Terms and Ideas

- Consociationalism
- Centripetalism
- Preferential voting
- Ethnocracy
- Pillarization
- Strategic outbidding
- Ethnic riot
- Ethnic cleansing

Questions

Q: What caused ethnic violence in Rwanda?

A: Both Mamdani and Straus address this question, with some differences in the perspective offered. Mamdani argues that the colonial state transformed fluid socioeconomic distinctions into rigid and racialized ethnic identities. This created the structural conditions for eventual mass mobilization along ethnic lines during the genocide. Meanwhile, Straus examines short-term dynamics to support his claim that the genocide was elite-driven and the result of state strength. He argues that violence escalated once local authorities signaled participation because the state's coercive capabilities created the conditions for compliance.

Q: How does that compare to Yugoslavia?

A: As noted in lecture, there are similarities between the two cases in that fear of an outgroup led to an ethnic security dilemma and eventual violence. Both also offer evidence against the primordialist argument in that ethnic violence was not merely the product of ancient hatreds. Instead, political institutions and elite strategies seem to have mattered. The state was decisive in both cases, though in different ways. In Yugoslavia, the collapse of the communist regime and the absence of strong state control created openings for violent entrepreneurs, whereas in Rwanda, it was strong state capacity that enabled the genocide. We therefore see how the state (or the absence thereof) is central in allowing ethnic conflict to turn into ethnic violence.

Q: What is Wilkinson's argument about ethnic riots in India?

A: The state is important for Wilkinson's theory as well. He argues that state governments in India have the capacity to stop ethnic riots but choose whether or not to intervene based on political incentives. Riots occur where (a) local politicians benefit from ethnic mobilization in competitive elections and (b) minority parties are not needed to form coalitions at the state government level. When minority support is politically valuable, the police is more likely to intervene. This is an instrumentalist approach to understanding ethnic conflict.

Q: What is consociationalism?

A: Lijphart defines consociationalism as democratic governance sustained in plural societies through elite cooperation and power sharing. There are four main components to consociational systems: (1) grand coalitions, where different social segments are included in the executive; (2) mutual vetoes, where minorities can block decisions that threaten their vital interests; (3) proportionality in the distribution of offices and resources between social groups; and (4) segmental autonomy, where each group manages its own cultural affairs. Consociationalism usually occurs in parliamentary systems

with proportional representation.

Q: What are the drawbacks to consociationalism?

A: The main counterargument is that consociational arrangements can replicate and even reinforce existing ethnic divisions. As cases such as Lebanon illustrate, these systems can also be rigid and prone to elite paralysis, which becomes troublesome when the demographic composition in society changes. Reilly argues that a better approach to encouraging accommodation is to make politicians reciprocally dependent on votes from other ethnic groups. According to him, centripetal systems such as preferential voting encourage moderation and multiethnic coalitions.

Q: What is the ethnocracy trap?

A: This concept relates to critiques of consociationalism, as Howard warns that systems which formalize ethnic representation and segmentation are incompatible with liberal democracy. This is because in ethnocratic systems, representation is no longer based on individual rights as political expression is tied to ethnic group membership. While such systems might appear pragmatic in the short term, in the long term they can prevent the emergence of nonaligned political actors, often institutionalize wartime divisions, and create paralyzed create political and economic structures.

Takeaways

This week made clear that solutions to ethnic conflict often seem to involve trade-offs between liberal democracy and stability. But the questions raised about how to accommodate ethnic differences are relevant not just in post-conflict societies but more generally in democracies around the world. Ethnic tensions do not seem destined to disappear, and might even increase due to processes such as immigration and globalization; consider the importance of identity in modern political discourse in the United States. Our readings on institutional design get at the heart of a difficult debate: to what extent are we willing to sacrifice the notion that governments should treat citizens as individuals, and not representatives of a given group, in order to have ethnic peace? How should we reconcile the rights of individuals with the collective claims that groups make? What rights should groups even have within democracies? And who can speak on behalf of these groups?

This week, we once again saw the interaction between structure and agency, the importance of the state, and how elite incentives and institutional design matter for political outcomes. These have been consistent themes throughout our course. Next week, we will discuss the role of social capital and civil society, before we consider the United States and its welfare state through a comparative perspective in the final week of the course. In both weeks, the issue of ethnic divisions and heterogeneity will come up again. Until then!