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978-0-521-71920-9 - The Foundations of Ethnic Politics: Separatism of States and Nations in Eurasia and the World

Henry E. Hale

Excerpt

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I

Introduction

Next to almost every “ethnic hotspot” is another “ethnic spot” that remains conspicuously cool. While Ukrainians and the Baltic republics mobilized in 1991 for independence from the USSR, the Central Asian republics remained bastions of unionism. When Hindu–Muslim riots exploded in the Indian state of Gujarat in 2002, intercommunal peace was the norm in next-door Maharashtra. As Nigeria’s Igbo and Hausa-Fulani regions became embroiled in the 1967–70 Biafran civil war, the adjacent Yoruba territory remained relatively calm. And in the international arena, Norway stubbornly kept its distance from the European Union as its neighbor Sweden joined the integrative project in 1995. Even within the hotspots themselves, the heat is not uniform. Some Iraqi villages descend into interconfessional strife while others are more successful at escaping it, and some individuals in Chechnya back independence from Russia while others oppose it. Nor is there consistency over time. The supposedly “age-old enemies” of Yugoslavia, Serbia, and Croatia have been at peace far more often than at war and the same is true with the Hutu and the Tutsi, the groups involved in the tragic Rwandan genocide. Variation such as this constitutes the great puzzle of ethnic politics.

All agree that uncovering the source of such variation is important. The worst ethnic conflicts have killed hundreds of thousands at a time, as has been the case in Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Nigeria in the last half century. Large numbers have also perished in ethnically charged international conflicts, including World War II and the current “war on terror.” Ethnicity is also widely held capable of bringing down states, with the USSR – one of the two great superpowers that structured the whole of international relations for much of the last century – being a particularly prominent victim.¹ Still others see ethnic conflict as a fundamental obstacle to democracy, perhaps the greatest political achievement of

¹ For example, Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

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humankind.² Ethnic politics is also frequently blamed for corruption and a whole host of economic ills, including what two leading economists call “Africa’s growth tragedy.”³

The sharpest disagreement comes over how to explain these puzzles. And this disagreement is fundamental. Some see ethnicity itself as the problem, understanding it as a realm inherently conducive to conflict that cannot be stopped, only contained. Others see ethnicity as entirely epiphenomenal, as a mere “spin” that politicians put on events so as to mask their true motives, usually alleged to be greed or political ambition. Each approach, like the variety of theories that fall between the extremes, contributes certain useful insights. But as will be shown, each also leaves a great deal unexplained.

The present volume seeks to put theories of ethnic politics on firmer theoretical ground by starting at the ground level, developing a theory of identity and ethnicity that is based solidly on research in human psychology. It is striking how few existing works – be they in political science, sociology, history, anthropology, or economics – actually engage the psychological literature, even as some of them make reference to the “psychology” of ethnicity. The few to engage such research have made significant strides, but the following pages will argue that many of them rely too heavily on one particular psychological theory that newer research has partially discredited. The difference is crucial: Where works citing the older psychological theory tend to conclude ethnicity is inherently fraught with conflictual tendencies, the present study contends that “ethnicity” does not produce any behavioral motivation at all, be it conflictual or cooperative. Does this study then agree with those treating ethnicity as entirely epiphenomenal or irrelevant? Not at all. Ethnicity represents a kind of crucial “first step” that people must take before engaging in any sort of action: It is one means of making sense of an impossibly complex social world so that they can then successfully navigate it. Thus, although ethnicity provides no motivation for behavior, it is a powerful determinant of the strategies that people use to pursue the things that do motivate them, including wealth, power, security, self-esteem, status, or, more generally, what are called here “life chances.” This perspective, when properly developed, displays surprising capacity to explain not only why ethnic politics is often associated with the pursuit of material ends, but why it is frequently fraught with emotion and passion. And it does so in a way that facilitates theory building, paving the way for more rapid advances in our understanding of ethnic politics.

At the most general level, then, this volume makes two fundamental claims. First, it contends that theories of ethnic politics must be better grounded, more solidly rooted in an understanding of *what* ethnicity actually is and *why* it is what

² For example, Donald L. Horowitz, “Democracy In Divided Societies,” *Journal of Democracy*, v.4, no.4, October 1993, pp. 18–37; John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), Chapter 16, “Of Nationality as Connected with Representative Government,” <http://www.la.utexas.edu/research/poltheory/mill/repgov/repgov.c16.html>.

³ William Easterly and Ross Levine, “Africa’s Growth Tragedy: Policies and Ethnic Divisions,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, v.112, no.4, November 1997, pp. 1203–50.

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it is. Scholars have certainly made advances without such a theory by simply assuming ethnicity is one thing or other. But the social sciences will surely make more, faster progress by coming to agreement on a sounder set of assumptions.

Second, this volume argues that *ethnicity* is primarily about uncertainty reduction while *ethnic politics* is primarily about interests. Ethnicity is a result of humans' cognitive drive to reduce the uncertainty they face in the world, whereas what people do with their less uncertain worlds depends on their particular interests. The most fundamental human interest, it is argued, is the maximization of life chances, from which flow the instrumental pursuits of wealth, security, and power as well as seemingly irrational desires for status and self-esteem. Explanations of ethnic politics, then, must divorce ethnicity from the realm of motives (desires, preferences, values) at the same time that they introduce it into the realm of strategy, the choice of actions designed to maximize life chances through interaction with the social world. Consistent application of these principles, which might be called a *relational* approach to ethnicity, tends to produce more fecund theory that is better at explaining why ethnic conflict and other patterns of ethnic behavior occur in some instances but not others.

All this is demonstrated through "case comparisons within a case study." This book's most fundamental arguments concern ethnic politics in general; however, it would clearly be impossible to provide a convincing comprehensive test of such a broad theory in a single volume. The utility of the relational approach is thus illustrated by training attention on one particular type of ethnic politics, the case of *national separatism*. National separatism is important because it is widely held to be the culmination of national development, the peak manifestation of nationalism, reflecting a nation's collective desire to establish or protect its own state in the international arena, one that is equal or superior in status to all other states. It has inspired myriad politicians to extol its virtues and authors to expose its vices. Many hold it among the most important driving forces of the last two centuries of human history, motivating revolutions in 1848 and laying international integration efforts low in the twenty-first century.

A note on terminology helps specify what exactly is in focus here. This volume follows Hechter in defining "nationalism" as "collective action designed to render the boundaries of the nation congruent with those of its governance unit." A "nation," in turn, is an ethnic group associated with a particular territory.⁴ "National separatism" is thus a form of nationalism whereby congruence is promoted or defended through one of two means: (1) splitting a smaller territorial governance unit off from a larger one or (2) opposing the integration of one territorial governance unit into a broader one. That is, "national separatism" includes both an ethnic region's secessionism and a nation-state's opposition to joining an international integration project. "Separatism" pure and simple need not involve distinct nations, but for convenience's sake the present volume assumes ethnic

⁴ Michael Hechter, *Containing Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 7–14. A governance unit, as Hechter defines it, is not necessarily an independent country but can also be an autonomous region formally recognized to be within a larger state.

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content when using the shorter terms “secessionism” and “separatism” unless explicitly stated otherwise. The term “ethnic group” requires more discussion and will be defined precisely only in Chapter 3. For now, however, it can be understood to refer simply to any culturally distinct group. All this underpins the following claim: If we can show that a new theory sheds light even on such a thoroughly researched and crucially important “case” as national separatism, we can establish cause for that theory to be considered in other realms of ethnic politics as well.

Because separatism is itself a broad topic, having global scope, it is useful to engage in a set of case comparisons within this study of the case of separatism. That is, this volume focuses in particular on patterns of separatism in a single part of the world so as to make a maximally concrete argument for the usefulness of the theory. This part of the world is “Eurasia,” a term understood here as corresponding to the territory of the former USSR. This region constitutes an excellent source of case comparisons for several reasons. Perhaps most obviously, it is substantively important, covering nearly one-sixth of the world’s land mass, containing thousands of nuclear warheads, and boasting some of the world’s largest hydrocarbon reserves. And indeed it was here that national separatism is said by many leading scholars to have had its historically greatest impact, bringing down the seemingly invincible superpower that was the Soviet Union. Given how extensively this topic has been researched, it will be a particularly impressive feat for a theory to generate new insight here.

For the social scientist, however, another feature of Eurasia is even more important: Its range of ethnic groups and its history make it an unusually useful “natural laboratory” in which different causal theories can be ruled out or supported through both interpretive and quantitative comparative analysis. In particular, the USSR by 1991 contained fifty-three ethnically defined regions, more than any other ethnofederation. Since these regions varied significantly and visibly in manifesting separatist attitudes, and since all kinds of data are available on factors potentially related to separatism, it is probably safe to claim that no single country could provide more leverage in weighing competing theories of official regional separatism than could the former USSR. Moreover, it has been possible to visit and conduct research in Eurasia, interviewing key decision makers, surveying public opinion, gathering important documents, reading influential publications, and obtaining the vast array of relevant data that are available. This study seeks to take advantage of these opportunities, employing everything from regression analysis to deep, on-the-ground qualitative interpretation involving original materials in three local languages (Russian, Ukrainian, and some Uzbek) and close to a total of two years spent in Eurasia between 1992 and 2007.

While as many as forty-five of the USSR’s ethnic regions are considered in the statistical analyses and many of these are discussed in the qualitative study, it proves useful to focus in special depth on two ethnic regions that pose a particularly stark puzzle: Ukraine and Uzbekistan. These cases are puzzling because leading experts writing before 1990 had argued the greater challenge to Soviet rule would come from the Uzbeks, not the Ukrainians. Indeed, Uzbeks possessed

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many attributes that existing theory often argues promote secession: They were among the poorest groups in the union, were growing rapidly in population, faced discrimination in other parts of the union, displayed reluctance to move away from their region, and were culturally very distant from Russians due to their Islamic tradition and Turkic tongue. The Ukrainians, on the other hand, spoke a language highly similar to Russian, had more upward mobility in the union, and were among occupied one of the more-developed regions in the country. But by the end of 1991, it was clear that the older predictions had it backwards: Ukraine's secession dealt the death blow to the USSR, while Uzbekistan consistently pushed for the union to be preserved.

At this point it is crucial to note what this book is and is not about. It is not primarily a book about the Soviet Union's demise. Nor is it mainly about Ukraine and Uzbekistan. Instead, it is a book making two larger theoretical points germane to the study of ethnic politics more generally: first, that we need to put theories of ethnic politics on firmer ground; and second, that a starting point can be the proposition that ethnicity is about uncertainty reduction, while ethnic politics is about interests. These are the core elements of the relational theory of ethnicity noted previously. The next two chapters of this book (Chapters 2 and 3) are therefore devoted to making the case for these propositions in general terms, relying on logic and extensive reference to research (especially psychological research) conducted in different parts of the globe. The subsequent chapter (Chapter 4) is also unrestricted geographically, demonstrating how the relational theory of ethnicity can make possible a theory of national separatism that has logical and empirical advantages over existing alternatives. This is the relational theory of separatism. Chapters 2–4 thus constitute Part I of this volume, the part devoted primarily to general theory applicable to multiple areas of the world. The chapters in Part II (Chapters 5–10) weigh various implications of the relational theory of separatism against alternative theories through deep qualitative and quantitative analysis of the Eurasian cases. The conclusion (Chapter 11) returns to the geographically general discussion, considering how the relational theory can help us understand different varieties of ethnic politics (not just separatism) in different parts of the world (not just Eurasia). The case comparisons involving Ukraine and Uzbekistan, therefore, are not meant to document a complete history of either of these republics, and the book does not intend to tell the full story of how the USSR collapsed. Readers interested in such full and complete histories might consult a variety of textbooks and historians' accounts that are now available. The material presented on Ukraine and Uzbekistan here, then, is just that which is needed to clearly establish the relative advantages of the relational theory of separatism in explaining Ukraine's and Uzbekistan's divergent and changing relationships to the union between the time when Gorbachev started liberalizing the USSR and the year 2007.

Despite this firm focus on the larger theory, the larger theory does inform a new and compelling interpretation of a landmark episode in Eurasian history. Thus, there is an important story in this volume. Readers who are interested in this story and less interested in the logic that undergirds it are invited to skim

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or skip Part I (Chapters 2–4), proceeding straight to the empirical discussion of Part II (especially Chapters 5–9). These latter chapters have been written in such a way that they should be comprehensible on their own and interesting for their substantive content as well as their value in testing the relational theory. They are not, however, written chronologically. Instead, they are structured much like an onion is, with each chapter peeling off one layer as a necessary step for advancing to a deeper part of the argument. This structure was chosen to maximize the chapters' value for demonstrating the power of this book's theory while still providing an interpretation of Eurasian separatism that is interesting in its own right.

This new interpretation greatly illuminates the role of ethnicity in Ukraine's secession, the union's collapse, Uzbekistan's struggles to manage autonomy, and the troubled development of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the international organization that formally supplanted the USSR. For one thing, we find that the driving force behind Soviet-era separatism, the motivation behind the separatist activity that was so visible between 1988 and 1991, was not really "ethnic" or "national" at all. Soviet republics sought autonomy not as an expression of national identity but as a way to escape a collective action problem in the union, a fear that the union government would one day use its power to a given republic's detriment rather than to its benefit. In fact, it is argued that the top preference of republic masses (including Ukrainian ones) was consistently for a cooperative *union*, not for national independence. The problem was whether any union was actually likely to *be* cooperative rather than exploitative. At the same time, ethnicity was far from irrelevant: Consciousness of a significant ethnic divide between a republic and the union made republic representatives more likely to see significant dangers of exploitation in the union since it lent a sense of separation from control over events in the union and, at times, called attention to historical precedents for these dangers. Ethnicity thus did not provide a motive for secessionism, but it accentuated the collective action problem that did provide this motive. Ethnicity did not provide the values that people sought through secession, but it did influence what strategies they thought would best give them what they valued. This part of the story starts to emerge in Chapter 5.

Accordingly, the final years of the USSR were not a period of steadily growing separatism, not a period where increasingly nationally conscious groups took greater and greater advantage of Soviet decay to fight for the independence they supposedly sought. Instead, they were a period of give-and-take between the union and republic governments, a time when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev pragmatically shifted strategies multiple times in an effort to convince republic leaders and masses that secessionist strategies were not to their advantage, that a reformed union was not likely to be exploitative. Indeed, we find strong evidence that Gorbachev very nearly succeeded. By launching a qualitatively new approach, an approach whose value is revealed by relational theory, he had successfully turned back the tide, reversing the trend of growing separatism in key republics

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like Ukraine and Uzbekistan. Indeed, because Ukraine's secession more than anything else prompted Russia to give up on the Soviet Union and seal its demise, we can even conjecture that the union most likely would have been saved (with only minimal losses) had an avoidable series of events not taken place in the form of the August 1991 coup attempt, which undermined Gorbachev's new approach. This part of the story is found in Chapter 6.

The theory also reveals how there was at least some potential to have saved the union even after the August putsch. Even though some 90 percent of Ukrainian citizens voted for secession and ratified their national independence in a December 1991 referendum, relational theory helps us see how a majority vote could *also* have supported saving the union had this been proposed to them ("framed") in the right way, a way addressing their ethnically charged strategic concerns – even during the fateful fall of 1991. In short, the union-breaking outcome of Ukrainian secession could have been flipped had republic leaders adopted a different way of framing the choices people had for solving the collective action problem at the heart of the union. All this is shown in Chapter 7.

But the story is not quite so simple as to boil down to leaders' manipulation of voting behavior. The analysis also suggests that the unionist outcome in Uzbekistan could have been reversed as well, that Uzbeks could have been led to support independence as well as integration. This raises the key question of exactly why it was that the Uzbek and Ukrainian leaders adopted different framing strategies. The answer, it is argued, returns us to the second core argument of this volume. If ethnicity is about uncertainty reduction, then ethnic politics is about *interests*. And material interests turn out to be crucial here. Leaders in both Ukraine and Uzbekistan, it is shown, had reason to be responsive to their populations' economic interests in the union. Moreover, their own personal material interests actually coincided with these mass interests in the most general sense. And these mass material interests depended crucially on levels of development: The more-developed Ukraine had less to gain from the union than the less-developed Uzbekistan. Thus, as the dangers of exploitation in the union rose, Ukraine was the first to "abandon ship," with both masses and leaders seeing their own material prospects as better outside the union than inside. Overall, then, ethnicity provided a crucial lens through which people assessed the dangers in the Soviet Union and the credibility of Gorbachev's various promises, influencing the calculations of material interest that played the major role in determining whether a given republic opted out. Chapter 8 makes this argument.

We strikingly find these same forces driving Eurasian states' policies regarding reintegration in the CIS straight through 2007. Those successor states with the least ethnic material distinguishing them from control of the former union (Russia and Belarus) remained the two leading unionists, and the least developed among the other republics (such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) have also showed remarkable consistency in backing more integrationist measures despite some fluctuation. Ukraine, more economically developed than Uzbekistan, has charted a consistently more separatist course despite being led by a reputedly

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“pro-Russian” president for the decade of 1994–2004. This case is made in Chapter 9, which also considers the other new Eurasian states. Chapter 10 confirms the relational theory against its rivals through a rigorous quantitative analysis of patterns in actual republic behavior and public opinion in as many as twelve non-Russian republics in the Gorbachev era.

In terms of the big picture of separatism and the Soviet breakup, perhaps the most striking revelation of this volume’s relational theory is just how contingent the whole process was. There was no inexorable ethnically inspired separatist march, either causing or responding to the weakening of the Soviet state. Ethnic groups were not trapped by their histories, seeking desperately and consistently to get out if they had suffered grievous wrongs in the union in the past. Nor did Soviet institutions doom the state to collapse by leading avaricious elites, under the cover of national slogans, to eat away at it from within. Instead, there were multiple moments where different outcomes were possible. Ukrainian separatism had been rising in 1990 and early 1991, but it had also been halted by mid-1991. The coup undermined Gorbachev’s strategy, but surely this coup could have been averted or carried out differently. Ukrainians voted for independence, but they might also have supported unionist alternatives to the status quo had these alternatives been proposed to them instead. Ukraine’s president framed his compatriots’ options in a secession-inducing way, but his choice may have been entirely different had Ukraine shared Uzbekistan’s lower levels of development. The proper way to understand such contingency is not to write ethnicity off as being irrelevant or epiphenomenal, but to better understand how it accentuates the kind of collective action problems that in fact set this whole process in motion. Indeed, had the USSR involved no significant ethnic distinctions among republics, the union probably still would have been reformed and decentralized, but it probably also would still exist.

In the most general terms, the Eurasian case comparisons within the case study of separatism serve the crucial purpose of demonstrating the power of the broader relational approach to ethnic politics. They show how a theory that is based on sound microlevel theory, on propositions consistent with psychological research on human behavior, can generate a story that makes new and better overall sense of very important manifestations of ethnic politics. We learn more about what ethnicity is and how it is likely to be involved in politics. And we also gain some hope for new understandings of what had previously been seen as intractable conflicts. Indeed, if ethnicity is not primarily a set of inherently conflictual values or motives, then it would seem possible to avoid or minimize ethnically charged conflict. At the same time, we risk making conflicts worse if we base solutions on the notion that ethnicity is irrelevant or epiphenomenal. Instead, ethnicity is relational. Thus, even though solutions to ethnic conflicts must not treat ethnicity as a motive, they should address the reasons why people tend to interpret particular situations with reference to ethnic divides. If this sort of ethnic interpretation can be obviated, we might find that we can reduce the intensity of or propensity for conflict. If ethnic interpretations cannot be

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obviated in a given situation, then the best solutions are likely to be those that accommodate ethnic difference.

This brings us back to this volume's two core propositions. We do need a theory of ethnicity grounded solidly in psychological research on human behavior. And the relational theory advances us in that direction: Ethnicity is driven by uncertainty reduction, while ethnic politics is driven by interests.

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PART I

THEORY WITH WORLDWIDE EXAMPLES