Terms and Ideas

- Ethnic identity
- Salience
- Nation
- Ethnic entrepreneur
- Primordialism
- Social constructivism
- Instrumentalism
- Rational choice

Questions

Q: What are ethnic groups and nations?

A: As discussed in lecture, ethnic groups are groups based on ascriptive and inherited characteristics (such as race, religion, or language) where members share a belief in a common ancestry. On the other hand, nations are cultural communities that command their members' ultimate loyalty above all others groups (when the chips are down).

Q: What are the main approaches to explaining the origin of ethnic identities?

A: There are three main explanations. (1) Primordialism (essentialism) argues that ethnicity is rooted in differences that are ancient, natural, and entrenched. This approach is different from the other two in that it sees ethnic groups as fixed as opposed to constructed. Of these alterative explanations, (2) instrumentalism considers ethnicity to be a strategic tool used to build coalitions to secure resources and political benefits. Politicians mobilize on the basis of ethnicity because it is cheap and effective to do so. Finally, (3) social constructivism argues that ethnic identities are created through institutions and social interactions. Ethnicity is both chosen and imposed; individuals draw on different identities depending on the context, but state categories and external social definitions restrict the options available.

Q: What determines the salience of ethnic differences?

A: The two main camps arrive at different conclusions. For primordialists such as Geertz, ethnic differences are innate and should therefore always be salient. This should be the case even when ethnic mobilization goes against the economic interests of both groups. Meanwhile, from the instrumentalist approach, Posner uses evidence from Malawi and Zambia to argue that salience depends not on the content of the cleavage but on relative group size, which determines whether politicians find an ethnic category useful for mobilization. Bates applies a similar strategic logic when he argues that ethnicity becomes important when there is competition over jobs, land, and administrative power. From a social constructivist point of view, Nagel notes that ethnic differences are reproduced by political actors and state institutions and thus become salient over time.

Q: How does modernization intersect with ethnic identity and conflict?

A: Previous modernization theorists had expected economic development to erase ethnic identities that were perceived as parochial. However, across our readings, we note that modernization can actually intensify ethnic competition. Geertz observes that modernization generates a deep tension between the desire for recognition based on primordial ties and the need to build large and modern political units. Bates argues that modernity produces scarce, desired goods that groups

pursue through ethnic coalitions in the African context. On the other hand, modernization might change the menu of identities that individuals can choose from while also allowing states to impose formal ethnic categories that constrain choice. Thus, modernization can change both the material incentives and the meanings attached to ethnic identification and lead groups into greater conflict.

Q: What are ethnic boundaries?

We can think of ethnic boundaries as the social lines that separate "us" from "them" and determine who belongs to what group. Nagel emphasizes that these boundaries are not fixed but instead continually reconstructed and reinforced. This happens both within and outside of particular groups. Internally, groups create boundaries through creating myths of origin, cultural symbols, and collective histories that define who belongs. Externally, states, institutions, and outsiders impose categories on people. This often narrows the range of identities that individuals can claim. These boundaries shift across contexts, and individuals might draw on different identities depending on the audience. An example of this process can be seen in the differences between how race is categorized across countries and time periods.

Takeaways

This week took us to one of the most active areas of modern political science research: ethnicity. Our readings exposed a fundamental divide between those who view ethnicity as the manifestation of ancient differences and those who see it as a political and constructed phenomenon. In recent decades, the latter view has dominated the academic literature. However, keep in mind that even if ethnicity is constructed, that does not make it any less real or meaningful to people who nevertheless experience their language, religion, and kinship as emotional givens.

Throughout the course, the topic of modernization has come up again and again; this week is no different. But whereas we had often discussed how modernization and its associated processes of urbanization, industrialization, and democratization have reduced different social tensions and divisions, our readings from this week suggest that modernization can create new cleavages as well. The incentives for ethnic competition seem to change as economic development creates new scarce resources.

Next week, we will discuss ethnic violence in more detail, with particular attention to the cases of Rwanda and Yugoslavia. We will also focus some more on the institutional conditions that might mitigate ethnic conflict and return to our discussion on constitutional and electoral system design. Ethnicity will also remain salient when we discuss civil society the week thereafter.

As mentioned in section, this department has several scholars who actively work on the topic of ethnicity; I encourage those of you with an interest to take a course offered here at Harvard during your time as an undergraduate.