. 'Interpretivist accounts illuminate the power of ideas, the influence of history, the significance of intellectuals, and the persuasive power of political rhetoric and dramaturgy. Rational choice analysis helps to explain the mechanisms that account for the impact of these political forces' (Bates et al., 1998:635).

Non-rational Explanations:

Kaufman's (2006) "Symbolic Politics" argues that the causes of ethnic violence are 'group myths that justify hostility, fears of group extinction, and a symbolic politics of chauvinist mobilisation' (2006:47). Myths produce emotion-laden symbols and make extremist policies popular. There are three dynamics of symbolic politics leading to war: one, mass hostility; two, chauvinist political mobilisation; and three, a security dilemma. These interact to create a spiral of escalation if the preconditions are present. Kaufman (2006) argues that ethnic conflict was driven by hostile mythologies in Rwanda: Hutus see the Tutsis as alien invaders and the Tutsis see the RPF as liberators from Hutu tyranny. Fears of physical extermination were prevalent on both sides, and hostile attitudes are supported. The hard-line elites' goal of Hutu domination was unambiguous and highly popular. Hatred of the Tutsis was described as a "lifestyle". Symbolic appeals by elites are also present the pervasive racist appeals in the media by Hutu extremists is widely known. The advantage of symbolic politics theory is that it explains why politicians put so much effort into symbolic appeals and why manipulators gain support from those whose tangible interests are harmed by their policies (Kaufman, 2006). This essay views Kaufman's (2006) theory as a combination of Weber's (1978) third and fourth types of rationality, norm-oriented and affective or impulsive rationality as these are traditional myths and violence is driven by emotional responses. Therefore, it falls into the category of primordialism, as Kaufman argues that ethnic conflict between the Tutsis and the Hutus was the result of fixed ethnic identities and "hostile attitudes". However, what it fails to account is that these conflicts 'are not created by rhetoric alone but by a specific type of interaction between the rhetoric and actual events' (Bates et al, 1998:632). This is where the advantages of using a combination of rational-choice theory and interpretivism come to light. The fact that interpretivism can explain why Hutus and Tutsis believed the "myths", and then by using game theory in conjunction, we can see how their actions were rational, under an analysis of the costs and benefits.

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The statement made by the essay that Kaufman's symbolic politics is a primordial theory is supported by Grigorian (Grigorian and Kaufman, 2007). He critiques Kaufman's (2006) theory, arguing that it is essentially a re-worked articulation of the belief that ethnic conflicts are the result of irrational hatred entrenched in culture or "incompatible values". He states three errors in Kaufman's (2006) vision:

'…first, his empirical test is not appropriately designed to demonstrate what the symbolic politics theory implies. Second, Kaufman fails to report evidence that could potentially disconfirm his theory. Third, he misinterprets some evidence by arbitrarily redefining concepts as consistent with and related to his theory when they are not' (2007:181).

Grigorian (2007) moots that the successful discovery of these myths at best demonstrates the existence of them, and not the causality. It is possible that causality may run in the opposite direction. The accompaniment of rallies may in fact be a tool used by elites in order to manipulate the masses. Furthermore, Kaufman's (2006) symbolic politics theory is about the causes of ethnic disputes, yet he does not prove that in the absence of hateful mythologies the conflict would not have erupted. Moreover, Kaufman's (2006) theory is ontologically inconsistent. He states that myth-symbolic complexes and also competition for territory and status cause conflict. Therefore arguing the irrationality of myths and the rationality of competition and status. Kaufman's (2006) theory is essentially flawed, on three levels; in his effort to prove that ethnic conflict is irrational he leaves out certain evidence that would verify ethnic conflict to be rational.

Oberschall's (2000) with his "Cognitive Frames" theory- using the Prijedor district in Northwest Bosnia in 1992 as his case study- also argues that ethnic conflict is irrational. Oberschall's (2000) cognitive frame is modelled on Goffman's (1974:21) "frame", which is a 'schemata of interpretation' situating and connecting events, people and groups into meaningful narratives. 'By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective' (Snow et al. 1986:464). Oberschall (2000) draws on elements of the premordialist and constructionist views on ethnic violence originating in fear and insecurity. He states that the Yugoslavs experienced ethnic relations through two frames: a normal frame and a crisis frame. For example, in crisis and war the normal frame is suppressed. The crisis frame was built around experiences and memories of the Balkan wars. He argues that nationalists 'did not invent the crisis frame; they activated and amplified it' (2000:989). The crisis frame includes collective guilt, revenge and retaliation, deterrence/ first strike, danger/survival, and legitimacy. This is also located in Weber's (1978) third and fourth types of rationality, norm-oriented and impulsive, as it too relies on tradition and emotion to mobilise the masses.

Oberschall (2000) argues that, in Yugoslavia, in the last days of communism national activists activated the "crisis frame" by playing on fears of ethnic annihilation in the mass media. This made for ethnic polarisation and allowed nationalists to be elected. Once in office they purged moderates and organised militias. War was conducted in accordance with the crisis script. He states that, 'without the tacit, overt or confused support of the majority, the nationalist leaders could not have escalated ethnic rivalry and conflict into massive collective violence' (2000:998-999). However, the premordialist approach that Oberschall (2000) draws on is criticised by Kaufmann (2005) and by Fearon and Latin, as 'it tends to treat ethnic discourses as unchanging essences that strongly determine individuals' actions' (2000:846). Furthermore, Obershall (2000) does not explain how elites managed to activate these crisis frames, and persuade the Serbs and Croats to engage in ethnic violence. As Bates el al. (1998:631) states, 'the rhetorical persuasiveness or emotional appeal of a particular leader is not sufficient to explain why individuals accept that leader's interpretations'. Obershall (2000) does not sufficiently explain why Serbs abandoned their "normal frame" and replaced it with the "crisis frame". By using a combination of interpretivism and rational-choice this problem is overcome. Interpretivism explains the context of the crisis frame and rational-choice theory explains why the normal frame was abandoned. For example, the costs would have been too great to not adopt a crisis frame if the other were intent on violence.

It is this paper's finding that Kaufman's (2006) symbolic politics theory and Oberschall's (2000) cognitive frames theory are essentially flawed. Kaufman does not show there is a causal link between the myths he identies and ethnic conflict. He also states that competition for resources contributes to the inception ethnic conflict, a rational explanation, therefore discrediting his own argument that ethnic conflict is irrational. Oberschall (2000) fails to articulate how his crisis frame is activated by elites. These arguments show that theories explaining ethnic conflict as

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irrational are limited.

Rational Explanations:

Fearon and Laitin (2000) use the constructivist approach to discredit the Primordial approach used by Kaufman (2006) and Oberschall (2000). They analyse both rational –individual/elites- and non-rational- culture- approaches to ethnic conflict, and discredit cultural explanations as they contain forms of static identity. They argue that identity constructions are linked to ethnic violence, and that 'constructivist explanations for ethnic violence tend to merge with rationalist, strategic analyses, particularly those that emphasize elite manipulation of mass publics' (2000:846). They find considerable evidence 'linking strategic aspects of the construction of ethnic identities to violence, and more limited evidence implicating specific cultural or discursive systems' (2000:846). The most common narrative is that large-scale ethnic violence is provoked by elites seeking to gain, maintain or increase their hold on political power. Elite manipulation is interpreted as instrumental rationality under Weber's (1979) classification, as a form of concealed self-interest.

Fearon and Laitin (2000) state that violence has the effect, intended by elites, of constructing identities in more rigid ways. These new identities increase the support for elites who provoke violence while favouring the continuation or escalation of violence in order to strengthen their hold of power. They give five rational explanations as to how leaders create these identities. First, they use notions of the "Other" (Hall, 1997, de Figeiredo and Weingast, 1997), because the masses are willing to support extreme ends when they fear for their lives and families, as the costs of not doing so outweigh the benefits. Second, the stream of asymmetric information in the media allows leaders to influence their (rational) followers' beliefs. Third, leaders use "securitisation" (Emmers, 2010) tactics to legitimise a coup d'état or to try to hold on to diminishing power. De Figeiredo and Weingast (1997:2) call this 'gambling for resurrection'. This is seen in the example the former Yugoslavia. 'Milosevic's days in power were numbered, so he had to seek an alternative dimension of politics that holds the promise of breaking apart the coalition' (Bates el al, 1998:621) and the issue of ethnic warfare managed this very well. Fourth, is what Woodward (1995) calls "psychological warfare", people are so blinded by elites that it determines how they draw conclusions from data on ethnic relations. Fifth, Brass (1997, and Mueller, 2000) suggests that the mass public caught up in the communal violence were actually pursuing their own, self-interested, hence rational, agendas that may have had little to do with communal aversions per se. In addition, when politicians inferred ethnic frames from these local disputes they merely gave people the licence to pursue their own agendas under the banner of communal conflict. As Mueller (2000:42) also argues, with reference to Yugoslavia, that conflict was the result of 'small bands of opportunistic marauders recruited by political leader and operating under their general guidance'. Evidence of the lack of nationalism is seen in Serbs' and Croats' voting patterns. Less than a quarter voted for their nationalist party at the time. This is the result of individual strategic action, instrumental rationality. This essay argues that these five explanations can account for the breakout of ethnic conflict and that they all fall into the rational-choice approach when put in context via interpretativism.

Furthermore, the theory of elite manipulation as rational is also supported by Jonsson (2007:30). In her interviews of villagers from the eastern part of the Northern Region of Ghana, she finds that 'despite the correspondence of the views of villagers and ethnic leaders on what issues had caused the [1980-2002] conflicts… educated elites were seen by almost all the interviewees as having contributed to them'. Varshney (2002), in her analysis of Hindus and Muslims in India, also states that leaders construct conflict narratives in which rumours and minor incidents between members of opposing groups are re-interpreted in the language of group animosity and used in rallies to incite violence. This shows how the theory of elite manipulation can be generalised to other areas and time periods of ethnic conflict strengthening it. Furthermore Skalnik (1987) shows how these constructed dichotomies are then hardened by conflict and give way to widespread fear and rhetoric of pre-emptive self-defence, minimising the space for moderates to operate, as seen in Yugoslavia, when after Milosevic changed his politics to that of ethnofication his opposition, the reformist, had almost no chance, as it was more costly to not support Milosevic, just in case the Croatians were about to attack the Serbs. This lends support to the theory that ethnic conflict is caused by elite manipulation, which leads to a security dilemma, explained successfully as rational using the cost-benefit analysis.

Posen (1993:27) also argues that ethnic conflict is rational, using the "security dilemma" and the structural approach.

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He uses the example of Yugoslavia, arguing the opposite to Kaufman (2006) and Oberschall (2000), stating that 'age-old antipathies' do not account for the violence, as it 'fails to explain the considerable variance in observable intergroup relations'. Instead he applies the realist concept of the "security dilemma" to explain ethnic conflict in this region. This describes the situation when neighbouring groups suddenly find themselves newly responsible for their own security, in the emergence of "anarchy". This development makes the security of one's own group paramount. However, as relative power is difficult to measure objectively it must be done subjectively, and this often seems offensive to neighbouring groups. This then creates a 'spiral dynamic' (Jervis, 1976): the neighbour will then seek to strengthen its own defence and so on and so forth. Viewed through this lens, Posen (1993) states that the disintegration of Yugoslavia was highly influenced by re-emerging identities of each other as threats, competition for resources, wealth and military, and bands of "fanatics". During the past 200 years the Serbs have regularly tried to establish an ever larger centralised Serbian national state. Ergo Croats had ample reason to fear the Serbs. However, from the Serbian standpoint Serbs in Croatia were unprotected and expected to become more insecure. 'Each side not only had to assess the other's capabilities, but also intentions, and there were plenty of signals of malign intent' (1993:37). The main points to take from Posen (1993), is that by using the security dilemma and broader realist international relations theory ethnic conflict can be explained as motivated by self-interest and therefore rational.

In addition, Lake and Rothchild (1996) argue within the realist camp that misrepresentation of information contributes to security dilemmas. They argue that it is this information failure that means groups cannot acquire necessary information to bridge the bargaining gap between themselves, making conflict possible. They also add the problem of credible commitment; when a group cannot commit to maintaining mutually beneficial agreements the risk of conflict increases. This may be because exploitation can be highly costly therefore groups would rather deal with the high costs of war than be exploited. Therefore, the "security dilemma" rests upon "information failures" and the problem of "credible commitment", the inability to know the intentions of your neighbour and the ability, in spite of this, not to arm yourself against him. This is what drives the logic of the other, leading to the spiral dynamic and ultimately ethnic conflict.

de Figueiredo and Weingast (1997) criticise the security dilemma theory stating that the spiral dynamic needed for the situation to lead to conflict only occurs occasionally, for example, even in states where violence has occurred, the security dilemma has been present all along but violence has remained episodic, constrained to narrow time periods. They explain the commencement of the security dilemma as being triggered by elite fears of loss of power and uncertainty about the true intentions of the propagators of violence. Sambanis (2001), on the other hand, found in his analysis of ethnic and non-ethnic wars that there was no evidence for the "security dilemma" theory, and the end of the Cold War did not act as a determinant for the conflict in Yugoslavia. He argues that theories of political development and neo-liberalism with its emphasis on the role of political institutions are more applicable as an explanation of the onset of ethnic war. He found that ethnic conflict is chiefly caused by political grievance and therefore unlikely to occur in politically free states. This gives weight to the argument of manipulation of the public by elites. Therefore, 'regional democracy exerts a moderating influence on the probability of ethnic war, whereas it appears to encourage ideological rebellion in the neighbourhood' (2001:280).

Kaufman (2006), however, states that rationalist explanations do not fare well, with the security dilemma model failing entirely in his testing. In the case of Rwanda, information failures between groups played a small role and the predatory aims of the Rwandan Hutu elites were clear-cut. As a result, they made little effort to negotiate a bargain with their adversaries. He found that both the predatory elites and mass fear models are supported; compatible with the symbolist, irrational account. In the case of Rwanda his argues, '[t]he emotion of fear was present; the rationality of fear was not' (2006:84). However, Kaufman does concede that rationalists are correct to point to the importance of leader self-interest as motivation. In both Sudan and Rwanda, the timing of the violence was largely driven by economic downturns that discredited regimes that had promised but failed to deliver economic development' (2006: 84-85). This lends support to the theory of politicians "gambling for resurrection" (de Figueiredo and Weingast, 1997). Therefore, even Kaufman who argues that ethnic conflict is non-rational concedes that elite self-interest plays a large role, ergo, ethnic conflict is rational.

Conclusion:

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Ethnic conflict can be explained as rational using a combination of rational-choice theory and interpretivism. The limits of rational-choice theory are unfettered by interpretivism which locates the meaning of ethnic conflict within the context of the politics of culture and transition. When ethnic conflict is seen through the lens of interpretivism, game theory can be applied resulting in cost-benefit analysis seeing ethnic conflict as rational. Specifically ethnic conflict can be explained by elites gambling for resurrection which snowballs into a security dilemma. In this light, non-rational explanations such as Kaufman's (2006) symbolic politics theory and Oberschall's (2000) cognitive frames are rejected as primodial, with serious methodological flaws.

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