

Ethnic Conflict as an Intra-Group Phenomenon: A Preliminary Framework

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The literature on "ethnic conflict" tends to focus solely on external sources of such conflict. But this unquestioning focus on ethnic conflict as due to factors in the relationship between "ethnic groups" or their elites may at times be misleading. Drawing on a critique of conflict theory as developed in the field of international relations, I point out the conceptual and methodological problems associated with the analysis of inter-group conflict, and point to the importance of within-group conflict, especially conflict between elites, as sources of external conflict. I apply this critique to the concept of ethnic conflict and point out the consequences of such questioning for understanding the causes of violent conflict along ethnic lines.

Key words: ETHNICITY, CONFLICT THEORY, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, ETHNIC CONFLICT, INTERSTATE CONFLICT, CULTURAL POLITICS

Ethnic solidarity and its impact on political behavior has in recent years become a central focus of the social sciences, due in large part to the spate of violent conflicts described as "ethnic" in various parts of the world. Yet while the concept of ethnicity itself has undergone indepth analysis and deconstruction, the phenomenon of "ethnic conflict," though much studied, has not been as critically examined. The large literature on the phenomenon mostly takes as a given that violence along ethnic cleavages is caused by relations between two ethnic groups, either due to the nature of ethnicity itself or because of an objective or perceived conflict of interest between the two ethnic groups (or their elites). Conflict along ethnic lines is thus portrayed as the result of attempts by groups of people defined in terms of ethnicity to achieve specific goals vis-à-vis other similarly defined groups of people. The very expression "ethnic conflict" reflects this assumption.

In this paper I attempt to show that such unquestioning focus on conflict as externally motivated may at times be misleading. Drawing on a critique of conflict theory as developed in the field of international relations, I point out the conceptual and methodological problems associated with the analysis of inter-group conflict, and demonstrate the importance of **within-group** sources of external violence. I apply this critique to the concept of ethnic conflict and point out the consequences of such questioning for understanding the causes of violent conflict along ethnic lines. This preliminary attempt to conceptualize ethnic conflict in turn will, I hope, contribute to our understanding of how society-level processes such as ethnic identity affect the international system, and in particular how they are related to violent conflict at the international level.

Ethnic Conflict as an Intergroup Phenomenon

That conflict along ethnic lines is to some degree related to the existence of ethnic identities is not disputed; questioning the concept of ethnic conflict does not necessarily require rejecting as irrelevant the concept of ethnicity itself. Ethnic identity may in fact be quite important and indeed central to many people, whether it is constructed or "primordial".

But despite the arguments of some of the ethnic conflict literature, the existence of ethnic identity does not in and of itself in any logical way explain the outbreak of violent conflict along ethnic lines. In fact, this structural explanation (that is, that the very existence of ethnic groups is a structural condition that leads inevitably to conflict along those lines, which in turn escalates to violence) does not account for the absence of conflict along ethnic lines in areas which are ethnically heterogeneous, nor does it explain the timing of conflict, that is, what determines why and when a conflict breaks out along ethnic cleavages and when it becomes violent. It also assumes its conclusion, that is, it assumes that the very existence of ethnic groups causes conflict (Posen, 1993; at a macro-level, Huntington, 1993).

A more common approach in the literature on ethnic conflict focuses on the role of elites of an ethnic group. Elites ("political entrepreneurs") acting in the name of the ethnic group pursue policies meant to improve the security and well-being of the group vis-à-vis other groups, or to improve their own standing vis-à-vis elites of other ethnic groups. In this approach, ethnic conflict is either a part of or a consequence of a wider strategy meant to advance the interest of the ethnic group (Horowitz, 1985; Esman, 1995).

A third approach stresses the role of individuals, where ethnic mobilization is portrayed as collective action in which individuals rationally decide to act together in the form of an ethnic group in order to improve their well-being and security. Conflict is just one type of such rational, utility-maximizing collective action (Hechter, 1986).

These three approaches all have in common a focus on ethnic groups as units of analysis, as collectives (or groups of individuals) seeking to realize their interest and ensure their security vis-à-vis other ethnic groups. Violent conflict is thus the expression of the interest of the group, either because it is a response to group grievances, or because conflict is a strategy by which to take advantage of opportunities for the group to benefit. The cause of all action is to be found in the relations between ethnic groups, and the determining explanatory factors for conflict are found in the environment external to the group. In effect, the preferences, the costs and the benefits are all to be found in the external environment.

Yet even if political mobilization and collective action are most effective along ethnic lines, does violent conflict along these lines always represent merely a further step toward realizing the interest of the ethnic group? This is an especially germane question because those violent outbreaks that are classified as "ethnic conflicts" for the most part take place in ethnically heterogeneous environments. In such situations, any violent conflict of necessity has very negative effects not only in a material sense, due to the destruction of property, infrastructure, etc., but also due to psychological damage and the extremely negative consequences of violence in terms of interpersonal relations and the social environment.

To answer this question and better understand this phenomenon, I suggest taking a critical look at the concept of intergroup conflict. To this end, I suggest an approach that is based on a conceptual and methodological critique of conflict theory and its implicit assumption that conflict between two groups is the result of interactions between the groups. Rather, this approach points out that conflict may in fact be the outcome of processes internal to one or both of the sides. In other words, external conflict may serve an internal purpose that may not even be related to the external conflict: while the costs of a conflictual policy may be incurred in the external environment, the benefits and the preferences being realized may in fact be located in the internal sphere.

Conflict Theory and International Relations

Much work on the concept of violent conflict has been undertaken in the field of international relations (IR), and a growing number of interstate conflicts are described and justified in terms of ethnic solidarity. In addition, Donald Horowitz (1985) notes the simi-

larity between the way ethnic conflict literature looks at relations between ethnic groups and the way international relations theories talk about interstate relations. These factors indicate that a critique of international relations theories of conflict is a good place to start to re-conceptualize ethnic conflict.

The basic, most prevalent approach in international relations, and the one to which Horowitz refers when noting the similarities between relations between ethnic groups and interstate relations, is called "Realism," and takes the state as the basic unit of analysis. The state, or elites who act in the interest of the state, are rational actors who interact with other states (or other leaders) in the international arena, motivated by the goal of ensuring state survival and security. This approach sees interstate relations as determined by this interaction in the nonhierarchical environment of the international arena. Based on these assumptions, Realism concludes that violent conflict between states is the natural outcome of competition between states for resources, territory, and security (Morgenthau, 1964; Waltz, 1979; Keohane, 1986). Those versions of realism that take individual decision makers rather than states as the focus of behavior also assume that decision makers base their actions on the interest of the state vis-à-vis the outside world, and that conflict is the result of motivations, goals, preferences and other factors outside the borders of the state.¹

But by focusing exclusively on the outside, on the international arena, IR ignores the most basic tenet of theories of political realism: the centrality of power. This is the starting point of my critique of IR approaches to interstate conflict, and of other theories of inter-group conflict as well. This critique is, like Realism, based on the assumption that political actors are rational (in the sense that their behavior is intentional and goal-oriented, taking into account preferences, costs and benefits) and that their priority goal is to achieve or maintain power, either as an end in itself or as a means to other ends. But unlike Realists this approach recognizes that the centrality of power as a goal means that political actors will quite often focus not on the outside world, but rather on survival in the domestic political arena, including preserving the domestic structures of power on which a leader's position and the support of his/her main constituencies are based.² Politics in the domestic sphere is about competition between elites seeking to gain and/or maintain power in the face of challenges from other elites; the competition takes the form of attempts to gain the support of specific necessary parts of the politically relevant population and of those elites who control "power resources" (economic, military, informational). Much of political behavior will thus have as its goal this internal competition for support. By recognizing the centrality of domestic power to national political leaders, this approach, unlike IR Realism and most other IR theories, thus points out that power factors in the domestic arena must be explicitly considered in any analysis of behavior toward the outside world. It thus also points out that despite the claims of IR Realists to the contrary, non-material power resources such as legitimacy and authority, and ideas of culture such as ethnicity and religion do have an

¹ Such an assumption is seen not only in Realist approaches that look to decision makers, but also in most of the IR critiques of Realism. For example one set of critiques of Realism focuses on cognitive processes, belief systems and perceptions of decision makers to explain their foreign policy decisions (Jervis, 1976; Holsti, 1971). But they focus only on beliefs and perceptions about the international arena, ignoring the fact that any behavior also takes into account the immediate (domestic) environment in which a political actor exists. They also face the methodological obstacle of identifying beliefs that cause behavior without inferring them directly from that behavior (explaining the dependent variable with reference to the dependent variable). In fact, much of the evidence they use to infer beliefs is itself political behavior, which, although in the form of spoken statements, nevertheless cannot be understood as merely "expressive behavior."

² This is not to say that what happens in the international environment is irrelevant to foreign policy behavior. Rather, external events matter to the extent that they affect a decision maker's ability to maintain power or the domestic structure of power. At times, international factors may indeed be the decisive factors. But this is clearly not always the case.

impact on the international arena, because they are key instruments of power in the domestic arena.

Indeed, in the domestic arena in order to gain the support of the necessary politically relevant population (or to neutralize their opposition), political leaders over the long term usually cannot rely only on the threat of punishment or on promises of immediate material rewards. Although such factors are perhaps always implicitly present, of key importance are nonmaterial power resources such as legitimacy and authority, which provide leaders with the ability to influence people without reference to immediate sanctions, positive or negative. Such nonmaterial bases of power in turn rely on ideas of culture such as religion and ethnicity, that is, the communities and values of the politically relevant population of a state. Leaders must respond to the population's preferences not only in terms of economic well-being but also in terms of preferences related to such noneconomic values. Indeed, one of the most effective influence strategies is to appeal to politically relevant actors as members of a group defined in ideational (cultural, ethnic or religious) terms. In effect political appeals are expressed in the "language" of group interest defined culturally. Ideas like ethnicity thus play an important role as an instrument of influence in the domestic political arena.

Interstate Conflict: Image and Reality

In building images of legitimacy and in gaining support that ensures the survival of existing structures of power, an important role is played by the very concept of the "state", and the interests ascribed to the state. Of course, objectively the institutions and the territory of the state exist. But perhaps more important is the image of the state as a unit, as a political entity which has specific interests. The community of citizens of a state, like the "nation", is indeed a construction, an imagined community, but one which has acquired an apparent reality such that to be without state citizenship is to be a nonperson. The construction of the image of the state and its identity is, as Anderson (1992) points out, linked to an "ideology" in the wider sense of the word; the justification for the state's existence and the legitimacy of its leadership is based not only on ensuring physical and economic security, but also on ensuring other, noneconomic interests.³ Most commonly this state identity is linked in some way to a cultural identity of the politically relevant population.

Realists build their arguments on the assumption that the state is a natural entity, and that states are basically all similar units, all having the same goal of survival. (Waltz (1979) uses the analogy of enterprises, all of which have the similar goal of making a profit and expanding market share.) But in fact, the functions and goals of states are highly contested. Beyond the goal of survival, states have no single objective criterion to ascertain priority goals. Indeed, different groups within the state usually have very different visions of what the state's main goal should be, expressed in terms of conflicting basic values for the domestic political system. The fact that political conflict over the proper goal of the state is a defining characteristic of any state means that different domestic actors will also view the state's relations with the outside in very different ways.

Politics in the domestic arena is all about this contestation of the officially defined role and interest of the state. For those with power, this contention and challenging of the role of the state, especially its relationship to the domestic structure of power and those who control power resources, can at times present a tremendous threat. In this context the constructed image of the state as a real community of people who share common interests is a very powerful tool; this image can be used to create an apparent confluence of interest

³ Here I use political philosopher Walter Carlsnaes' definition of ideology as "a political doctrine which purports to motivate an actor P to do y (or not to do z) for the collective interest of Q." (1986:150).

between the preservation of the existing structure of power and the interests of the wider population defined in terms of state security and survival (that is, the survival and security of the community of state citizens); or in terms of a legitimating idea such as ethnicity (that is, linking the survival of the ethnic community to the survival of the state). Creating an image of an "objective" interest of the state vis-à-vis the outside is a powerful way to influence this domestic political competition.

Power and Discourse

Power theorists have pointed to what they call the "second face of power" as a key element of power relations: the ability to control the political agenda, to determine what options are to be considered in the political arena (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). The ability to set the agenda, to determine the limits of legitimate political discourse and political action, in effect controls the outcome, limiting it to very specific possibilities in a way that may overcome the preferences of the population. Rather than the classic concept of influence or power, where an actor induces the target to do something or not to do something, this strategy of agenda-setting indirectly creates a situation in which the outcome is already pre-determined despite the preferences of the target; the target may never have a chance to realize first or even second preferences, but may have to settle for the only available outcome.

This concept of agenda-setting points to the importance of political discourse in power relations. Indeed, shaping the limits and focus of political discourse in effect creates the limits and focus of political possibilities; the struggle over political discourse is thus often a key moment in political competition or struggle for power. Political actors may therefore undertake actions with the express intention of affecting political discourse rather than merely as an end in themselves. Especially in cases where the preferences of the majority of politically relevant actors threaten the very structure of domestic power, it is vitally important for the threatened elites to shift the focus of political debate, to affect the terms of political discourse in such a way as to remove these preferences even from legitimate consideration. One way to do this is to identify the existing structure of power with the interest of the state, either in terms of the community of state citizens (defined perhaps in ethnic terms), or in terms of the state's relations with the outside world (or in terms of relations with other ethnically-defined states), and to portray the state's existence (and thus the well-being of the state community however defined) as threatened.

Thus a key part of such a strategy is to create the perception of a real, immediate threat. In the case where there is no external threat, a credible image of a threat must be created, even if this involves provoking conflict with the outside world. Such an action will have as its primary goal influencing domestic political discourse in an attempt to affect domestic political realities, rather than influencing relations with the outside. Indeed, if the potential costs to ruling elites of changing structures of domestic power are very high, those elites most threatened will be willing to undertake policies that impose very high costs on society as a whole and even on their own interests in the short term if it will ensure their survival in power. Of key importance here is the fact that information about the outside world is available only indirectly to the vast majority of the population; such indirect sources of information (media) are in the hands of elites, who thus have the ability to construct a specific image of outside reality in a way that corresponds to their own interests.⁴

Violent conflict vis-à-vis the outside may thus be undertaken in order to achieve specific goals within the domestic arena. Such conflict, by creating an image of external threat to the state and its inhabitants, constructs a discourse in which this external threat outweighs

⁴ For a fuller elaboration of these points, see Gagnon (1994/95).

all other interests and reinforces the image of the state as a reality, that is, the image of a true community of interest of all citizens of the state. The result is not necessarily to change the population's actual beliefs, perceptions or preferences about their own immediate lives, but rather to create a political discourse focused on the external threat, to shift discourse away from issues threatening to parts of the elite, for example threats to the structure of power. The effect is to create a political environment in which there is little choice; rather than actually changing preferences, this strategy changes the possibility of realizing particular preferences, creating a situation in which people have very limited options. This strategy thus effectively demobilizes those parts of the population whose main political preference is to shift the structure of power, because the issues around which they were mobilizing have become politically irrelevant. It also works to reinforce the image of a world of similarly monolithic state actors, further reifying the image of the state as a community of interest vis-à-vis other states. It thus creates an image where the very existence of different states means that interests are automatically different along state cleavages, while interests with the state are identical.⁵ The implication, of course, is that anyone within the state who disagrees with this official view of that interest is by definition an enemy of the state and of its citizens, as beyond the community of state citizens.

This explains how violent conflict, although perhaps not rational from the point of view of state security or the well-being of the population, nevertheless may be a rational response by political actors to threats to their security and power interests from within the state.

Methodologically, the implication of this approach is that the meaning of violent conflictual behavior cannot be sought only in the environment external to the state (or the group). Rather, hypotheses must also be allowed that look to internal sources of external behavior, regardless of the fact that the justifications and descriptions of protagonists of conflict are always framed in terms of the world external to the state (or to the group). In the case of interstate relations, only by getting beyond this rhetoric of state interest and state security can we begin to understand not only the role of ideas of culture in the international system, but also the sources of violent conflicts which so often prove extremely costly to states and their populations.

Conflict Theory and Ethnic Conflict

Applying this critique to violent conflicts along ethnic lines, what becomes immediately clear is that any analysis of this kind of conflict must be willing to look beyond the supposed interest of groups of people (or elites) defined by ethnicity to understand the reasons for violent conflict. First, who is in conflict? The concept of the "ethnic group" as a party to conflict, as a unit with identifiable interests, is even more debatable than the concept of the state. This is not to say that people do not identify themselves ethnically or that ethnicity is some kind of false consciousness. Rather, just as state citizenship is a reality that exists yet does not in itself determine the goals, values or preferred policies of those who are citizens of the state, so too the mere existence of an ethnic identity does not a priori determine any commonality of interest with others with a similar identity (even "affective" interest), other than in cases of extreme threat to existence based solely on that identity.

⁵ Of particular interest here is the degree to which the academic field of international relations reflected these images and in fact served to legitimate them. It is perhaps no coincidence that the hegemonic theoretical approach in the field of IR coincides exactly with this ideological construct, nor that this "Realist" construct arose in American academic circles in the early years of the Cold War, when the enemy image of Soviet Russia played an enormously important domestic political role in the face of socio-economic trends in American society that foresaw the possibility of tremendous changes in the structure of power. Likewise, from the Soviet side, a very similar image of interstate relations (although based on the supposed class nature of international relations) reflected the interests of specific structures of power within the Soviet ruling party who were resisting attempts to reform these structures from within the party.

This becomes clear when we look at the definition of "ethnic group." An ethnic group is most commonly defined as a group of people who share a common language, culture, history, sense of belonging, etc. In the wider sense of the word, ethnicity is in fact one part of culture, and culture in turn can be seen as a shared system of communications, or a "language" in the wider sense of the word. What makes an ethnic group is therefore a shared system of communications in this wider sense. People are of course parts of a number of such communication systems, and other, non-ethnic communication systems or identities are no less "real" or relevant. Rather, in the context of the participation of the wider population in politics, combined with the territorialized nature of political power dominant in the modern world and an international system which defines territorial sovereignty in terms of national units defined culturally, ethnicity becomes the "language" that political actors are driven to use for their own communicative (power) goals.

An ethnic group's membership is thus determined not by shared interest (even "affective"), but by shared "language" or culture; that is, you are a member of an ethnic group not because of a commonality of interest with others, but because of a commonality of culture.⁶ Although ethnicity may represent a type of cleavage (though in no way an absolute, impenetrable one), it is a communicative cleavage rather than an interest cleavage. Given the extent to which politics is about communication, such cleavages of course take on added importance in the political sphere, and may indeed become a basis of political organization in specific situations. The communicative aspect of ethnicity may make it appear to be a natural cleavage, which facilitates arguments about essential differences between "our" ethnic group and others, especially in ethnically homogeneous regions where most people have no day-to-day experience of others.

But even given that this communicative element may push toward a tendency to political cleavages along ethnic lines in particular political environments, this common mode of communication says nothing at all about a commonality of interest; at most it provides political opportunity to make arguments based on this common "language". As with the state, an objective interest of all members of the group, especially when the group is as diverse as all of society, can be found only in the case of an immediate threat to the existence of the members of the group based on that identity, or to the communicative system they share. In such a case there may in fact be a clear and relatively objective common interest of all members of the group and therefore of the group itself. Yet even here, there is not necessarily one objective way to defend that interest.⁷

In fact, what becomes clear is that rarely, in cases of ethnic conflict, are we talking about unorganized masses of ethnically-identified people spontaneously undertaking actions to realize their group interest. Rather, what is involved are organizations which claim to represent the interest of individuals identified by ethnicity. These organizations can range from states to political parties to liberation movements. But what all have in common is that they are political organizations seeking to achieve political aims. Given this fact, the critique of intergroup conflict theory described above is just as applicable to groups organized and described as ethnic as it is to the state. Thus, the concept of an ethnic group and the construction of an image of commonality of interest of the group must be seen as a political strategy of those elites who claim to speak in the name of the group. If they undertake conflictual actions, these actions must likewise be seen as the result of decisions made by

⁶ The approach here, stressing the communicative nature of ethnic affiliation, is in contrast to those who stress the "affective" or emotional nature of ethnic solidarity. By stressing the "language" definition of ethnicity, this approach avoids the tendency to accept at face value arguments about a commonality of interest based on emotional or affective ties, putting it instead at the level of hypothesis to be tested.

⁷ Bosnia-Herzegovina's Bosniak-Muslim community is a case where, in the face of genocide and the real possibility of destruction, the political community is seriously divided about the best strategy for survival (in an ethnic Bosniak-ministate or as part of a reconstituted Bosnia-Herzegovina).

individuals who act in the name of an organization which acts in the name of the ethnic group; but these individuals are acting in a specific **political** context, that is, a context of conflict and competition within the organization or group.

As mentioned above, large-scale violent conflict is rarely the spontaneous action of even a significant part of an ethnic group. Rather, it is usually initiated by a very small number of people as part of a purposeful policy.⁸ Of course once violence is started it takes on its own logic and creates a spiral effect where violence may engulf entire ethnic groups. But of interest here is how the violence starts, the motivation of those elites who provoke such violent conflict.

When the elites in question are leaders of a state, acting in the name of an ethnic group, the above analysis of state leadership behavior would clearly apply; challenger elites may be either of the same ethnicity or different, although challenges from elites of the same ethnicity may be more threatening (because they can challenge culturally-based strategies) and thus would tend to produce more costly (violent) reactions. In the case of other types of ethnically-defined organizations, this same analysis is applicable. In such organizations elites seek power within the organization, as an end in itself or as a means to a specific end. To gain and maintain power, they must appeal to politically relevant audiences. The dynamic of power means that, as with the state, the actions or decisions undertaken in the name of the group by the leadership of an organization must be seen not only in light of the avowed interests of the organization, but also in the light of the interests of those who made the decision, both vis-à-vis the outside but also in terms of factors internal to the organization and internal to the group whose interest is purportedly being promoted.⁹

Just as in the case of the state, among people of the same ethnicity there may exist very different views about what constitutes the interest of the group, whether there is in fact a common interest, and if so how to achieve that interest. In certain cases, in the face of potential threats to their own power positions, elites may be willing to undertake policies that have very high costs for individual members of the ethnic group but which bring great benefits to themselves. For example, in the case of within-group challenges where the challenger elites seem likely to mobilize the majority of relevant actors against the status quo, some elites may respond by provoking external conflict in order to shift the focus of political discourse to the threat from outside (the reaction to the provoked conflict), to images of a threatening other. Part of this agenda-setting or discourse-shaping strategy takes the form of the struggle over authenticity, that is, the definition of what makes a real Serb, Croat, Aleut, etc. Only those who fulfill this definition have the legitimate right to take part in political competition; the effect is thus to shut off entire ranges of political preferences and options and to monopolize the terms of political discourse. Such monopolization of course is more easily accomplished in the shadow of some external threat.

A major part of such a strategy of violence is for those who undertake it to insist on describing and explaining it with reference to interethnic relations, as due to ethnic divisions or to the evil doings of the other ethnic group (rather than only certain individuals in the other group), as being about inter-group relations. Yet as we have seen, methodologically the meaning of these statements can be understood only by putting them into the full political context in which the speaker exists, and they must be seen as attempts by the speaker to achieve specific goals vis-à-vis particular audiences.

From this perspective it becomes clear that violent conflict along ethnic lines may have as a cause or as a goal factors within the ethnic group rather than in the relationship with

⁸ This is clearly the case in some of the most bloody examples of "ethnic conflict" in recent years: in Kenya, in Burundi and Rwanda, in Natal, South Africa around the time of the first multiparty elections there, in the Hindu-Muslim rioting in India, and in the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia.

⁹ For a similar analysis applied to parliamentary parties, see Tsebelis (1990).

other ethnic groups.¹⁰ The use of violence, which inevitably provokes retaliatory violence against members of the group, has a particularly striking effect in that it solidifies the ethnic cleavage, "proves" that commonality of interests run only along that cleavage, thus reifying the image of the "ethnic group" as a real unit with real objective interests vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in the same way that the international system has done for states. It imposes this ethnicized reality as something natural, thereby further limiting political options in the future, redirecting them away from internal conflict toward this external focus. Such a strategy thus causes this issue of external threat to monopolize political discourse, pushing aside other issues as less important. Even though it may in fact do great harm to the interests of even a majority of the individuals of a particular ethnicity, decreasing their security and well-being, it may be quite successful in achieving its intended goal, which is to promote the power interests of particular elites within the group.

This is not a case of manipulation, in the sense that people are being duped and don't really know their own interests. Rather, what this strategy does is to restructure the political environment in such a way that the only way to achieve any goal is to accept its positioning along the ethnic axis. Any preference that comes into conflict with the officially defined interest of the ethnic group is silenced and relegated to non-reality. In this way, the restructuring of a political arena along ethnic lines through references to a threatening other, although in some ways serving to mobilize certain people along ethnic lines, in other very important ways serves to demobilize and silence those parts of the population for whom the "officially" defined interest of the ethnic nation is contrary to their interests, ethnic and otherwise. By depriving the population of the ability to dissent openly, it also deprives challenger elites from being able to mobilize people on other issues. By being confined only to an officially-defined, acceptable limit of political discourse, these would-be challengers are in fact made harmless. Violence not only ensures this qualitatively new political situation but it also makes it much harder to shift discourse back away from the monolithic image of the nation toward a more natural contention and competition across the entire range of political issues.

Conclusion

This article has provided an alternative framework with which to analyze inter-state and inter-group conflicts. Accepting that external conflict may in fact have its main goals within the state provides a way of understanding the dynamics of the international system as the interaction of domestic political conflicts. It also provides a way of understanding the effect of ideas of culture (including ethnicity) on the international system without downplaying the centrality of power, without resorting to methodologically questionable essentialist and essentializing analyses that see "ethnicity" as a motivating "belief system" or "affective" factor, and without accepting "ethnic group" as anything more than a community of shared "language" rather than a community of interest. It likewise provides a way to understand the dynamics of intergroup relations as the interaction of within-group conflict, and thereby suggests a different approach to non-state violent conflicts undertaken in the name of ethnic solidarity. By focusing on politics as a process of competition between elites of the same group, it shows a way to understand violent conflict as an outcome of intra-elite political competition rather than as due to some constructed image of a "group interest" or mere irrationality. It also points out how processes of change which affect domestic power can be generators of violent conflict described in cultural terms.

Such an approach clearly helps explain those cases in which conflictual behavior seems "irrational", that is, in which the external costs are much higher than the external benefits. Yet it should also provide a way of understanding cases where conflictual behavior toward

¹⁰ For the case of Serbia, see Gagnon (1994/5).

the outside seems rational, for example where the stated goal of conflict is to gain territory, resources, diasporas, things that seem to be "natural" or "objective" interests. Clearly such interests cannot be assumed to be "natural" (as IR Realists do), especially since not every ethnic group goes to war for territorial or geo-strategic advantage. Indeed, the question of whether violent external conflict is ever "rational" (in terms of the external environment) is a fair one; this framework provides alternative explanations for such apparently "natural" behavior that nevertheless recognize the centrality of power to politics.

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ETNIČKI SUKOB KAO UNUTAR-GRUPNA POJAVA: PRELIMINARNI OKVIR

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U literaturi posvećenoj etničkim sukobima postoji tendencija da se u obzir uzmu samo izvanjski izvori sukoba. Takvo stajalište - da su glavni uzroci etničkih sukoba u karakteru odnosa među etničkim skupinama, odnosno njihovim elitama - može, međutim, biti pogrešno. U radu se izlaže kritika konfliktne teorije razradene unutar znanstvenog (politologijskoga) područja međunarodnih odnosa. Kritika obuhvaća konceptijske i metodološke probleme analize među-grupnih sukoba i ukazuje na važnost unutar-grupnih sukoba (sukoba među "domaćim" elitama) kao izvora onih prvih. U zaključku, autor ističe važnost izložene kritike za razumijevanje uzroka i izvora nasilnih sukoba koji slijede etničke markere.