

Stories of Peoplehood

The Politics and Morals of Political Membership

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Plantin 10/12 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data applied for

ISBN 0 521 81303 4 hardback
ISBN 0 521 52003 7 paperback

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page xi</i>
Introduction: on studying stories of peoplehood	1
 Part I Explaining the political role of stories of peoplehood	
1 Elements of a theory of people-making	19
2 The role of ethically constitutive stories	72
 Part II Constructing political peoplehood in morally defensible ways	
3 Ethically constitutive stories and norms of allegiance	129
4 A pioneering people	175
 <i>References</i>	 213
<i>Index</i>	226

1 Elements of a theory of people-making

Varieties of political peoples

Theories must be theories of something. One of the goals of this book is to persuade contemporary American political scientists that they should take as central to their theorizing some topics that have long been treated as marginal or beyond their disciplinary concerns. When American political science underwent what scholars call its “behavioralist revolution” in the 1950s, many outstanding scholars came to believe that the study of politics should be understood as the empirical analysis of the behavior of human “interest groups.” Others preferred to study the conflicts of “classes” in Marxist fashion. Some analyzed the functions of “systems” in imitation of the sociologist Talcott Parsons. Others focused on the often-irrational workings of individual psyches; and some continued to stress the internal traits and tendencies of human institutions and of bodies of ideas. Today many study politics as the preference-driven actions of instrumentally rational individuals.¹

Without disdaining any of those enterprises, I suggest that an intellectually adequate political science must also focus on what I regard as a quite basic dimension of all political activity, one that has not been so directly addressed by prevailing approaches: the making, maintaining, and transforming of senses of political peoplehood. Sometimes this activity dominates political life. Often it is an important but muted component of political action, and at times it is more marginal. In the final analysis, however, it structures politics – and human beings – too fundamentally to be ignored. It is a type of activity that is carried on not by members of all human associations, groups, and communities, but by participants in what is still a rather larger and unruly subset of those groups. I term that subset “political peoples.”

A human group can be of great importance to its members, as many cultural, recreational, and social associations are, without its being the

¹ Pertinent discussions of the history of political science include e.g. Seidman and Harpham (1985), Farr (1988), and Gunnell (1993).

sort of “people” I am concerned with here. I define a group as a *political* people or community when it is a potential adversary of other forms of human association, *because* its proponents are generally understood to assert that its obligations legitimately trump many of the demands made on its members in the name of other associations. This definition excludes many forms of human community: though doubtless many persons feel great loyalty to their football clubs, singing groups, or Girl Scout troops, neither the leaders nor members of such associations are ever likely to assert seriously that the obligations of those memberships justify them in violating governmental laws.

To be sure, it is also true that usually not all, and often not even most, members of a “political people” will fully accept such claims to its primacy. Most will feel that they have a number of other affiliations and identities with claims on them that are also very important. Many may in fact feel they have been to some degree directly or indirectly coerced into their putatively “primary” political membership. Yet so long as most acknowledge that their membership presents them with these sorts of claims on their allegiances, the group is a “political people” as I am using the term here.² “Political peoples” are forms of “imagined community,” in the famous phrase that Benedict Anderson (1983) has applied to nations. I am stressing, however, that they are “political” because they are communities “imagined” to impose binding obligations and duties; and many human associations beyond those that Anderson calls “nations” fall under this definition.

To see why, we need to recognize that the potency of senses of “political peoplehood” can vary in two ways. First, a particular group’s supporters may believe that its obligations can override the demands of a lot of or only a few other associations. Second, a group may assert its primacy over a wide range of issues, or only certain ones. Clearly, actual groups will often fall somewhere in the middle in the strength of the demands made in their name, the number of issues over which they assert priority, or both. We can thus imagine a wide variety of “political peoples,” from those that advance “strong” claims to allegiance over a “wide” range of issues down to those more politically trivial groups that advance only “weak” claims to allegiance over a “narrow” range of issues. Displayed in that favorite

² The existence of such senses of political peoplehood can therefore be substantiated empirically by evidence such as speeches of leaders and legislative and judicial proclamations of members’ statuses and obligations, and by opinion surveys of members’ beliefs about their community and its claims upon them. I do not seek to provide such evidence in systematic fashion in this theoretical work, but the concepts laid out here are useful in part because they can easily be operationalized in this fashion.

Table 1

Strong & Wide (China, US)	Strong & Midrange (Quebec)	Strong & Narrow (Jehovah's Witnesses)
Moderate & Wide (Belgium, Navajos)	Moderate & Midrange (Wales, Antioquia)	Moderate & Narrow (AFL-CIO, Greenpeace)
Weak & Wide (Puerto Rico, Ecovillages)	Weak & Midrange (Brooklyn, Hong Kong)	Weak & Narrow (Oxfam, PEN).

tool of social scientists, a multi-celled table, and with some contestable examples provided, this variety looks as shown in Table 1.

This table could be expanded indefinitely by including gradations indicating further degrees of strength and breadth for senses of peoplehood, along with the additional permutations that would result. But for our purposes, these two dimensions of “the potency of peoplehood” are not the same. The most politically important feature of a group is the degree to which its proponents assert its priority over other associations, whether over many issues or few. It is such assertions that most often entail political conflict. These senses of political peoplehood might therefore instead be arrayed along a spectrum ranging from “strong and wide” through “moderate” versions and finally to “weak and narrow,” to wit: *Strong/Wide* → *Strong/Midrange* → *Strong/Narrow* → *Moderate/Wide* → *Moderate/Midrange* → *Moderate/Narrow* → *Weak/Wide* → *Weak/Midrange* → *Weak/Narrow*.

I will discuss the various types of political peoples listed in Table 1 in this order.

Strong political peoples

The various types of “strong” political peoplehood are, unsurprisingly, the ones that pose the greatest challenges to achieving a peaceful, constructive “politics of people-making,” and so they will feature most prominently in the ensuing discussion. To clarify their problematic character, let me emphasize that even “strong and wide” senses of membership are still conceptions of particular forms of human community, in which certain sorts of persons and activities rightly have places and others do not. Even if such a view of political community is presented as properly extendable to all of humanity, as when Alexander the Great sought to conquer the world, it still represents a type of political association that requires

its members to accept certain identities and affiliations and to abandon others (Armstrong, 1982, 133). “Strong and wide” senses of political membership are thus ones that present a particular form of community as “inherently limited” in some respects that make it distinctive, but as nonetheless “sovereign” (Anderson, 1983, 16–17).

Indeed, at the extreme, the champions of a “strong and wide” political people depict it as a distinct society entitled ultimately to override the claims of not just many but *all* other groups, and entitled to do so not just in regard to a few issues but *all* issues. When officials of modern regimes like the People’s Republic of China or the United States hold that their members are obligated to obey all of their national laws, to forswear all allegiances to any foreign powers, and to accept obligations for military service against whomever the government designates as an enemy, they are asserting senses of peoplehood that are both strong and wide.

It is tempting, in fact, to identify such “strong and wide” conceptions strictly with the “peoples” and officials of widely recognized “sovereign” states. But that would be a mistake; many leaders who articulate such strong senses of peoplehood are not even aspirants to formal state offices, at least not openly. They may be religious leaders, such as the sword-wielding popes of the late Middle Ages and clerics like the Ayatollah Khomeini. They may be spokesmen for radical racial and ethnic groups, like the contemporary Aryan Nation and Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association at its most extreme. Often such figures combine religious and ethnic appeals, as Osama bin Laden has done with horrifying effectiveness. They can be working-class activists, such as the various Marxist strategists who have seen their ultimate community of allegiance as the transnational proletariat. They can also be linguistic or cultural adherents, as in the case of some strongly separatist Quebecois; or regional loyalists, like the antebellum American southerners who believed their obligations to their states and region overrode the claims of the Union. At times, leaders of radical environmentalist and feminist groups and other social movement organizations similarly contend that duties to their association and its cause deserve to outweigh all rival obligations. Many more such examples could be added.³ Whenever any such leaders contend that the church, group, community, gender, association, class, or “people” for whom they profess to speak deserves the allegiance of

³ These conceptions of peoplehood might be seen as various forms of what many analysts, following Cornelius Castoriadis (1987) as well as Anderson, refer to as “social imaginaries.” They also certainly include what are often termed “myths” of identity. But it is not possible to explore here the relationship between my term “peoplehood” and the many and varied scholarly uses of “social imaginary” and “myth” without a lengthy excursion into semantic swamps where, I fear, many readers would be lost permanently.

all who belong to it in cases of conflict with virtually all rivals, they are promulgating a “strong” version of political peoplehood as defined here.

It might be thought that any “people” whose leaders advance “strong” claims to sovereignty in regard to some issues will ultimately seek to do so in regard to all. It is indeed likely that they will act this way under many circumstances. But not all; today there are many political communities that firmly brook no challenges to their rights to self-determination in many important matters but that nonetheless agree to form semi-autonomous entities within broader societies whose decision-makers speak for them in other regards, often especially in foreign affairs. As suggested on the preceding chart, with secession and independence apparently rejected for the time being, Quebec (or at least its Francophone majority) forms one such “political people” today. Though Quebec continues to act as a member of Canada’s federal system, it officially denies that it is a province. On December 7, 2000, moreover, the self-styled National (not provincial) Assembly of the “Quebec State” passed Bill 99, asserting “that the Quebec people, through their political institutions, have the right to rule on the nature and extent of their right to self-determination” and on its exercise. The bill also specified that “no parliament or government may reduce the powers, authority, sovereignty or legitimacy of the National Assembly.”⁴ These are direct assertions of “strong” political peoplehood, even though Quebec voters have thus far refused to ratify referenda explicitly endorsing full sovereignty. At the same time, Quebec chiefly insists on autonomy in regard to language education and use, issues with broad ramifications to be sure, but still sufficiently confined to term this a “strong but midrange” sense of peoplehood.⁵

Finally, many forms of political community claim primacy over a few issues, but not very many. Devoted Jehovah’s Witnesses pursue ways of life that are, to be sure, comprehensively shaped by their religious beliefs, and many Witnesses believe that the obligations defined by their faith unquestionably outweigh their duties to any governments that claim power over them. But apart from a relatively small range of issues such

⁴ These official English translations of the provisions of Bill 99 can be found at <http://www.premier.gouv.qc.ca/premier/ministre/english>.

⁵ As Joseph H. Carens notes in a forceful defense of Quebec’s policies from a liberal democratic point of view, “the only distinctive cultural commitment . . . that Quebec requires . . . is knowledge of French.” Neither immigrants nor native-born citizens are required to “prove their loyalty to Quebec by proclaiming an attachment to its symbols or an identification with its history.” People “can be full members of Quebec’s distinct society even if they look and act differently from the substantial segment of the population whose ancestors inhabited Quebec and even if they do not in any way alter their own customs and cultural patterns with respect to work and play, diet and dress, sleep and sex, celebration and mourning, so long as they act within the confines of the law” (Carens, 2000, 131).

as proselytizing, flag salutes, and in some cases military service, most Jehovah's Witnesses have no trouble accepting governmental authority, and indeed some hold civic offices.⁶ Their religious membership amounts to a "strong but narrow" kind of political peoplehood that can at times involve them in intense political conflicts, but not nearly so routinely as in the case of the more wide-ranging forms of "strong" peoplehood.

Moderate political peoples

The categories of "strong and midrange" and "strong but narrow" political peoples are analytically distinct from, but in practice merge into, various forms of "moderate" political peoplehood. The key distinction is whether a people's officials claim to be the final authorities over some range of matters, or whether they are content to share even final decision-making. The boundaries between having a meaningful "share" in decisions and being "final" over some of them are, however, often hard to draw.

Even so, one of the most striking phenomena in the world today is the growth of apparently stable forms of "moderate" political peoplehood, in which leaders of various communities are willing to recognize themselves as significantly authoritative on certain matters without claiming full and final "sovereignty" over most or any. Such circumstances are, to be sure, far from unprecedented. In the European "Middle Ages," from the fall of the Roman Empire to the rise of monarchs claiming absolute power over the members of their "nations," most people lived within multiple structures of authority – including diverse orders of clerics, local lords, more distant kings, sometimes village or town officials, sometimes Holy Roman Emperors – all of which asserted certain prerogatives but not absolute sovereignty. Despite the tensions and disorderliness inherent in such a structure of overlapping authorities and memberships, many legacies of this past survived the consolidation of monarchical and then republican European nation-states from the fourteenth century through the twentieth. Today, Europeans are simultaneously constructing a heightened supra-national system of power and membership in the form of the European Union and devolving certain powers back to older forms of political community such as Wales, Scotland, and Corsica. Some analysts see in these developments the potential for a modernized, democratized variant of the Middle Ages' world of "moderate" political memberships (Held, 1995, 31–38, 136–140, 235–237).

⁶ For an overview of political and legal controversies involving the Witnesses, see Peters (2000).

To assert, as I do in Table 1 above, that Belgium today advances only a “moderate” sense of peoplehood is perhaps overstated. Belgium can still plausibly be perceived as a traditional sovereign state. It is so treated in the United Nations, the Olympics, and many other “international” arenas. Yet it is at least equally plausible to hold, like the Belgian scholar Liesbet Hooghe, that with the constitutional reforms of 1988, further formalized in the 1992 *Accord de la St Michel*, “official Belgium decisively abandoned the nation-state idea. According to the new definition of stateness and state–society relations no level of government can claim absolute priority. Sovereignty has lost its absolute character; it is now shared by the regions, the national state and Europe” (Hooghe, 1991, iii; Fitzmaurice, 1996, 3, 145). Many leaders of Belgium’s more federalized modern government have indeed firmly supported increasing the European Union’s supervening authority over a growing list of issues. Belgium has also always had substantial linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity, creating tensions that were curtailed initially chiefly by opposition to Dutch rule in the early nineteenth century, and that have often festered since. As a result, today Belgians have sought to control their linguistic and economic conflicts via assigning extensive authority for governance to the levels of the quite varied regions and communities, provinces, communes, and cities that have made up Belgium throughout its modern history (Hooghe, 1991, 3–5, 22–23; Fitzmaurice, 1996, 268; Strikwerda, 1997, 27–63). Hence many Belgians today, leaders and citizens alike, are content to define the obligations of Belgians to Belgium in ways that are more tolerant of multiple allegiances, some more expansive, some less expansive, than champions of state sovereignty elsewhere can comfortably abide.

Similarly, leaders of the Navajo Nation in the US formally claim sovereignty and subject an even wider range of their members’ affairs to distinctive regulation than Quebec does (though Quebec may be closing the gap). The Navajo people rely heavily, however, on funding from the US government, and they seek it in the name of their rights as equal American citizens, as well as in the name of treaty agreements.⁷ Unlike Quebec, they are not now asserting any general right to annul federal legislation. Thus the Navajo, the Belgians, and some other communities today seem to accept stable, “moderate but wide” senses of political peoplehood.

⁷ See, e.g., Navajo President Kelsey A. Begaye (1999, 6): “The Indian allocation is usually one half or less of the non-Indian allocation . . . We can no longer accept being treated like second class citizens in our own country. This allocation of limited resources to Native American Nations goes back to the heart of the Jim Crow laws; ‘Separate but Equal’ . . . the principle of equal justice under the laws must apply to the Native American Nations in America.” Available at <http://www.navajo.org>.

Moving to the next “moderate” gradation: even after devolution, the Welsh government claims less yet in the way of sovereign powers than does either Belgium or the Navajo Nation. The sense of Welsh political peoplehood is real; it, too, now has a National Assembly; but neither most Welsh leaders nor most residents view Wales as highly demanding or authoritative over a very broad range of issues. The Welsh government’s mandate is to address more local concerns distinctive to the people of Wales, while the Welsh continue to be represented in the UK and European Parliaments and to act as loyal citizens of the UK and the European Union in the broad areas of those governments’ acknowledged jurisdictions. In the same way, citizens of the relatively prosperous Antioquia region of Colombia, who often presented themselves in the past as Antioquians far more than they did as Colombians and who maintained significant measures of self-governance, now acknowledge Colombian identity. Antioquia acts only as a particularly powerful department or province within the Colombian state. Most state or provincial citizens in most stable federal systems probably have similar “moderate, midrange” conceptions of their state or provincial “peoplehood.”⁸

Finally, in contrast to the “strong but narrow” senses of politically potent identity held by groups like the more fervent religious denominations, most labor unions and environmental groups are willing to accept that they must ultimately yield to governmental authority even on the specific issues that most concern them. They do not have especially “strong” senses of their group obligations. Yet their politically pertinent senses of group identity are not terribly weak, either. Many leaders and members are willing to engage in some measure of civil disobedience to certain laws to attain their rather specific ends and to regard contrary rulings as illegitimate. They will picket without permits, hold sit-in demonstrations in areas where they have no legal right to be, and sometimes sabotage industrial operations, to dramatize their causes.⁹ This belief that they

⁸ On Wales see e.g. Jones and Balsom, eds., 2000, esp. 282–283. Ann Twinam details how, due chiefly to their prosperity, inhabitants of Antioquia, called Antioqueño or *paisa*, have long been “reviled” as “Jews” by others in Colombia, many of whom have actually asserted that Antioqueños are predominantly of Jewish descent. The Antioqueños responded in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries by advancing various countermyths claiming that they “form a special race, a distinct culture, and a probably superior people within Colombia” (Twinam, 1980, 81, 84, 90–94; quote is from 94).

⁹ For example, at this writing, Greenpeace, which says its mission involves “nonviolent, creative confrontation to expose global environmental problems,” has activists facing criminal charges for violating a safety zone in one of their many protests against American military and nuclear tests (details at <http://www.greenpeace.org> and <http://www.greenpeaceusa.org>). Unions involved in the AFL-CIO have long histories of sometimes militant strike actions, a history celebrated at its website; and the organization currently professes its broad commitment to finding “creative ways” to give “workers a say in all the decisions that affect our working lives,” not just their contracts (<http://www.aflcio.org/about/mission.htm>).

are justified in disobeying some state laws is what leads me to classify groups such as the AFL-CIO and Greenpeace as having a “moderate but narrow” sense of political peoplehood. Both examples suggest, moreover, that at times some leaders and members of such organizations may advance and act on much stronger claims for their right to override other authorities.

Even so, all these diverse “moderate” forms of peoplehood are of particular interest because, much of the time, they can inspire allegiance from and participation by their members while accepting that those members simultaneously belong to a wide variety of other deeply valued communities. These senses of peoplehood are often conducive to a more pacific and productive “politics of people-making” than “strong” conceptions. Throughout the ensuing analysis, I seek to explore the strategies and conditions that can generate and sustain such “moderate conceptions” against what I depict as powerful political pressures to assert more extreme, demanding, and conflictual notions. Though moderation is admittedly not a virtue in all regards, when it comes to assertions of rightful authority by would-be leaders of political peoples, it generally is.

Weak political peoples

The various “weak” forms of political peoplehood receive less attention in this book. After all, they are weak. Still, they cannot be dismissed as politically irrelevant, if only because they represent forms of membership that can sometimes be mobilized into stronger versions. To dramatize that fact, and also to clarify the distinction between a strong sense of cultural peoplehood and the sort of political peoplehood I am considering here, I have listed Puerto Rico as an example of a rare “weak but wide” political people. Many Puerto Ricans on the island and in the mainland United States feel their Puerto Rican cultural identity very keenly; and island officials regulate quite a wide variety of issues affecting the lives of their residents. Yet all know that these officials do so only at the sufferance of the US government, a government in which island Puerto Ricans are not represented. Unlike the Navajo and other Indian Nations, Puerto Rico has never had treaties with the US designating it as an at least putatively sovereign nation. To the contrary, nothing in American law permits Puerto Rican officials credibly to claim any ultimate sovereignty over any topic (Ramos, 2001, 11–14). Unsurprisingly, many Puerto Ricans object to this “weak” status, and it has the potential to be a basis for a form of peoplehood that will assert much more standing in relationship to the United States. Still, such assertions are as yet not powerful enough to produce any major political conflicts, in part because many Puerto Ricans seem satisfied to have a strong sense of distinctive cultural identity but

only a weak form of political peoplehood. The situation of Puerto Rico thus resembles that of the various small “ecovillage” communes that exist in a number of American states and other countries. These are “countercultural” communities with institutions of collective property, organic farming, and distinctive environmentally oriented religions that establish quite comprehensive ways of life for their members; but they do not claim any exemptions from any supervening governmental authorities, making them “weak though wide” political peoples.¹⁰

Similarly, being a member of the “people of Brooklyn” cannot be dismissed as a politically inconsequential identity. But though the public policies of Brooklyn have fairly substantial consequences for the lives of the borough’s citizens, no one claims that Brooklyn is sovereign over and above the government of New York City, much less the State of New York or the United States of America. Indeed, it is less broadly significant in the lives of its inhabitants than Puerto Rico’s government or the communal institutions of ecovillages. Brooklyn’s “weak, midrange peoplehood” correspondingly forms part of the politics of people-making in the United States, but not a major part.

It is more controversial to characterize Hong Kong as a “weak, midrange” political people, since it has long had a distinctive identity and a significant measure of functional autonomy, despite having been a British colony. The Basic Law that now defines it as a Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China, moreover, includes guarantees of a “high degree of autonomy,” continuation of most existing laws, and maintenance of a capitalist economic system for fifty years. Still, appointment of the chief executive and interpretation and amendment of the Basic Law rest with the Central People’s Government, so that like Puerto Rico, Hong Kong has no authority that cannot be altered by direct national legislation. In fact Hong Kong citizens have even less discretion over vital matters like the selection of their top administrative officials than Puerto Ricans do; so they can reasonably be classified as a “weak and midrange” political people.¹¹

Even organizations that do not claim any authority to override claims made on behalf of other human groups, and who concern themselves with a relatively narrow range of human affairs, cannot be entirely dismissed as irrelevant to the politics of peoplehood. A transnational organization like the charitable group Oxfam International may work to relieve suffering in ways that lead its members to question existing governmental policies

¹⁰ On Puerto Rico’s legal status, see e.g. Ramos, 2001. On ecovillages, see e.g. Jackson, 2000.

¹¹ The text of the Basic Law can be found at http://www.info.gov.hk/basic_law/fulltext.

and allegiances, even if such questioning rarely escalates to civil disobedience, much less active rejection of the legitimacy of various regimes. The political tensions bound up with such memberships are exemplified in Oxfam International's "Strategic Plan, 2001–2004," entitled "Towards Global Equity." It proclaims that "Oxfam people are global citizens" and that its members "participate in, support and promote the emerging movement for global citizenship."¹² In so doing, Oxfam International inevitably fosters challenges to claims of the primacy of other forms of citizenship, even if its members devote themselves to advocacy and non-violent protests, not revolutionary activity. Similarly, International PEN, the worldwide association of writers, professes itself to be strictly "non-political" and claims no authority to violate any law. Still, it urges its members to "champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace in one world" and to "oppose any form of suppression of freedom of expression . . . throughout the world wherever this is possible."¹³ The organization frequently invokes these principles to challenge the legitimacy of many policies of existing political communities.

All such memberships therefore warrant notice here, both because just as they are, all such groups can play significant roles in the politics of people-building, and because these classifications of various communities as "strong," "moderate," or "weak" political peoples are subject to dramatic change over time.¹⁴ The ancient Babylonian Jews may have redefined Jewish identity as fundamentally religious and compatible with subjectship in a Persian province, as many Jews would later do under the Ptolomies and Rome; Jews may have functioned as stigmatized ethnic "corporations" within the corporatist structure of feudal Christian Europe; Jews in the United States may have often accepted identification as simply another religious group among the many American citizens have embraced; but modern Zionists have successfully advanced stronger and more sharply political views of Israeli peoplehood (Ettinger, 1976, 727–1092; Scheindlin, 1998, 27–56). As noted, in some centuries Catholic popes riding at the head of armies clearly engaged in quite

¹² "Towards Global Equity: Strategic Plan 2001–2004," Oxfam International, available at www.oxfaminternational.org.

¹³ "International P.E.N. Charter," available at <http://www.oneworld.org/internatpen/home.htm>.

¹⁴ Florencia Mallon has argued similarly (1995, 6): "In families, communities, political organizations, regions, and state structures, power is always being contested, legitimated, and refined. Some projects, stories, or interpretations are winning out over others; some factions are defeating others. The interaction among different levels, locations, or organizations in a given society – say, between families and communities, communities and political parties, or regions and a central state – redefines not only each one of these political arenas internally but also the balance of forces among them."

coercive forms of “people-building” in Europe, conquering populations who were then subjected to direct church governance. Even during the antebellum era in US history, important leaders of the Catholic Church in Europe (and a few in the US) repeatedly denounced American republican institutions in favor of rather repressive forms of monarchy. They thereby implied, at least, that church allegiances opposed and trumped the loyalties of Catholic Americans to the US government, making the Church a “strong” political people (Smith, 1997, 209). But in the twentieth century, Catholic leaders and members have overwhelmingly accepted that church membership provides no legitimate basis for generally disavowing the authority and laws of the US government or those of most other governments in whose jurisdiction Catholics reside. Catholicism thus rarely if ever represents a “strong” form of political peoplehood today.

That does not mean, however, that the modern Catholic Church is never a significant actor in the politics of people-making in the US, as it clearly is elsewhere. In certain regards, American Catholics have quite plausibly continued to see themselves as threatened by political forces advancing Protestant or secular visions of the American nation. Examples include Protestant attacks on the presidential candidacy of John F. Kennedy, policies denying public funds to Catholic schools, and rulings permitting abortions. In response, Catholics have sometimes taken group actions to resist these rival positions, and a radical few have claimed that their religious identities and allegiances justify violating at least some US laws. These stances are, to be sure, quite rare within the American Catholic Church and generally quite narrow in the breadth of their challenges to US laws, authority, and membership. Hence it makes sense to continue to classify that Church as at most a “moderate” and “midrange” form of political peoplehood, often a rather “weak and narrow” form. The same is true of most of the other civil associations that comprise what many writers call “civil society.” But because the politics of people-making is an ongoing dimension of human life, and even “weak” political peoples are not likely to escape the pressures it generates indefinitely, the statuses of all such groups are always subject to transformation.¹⁵

As I have noted, today many scholars see a pattern of transformation that they regard as quite encouraging. They are predicting empirically and hoping normatively that forms of membership advancing strong claims

¹⁵ In a valuable analysis of the political construction of Mexican – American social movement organizations that has parallels with the arguments here, Benjamin Marquez observes that some are constructed in ways that support moderate, integrative civil rights agendas; others, in ways that express support for racial autonomy; and some in ways that inspire radical revolutionary activity. But groups can over time be transformed from more moderate to more radical (Marquez, 2001).

of absolute sovereignty are in fact disappearing in favor of more moderate varieties of peoplehood, as a result of processes of globalization and the decline of nation-states (Held, 1995; Linklater, 1999; Bosniak, 2000; Young, 2000). In many cases, such as federated societies like Switzerland and Canada; countries with semi-autonomous indigenous peoples like the United States and Australia; and societies with religious groups that claim partly autonomous status like the Amish and some Orthodox communities in Israel, it does indeed seem that populations can simultaneously maintain enduring allegiances to more than one political "people" without necessarily generating any severe clashes.

Still, those same examples, like the bloody history of medieval Europe, also indicate that the potential for severe conflicts usually persists in such arrangements. As discussed in Part II, I agree broadly with those who wish to see a complexly federated world of "moderate" to "weak" political peoples in which individuals can freely choose to belong to many such roughly equal and only "semi-sovereign" communities at once – so long as these forms of peoplehood are still capable of serving as locales of human economic, cultural, and political flourishing. In this Part, I argue nonetheless that the political dynamics of people-building make the achievement of such arrangements on an enduring basis difficult and precarious, though not impossible. The point is to show how those of us with normative reservations about absolutist senses of allegiance face major, identifiable challenges in considering how we can forge stable forms of political membership that eschew them.

The wellspring of those challenges is the fact that, precisely because there are many forms of human association whose leaders are tempted to claim their members' allegiances in cases of conflict, political tensions between advocates of different actual and potential political communities will inevitably arise and sometimes escalate. When an existing government's authority is challenged by a movement leader or by officials of a rival regime, those clashes are likely to prompt the rival forces to advance "strong" senses of peoplehood, to assert sovereignty strenuously on behalf of the "political people" they claim to champion. The Kyrgyz conception of "peoplehood" is presented to the web-surfing world, perhaps sincerely but doubtless also self-consciously, as one that does not threaten either law-abiding domestic minorities or neighboring peoples. But the tenacity with which President Akayev has held on to his power suggests that, should the new Kyrgyz Republic's leaders come to believe their regime faces serious struggles to maintain its independence from any such sources, such as the ethnic Uzbek Islamics it is already policing stringently, matters may well change. It is likely that they will stress more in symbols and in policies the aspects of the Manas story and

their other traditions that justify repression of such opposition. These measures may in turn produce intensified struggles and even more radical assertions of distinctive political identity by groups like Uzbek Islamics in Kyrgyzstan. Throughout the world, the outcomes of such struggles do much to define the forms of human association, membership, and identity that prevail, though always, only for a time. That is why I characterize “people-making” processes as fundamentally political.

Premises of a “positive” theory of people-building

My account of the elements of these political processes of people-making rest on four assumptions about *all* senses of political peoplehood, from very strong to very weak. These assumptions can certainly be disputed; but even without elaborate defense, I believe they are sufficiently plausible to make attention to the arguments built upon them worthwhile. Simply stated, the premises are:

(1) No political peoples are *natural* or *primordial*. All are the products of long, conflict-ridden histories, and all must be understood as human creations, formed by participants in preexisting forms of peoplehood.

The core evidence for this claim is historical: no extant sense of political peoplehood can be shown to have endured over long periods of time without quite fundamental transformations. None has been free from historical periods of intense internal and external contestation in which partisans of rival visions of political community have sought to dispute and to transform the political identities and allegiances of some or all putative members of that “people.”

(2) Political peoples are created via *constrained*, *asymmetrical* interactions between actual and would-be leaders of political communities and the potential constituents for whom they compete.

This assumption rejects views suggesting that senses of peoplehood emerge organically or evolve out of people’s particular economic, territorial, demographic, ancestral, religious, linguistic, or cultural identities in some fairly automatic, unconscious process. All those factors do shape individual senses of personal identity, but precisely because many factors do so, none can automatically serve as the basis of a conception of political community. Instead, they must be explicitly espoused as such a basis in ways that effectively mobilize constituencies to embrace them and institutionalize them. That is why the processes of people-making must be analyzed as resting on interactions between leaders and constituents; and the interactions are *asymmetrical* because it is actual and would-be leaders who most directly articulate and seek to institutionalize conceptions of political peoplehood.

That asymmetry means, moreover, that there is always a dualistic character to such conceptions. Indeed, at one extreme, leaders may articulate and impose such sharply differentiated, vertically structured conceptions of peoplehood that leaders and constituents are portrayed as having virtually nothing in common. Those in power form a ruling class that defines itself as a distinct group or “people” entitled to rule over one or more lesser groups or “peoples.” Even in such accounts, let me stress, both rulers and subjects are still understood to be members of a larger political order that represents a kind of common political “peoplehood.” It is, however, a kind in which the different classes occupy very different places and are presented as possessing sharply different characteristics.¹⁶ The great French historian Marc Bloch captured well what he termed this fundamental “dualism” of hierarchical forms of political membership. He wrote, “serfdom made a man at once the subject of his chief and a member of an inferior and despised social class, near the bottom of the scale” (Bloch, 1970, 88–89). As the peasant revolts that Bloch went on to discuss indicate, the occupants of such lower ranks often object passionately to the stigmatized statuses and identities imposed on them, but they cannot deny their existence; and over time many may at least partly internalize those identities. Not only feudal aristocrats governing bodies of peasants who often did not even speak the same language, but also European colonial governments imposing subjectship on diverse African and Asian populaces, and southern white supremacists governing American blacks in the days of slavery and Jim Crow, all display versions of such “vertical, differentiated” forms of peoplehood.¹⁷

But the asymmetrical relationship of leaders and followers need not be so one-sided. At the other extreme, leaders may instead articulate a fully horizontal, unified conception of membership in which they claim to be no more than representative members and humble agents of their “people.” Bloch also called attention to how in the towns, villages, and rural communities of the late Middle Ages, many sought to form “communes,” legally recognized political entities bonded not by “the old oaths of fidelity and homage . . . perpetuating ties of dependence” but by “an obligation among equals” to provide each other with mutual aid (1970, 172). From such communes would eventually emerge political, economic, demographic, and intellectual support for achieving more

¹⁶ That is one reason why my category “peoples” is broader than Benedict Anderson’s definition of “nations.” He envisions the latter as “always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship,” whatever “the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail” (1983, 16). In contrast, a “people” may include an elite group that presents itself more like shepherds looking after lower orders of sheep, adults supervising children, or owners managing their property.

¹⁷ See e.g. Gellner, 1965, 1983; Frederickson, 1971.

egalitarian forms of political community more generally, as supporters of political hierarchies feared from the start. In the last two centuries, many modern nationalist leaders have advanced such “horizontal, unified” visions of peoplehood as justifications for their authority, especially but not exclusively democratic ones. In the nineteenth century, many white Americans advanced horizontal, unified accounts of US peoplehood that were logically in deep tension with the vertical racial structures of membership they simultaneously endorsed.¹⁸

As that example indicates, the distinction between “vertical, differentiated” and “horizontal, unified” forms of peoplehood is always a matter of degree, and most actual communities display elements of both.¹⁹ Claims of horizontal equality and homogeneity are usually actually applied to a more or less large ruling group, while hierarchical accounts define the different statuses of all those denied full membership within a political community who are still treated as belonging to it. Only if a “ruling group” consisted either of one person alone, or of all members of a political people, would we find a political community that did not combine vertical and horizontal forms; and such extremes are rarely if ever to be found.

Even at such extremes and in all cases in between, the asymmetrical interactions between leaders and led should be seen as *constrained* in several ways. Most importantly, leaders’ choices are always to some degree restricted by what their potential constituents will accept. Even in instances when leaders are relying extensively on coercive power to impose a political membership on recalcitrant subject populations, obstacles to arbitrary rule are likely to exist that cannot safely be ignored forever.

The source of these obstacles is the fact that, though no political “people” is natural or eternal, the forging of senses of peoplehood never takes place *de novo*, in a state of nature. Aspiring leaders always confront populations already endowed, individually as well as collectively, with a great variety of senses of membership, identity, and affiliation, with entrenched economic interests, political and religious beliefs, historical and cultural attachments, and animosities. What we might then loosely term “the three I’s” – preexisting senses of identity, interests, and ideals, all of which inform each other – are themselves partly the products of past politics of people-making. But they are also the products of biological needs and historical developments, such as evolving economic systems, geographical units, communications, transportation, military and medical

¹⁸ See Smith, 1997, for what is meant to be overwhelming evidence of this claim.

¹⁹ This distinction corresponds to the contrast between “ranked” and “unranked” multi-ethnic groups made in Horowitz, 1985, 21–36, though here the identities of rulers and ruled need not be defined in ethnic terms.

technologies, and climactic and demographic trends that are shaped but not simply created or directed by politics. These conditions set more or less stiff boundaries to the senses of peoplehood leaders can advance successfully: they provide the resources and will both for the maintenance of routinized arrangements, practices, and affiliations that cannot easily be altered without generating chaos, and for conscious resistance to existing and proposed forms of political community.

Furthermore, leaders are themselves endowed with certain conceptions of their possible identities, interests, and ideals and not others. As a result, they are far more likely to be inclined to pursue visions of peoplehood reflective of those established commitments than any alternatives. To the degree that this is so, perhaps we can say that they are “constrained” in their aspirations internally as well, as analysts of power influenced by Michel Foucault tend to suggest.²⁰ To many others, of course, it seems peculiar to argue that leaders are “constrained” to do what they want to do, or to be what they feel themselves to be. The assumption here is that aspirants to leadership are constrained but not fully determined by the discourses and traditions that contribute to their senses of identity and purpose.

Potential constituents are similarly restricted by all these factors in seeking active grass-roots alliances with their present or potential fellow members. Furthermore, they must always operate within existing structures of political, military, and economic power, headed by current leaders; and in more repressive, hierarchical societies, those structures can greatly limit their abilities to join new coalitions or new political memberships, or even to express openly their dissatisfactions with the prevailing order. To be sure, these structures of power also affect established leaders, but they are likely to limit ordinary people to a greater degree.

And perhaps even more importantly, most people simply do not have the same personal aspirations as would-be leaders in many respects, including their desires to organize efforts for political change. The division between leaders and constituents is one that reflects personal goals, values, and inclinations as much as it does the objective possession of resources or statuses, because these can be sought and sometimes acquired, if sufficient will to do so exists. But some persons are admittedly better situated to lead than others, and some wish to do so far more than others. Here too, whether the lack of a desire to lead counts as a “constraint” can be debated; but for all these reasons, mass publics rarely if ever act

²⁰ See, for example, Foucault’s contention that modern criminal court judges are more “subordinate” to systems of “normalizing,” “carceral” punitive mechanisms and discourses than those systems are “subordinated” to them (Foucault, 1979, 307–308).

consciously to create a new form of political community unless they are organized to do so through mobilizing leaders.

(3) Ordinarily, however, these various “constraints” are not so powerful, individually or collectively, as to determine entirely the sorts of accounts of peoplehood that leaders can effectively advocate and that people can successfully support. *Both leaders and constituents possess meaningful political agency.*

Because they always have available to them a range of alternative senses of identity and interest that they and various potential constituents might plausibly embrace, leaders have meaningful discretion in regard to the conceptions of peoplehood they advance and institutionalize. In democratic systems, moreover, constituents exercise political agency by deciding for whom they will vote. More fundamentally, in all systems constituents can resist voluntarily providing other forms of crucial aid, especially their labor and their military service, to elites whom they oppose.²¹ More generally, as Dominique Schnapper has noted, the more members “cease to participate in the values, practices, and institutions” established as elements of a particular form of peoplehood, the more weakened it becomes (Schnapper, 1998, 41). Thus, even when membership in a political society is imposed by conquest, unwilling subjects can usually resist it while sustaining some quite distinct, alternative conceptions of the “people” to whom they inwardly profess their allegiance, and for whom they seek to act. Even when medieval rural peasants were not officially recognized as forming “communities,” they still sometimes forged senses of common identity and common cause (often led by country priests) and rose up to attack their lords, seeking to set up leaders of their own (Bloch, 1970, 169–170). The types of alternative orders they sought to create, moreover, varied widely. Even entrenched economic interests of the sort that drove peasant revolts, interests which are often rightly thought to be especially politically potent, still can be advanced by a range of forms of political community (Jung, 2000, 30–31). Whatever stance one takes on philosophic questions of free will, in these regards leaders and constituents generally experience themselves as having meaningful agency in the forms of peoplehood they imagine, articulate, endorse, and institutionalize.

(4) But agency to do what? What do those who advocate or endorse certain forms of political membership hope to accomplish? As just suggested, I presume that political communities are constructed for many

²¹ David Laitin (1998, 27) provides the example of parents who support nationalist language laws in former Soviet republics but who also undermine them by continuing to send their children to Russian-language schools until a critical mass of their fellow Russian speakers can be persuaded to accept change.

purposes, which must ultimately be understood to grasp any particular politics of people-building. Economic concerns are always present and often integral, but other goals are sometimes still more potent. The common denominator shared by virtually all of them is that *architects of all forms of peoplehood are engaged in political projects that seek to create stable structures of power* enabling them to accomplish their varied ends. Hence, although the actors in this politics have a range of aims that we must in the end comprehend, we can analyze them as all concerned in the first instance to achieve and maintain power adequate to pursue those aims.

Though an exhaustive literature survey would be distracting here, it is worth pausing to indicate how these premises situate the ensuing analysis in relation to other scholarly perspectives. First, I am clearly siding with the many and varied writers who see political group memberships such as national, ethnic, and racial identities as fundamentally humanly “constructed,” against “primordialists” who understand these identities as in some sense natural products of human sociobiological development. In so doing I am taking a position that, while not uncontested, is predominant in modern scholarship. As David Laitin has remarked, “Construction and choice, rather than blood and inheritance, is now the standard story line about identities” (Laitin, 1998, 12). At the same time, I do not presume that support for a particular form of peoplehood is always merely “instrumental” to some other end. Often it may be; but many political actors may instead see the construction of a certain sort of common life as their highest ideal.²²

²² One influential work championing “primordial” views of ethnicity is Van den Berghe, 1981. A prominent if controversial contemporary work championing biological theories of racial groups is Rushton (1995). The Indian sociologist T. K. Oommen (1997, 66) accepts the biological reality of races but not what he sees as ideologies of racial superiority. The “constructivist” or “instrumentalist” opponents of ethnic and national “primordialism” and biological racialism include classic modern writers like, e.g., Hans Kohn (1957) and Elie Kedourie (1961) on through Donald Horowitz (1985), Eric Hobsbawm (1990), Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (1991), and Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2nd edn., 1994).

Anthony D. Smith has criticized some of these writers for overemphasizing how national identities, in particular, have been crafted by elites, instead of recognizing the large degree to which modern nationalism has been a “popular” phenomenon (e.g., Smith, 1995, 40). He and Hobsbawm and Gellner, among others, also purport to differ over a question related to both the “primordialist/constructivist” and “popular/elitist” controversies. This is the issue of whether modern nationalities are fundamentally constructed and *novel* or whether they are built on long-enduring traditions, ethnic ties, and myths in ways that involve considerable continuity with older forms of political community (for a fair-minded overview, see A. D. Smith, 1999, 3–19).

As the discussion of Omi and Winant in the text indicates, I defend a middle ground in these debates that I regard not as a waffle but as more intellectually defensible than either extreme. I believe useful answers to these questions come from determining what,

Among those who agree in seeing political identities as “constructed,” I am also siding against those who stress processes of “social construction” more than processes of explicit “political construction.” Again, I do not dismiss the importance of culture, language, discourses, social groups, religious affiliations, economic interests, territoriality, folkways, unconscious norms, and other such elements as factors that often contribute to senses of political membership. I regard much scholarship exploring these topics as complementary to the analysis here. But my approach is undeniably opposed to that of scholars who would treat such factors as fundamentally determinative of political identities while dismissing the “high politics” of law-making, organized political movements, conquests, and confederations as ultimately of secondary importance.

And among those who do stress processes of “political construction,” by casting my analysis in terms of aspiring leaders and potential constituents, I am pursuing an approach reminiscent of, among other writers, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci.²³ Much like his greatest Italian predecessor, Niccolò Machiavelli, Gramsci argued that the “first element” of politics was “that there really do exist rulers and ruled, leaders and led” (Gramsci, 1971, 144).²⁴ He contended that “intellectuals,”

in each particular context, is constructed and novel in specific stories of peoplehood, and what is instead inherited and maintained, either due to the enduring popular appeal of the elements in question or for other reasons. At the general theoretical level, the answer is surely that elite construction of distinctive conceptions of common identity; their popular opposition or embrace; and the maintenance by elites and masses of longstanding traditions of identity are always and everywhere present, but in greatly different degrees in different cases. I therefore agree with A. D. Smith that the construction of senses of peoplehood draws on and is constrained by preexisting, widely espoused senses of identity that, though not “primordial,” are deeply entrenched. But most of those he criticizes, except perhaps Hobsbawm in his least balanced formulations, would also concur; and Smith himself gives great weight to the innovating and mobilizing roles of elites in his concrete historical analyses. Hence I am not sure how deep these theoretical differences actually run.

²³ I am grateful to Roger Rouse for stressing this similarity to me. Dominique Schnapper builds on Weber’s conception of the nation as a political creation to reach a similar conception of “political projects,” though she distinguishes herself, as I would do, from any notion that such projects stem wholly from “will to power” and is necessarily devoted to *Machtpolitik* (Schnapper, 1998, 11, 21, 37–40).

²⁴ Gramsci was in fact self-consciously continuing a long line of political theorizing that includes figures like Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, Thomas Hobbes, and most seminally, as Gramsci recognized, Machiavelli (Gramsci, 1971, 6, 125–136). I am grateful to Norma Thompson for stressing the Machiavellian structure of my argument to me; but I also acknowledge that these predecessors are generally understood to advocate far less democratic forms of politics than I ultimately want to defend. The normative positions I defend in the last portion of this book are, however, “Machiavellian” in the sense expounded by John McCormick (2001): though they accept a fundamental elites/mass populace distinction, they express convictions that people can and should be politically active in guarding against elite abuses.