PRIMORDIALISM LIVES!

Should we take ethnic groups as fixed for the purpose of political analysis? In other words, is it sensible to assume that ethnic identities cannot be reconstructed?

The constructivist claim that ethnic identities are socially constructed is clearly correct. After all, our ethnic identities are not stamped on our genes so they must be constructed. It does not follow, however, that we should drop the assumption of fixed ethnic identity. This is because ethnic identities, while constructed, are hard to reconstruct once they form.\(^1\) Reconstruction can happen but the conditions needed for reconstruction are quite rare, especially in modern times, and especially among ethnic groups in conflict. Hence the reconstruction of ethnic identities is seldom possible and the reconstruction of identity can seldom serve as a remedy for ethnic conflict today. It therefore makes sense to retain the assumption of fixed ethnic identity for most analysis, especially for analysis of the causes and prevention of ethnic conflict.

In other words, our editor Kanchan Chandra has successfully smoked a (horrors!) primordialist out of hiding. My primordialism is qualified: I think primordialist ideas do not fit all ethnic identities or situations. But I do argue that primordialism--as Chandra summarizes it--covers most modern identities and most identities in conflict situations. In short, the primordialist view has been prematurely dismissed and deserves a second look.

Three claims elaborating this argument, and a fourth point of qualification, are advanced below. (1) Ethnic identities harden when mass literacy is achieved. (2) Ethnic identities are hardened by violent conflict with others. (3) The identities of non-immigrant ethnic groups are far more firmly fixed than immigrant identities. (4) While ethnic identities can seldom be transformed into new identities, they can often be made more benign, and efforts in this direction can bolster peace.

1. **Ethnic identities harden when mass literacy is achieved.**\(^2\) The identities of non-literate people can be reshaped, but the identities of most mass-literate peoples are quite firmly

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fixed. This is because mass literacy allows the identity to be stored in writing and purveyed in common form to a mass audience. Storage in writing and purveyance in common form give an identity a more developed and uniform character than an identity stored in an oral tradition. Both development and uniformity in turn bolster the identity. A more developed identity—one that includes more historical and cultural content—inspires more loyalty because it offers more substance to be loyal to. A group with a more uniform identity is less weakened by local variation in the identity: group members find themselves sharing a more closely identical culture even with group members who are strangers, which bolsters group solidarity.

Written identities also have a resilient quality that makes them almost impossible to stamp out. The identity may lie dormant for a time, but ethnic entrepreneurs can bring it back by recovering and purveying the nation’s holy texts. This is why some modern ethnic identities have been Phoenix-like, subsiding for decades and then roaring back to life. Scottish, Welsh and Breton nationalism all illustrate.

The hardening effect of mass literacy on ethnic identities is seen in the dramatic slowing of ethnic assimilation in regions where mass literacy has arrived. Eurasia’s past is littered with vanished pre-literate identities. The Hittites, Sumerians, Babylonians, Phoenicians, Amorites, Edomites, Moabites, Jebusites, Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Parthians, Picts, Gepids, Getes, Vandals, and many more have disappeared into the mists of history. But once literacy began spreading in the nineteenth century the vanishing of Eurasian identities became much less common, and it almost ended among groups with broad literacy and a written history and culture. One could even argue that this class is an empty set—that there are no clear examples of major mass-literate Eurasian identities that have vanished.

Nineteenth-century France made peasants with local identities into Frenchmen before these local identities were crystallized and broadly propagated through writing. Nineteenth-century Italy did the same. Today such identity reconstruction would be far harder in Europe because Europe’s cultures have been vastly hardened by being recorded and widely published. The story shows that identities are often etched into stone when they are printed on paper.

2. Ethnic identities are hardened by violent conflict with others. Conflict enhances the hardening effect of mass literacy on identity by enhancing the emotional impact of recorded national memories. The experience of warring or oppressed peoples, filled as it is with tales of common struggle and sacrifice for the common good, creates a stronger we-feeling than the experience of people who escape these tragedies; hence it has stronger effects when national scribes record and purvey it.

For this reason groups in conflict are especially poor candidates for identity change, and identity change is an especially unlikely remedy for ethnic conflict.

3. The identities of non-immigrant ethnic groups are far more firmly fixed than the

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identities of immigrant ethnic groups. Immigrant groups often assimilate, remaking their identities in the process. Thus the ethnic identities of many immigrant groups in major immigrant states--the United States, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and English-speaking Canada--have largely faded. But non-immigrant groups assimilate far less often, and in modern times ethnic identities in Africa, Asia, and Europe--which are peopled largely by groups that do not see themselves as immigrants--have been much more enduring. The identities of peoples living in immigrant-majority states but were not voluntary immigrants themselves--such as the Quebecois and native Indians of Canada, the African-Americans and native Indians of the United States, and many native Indians of Latin America--have also proved durable.

Three explanations for this empirical regularity suggest themselves. A moral explanation suggests that people accept the duty to compromise their culture when by immigrating they willingly choose to live with people of other cultures. An immigrant self-selection explanation suggests that individuals with weaker ethnic identities are more willing to leave their homelands to emigrate; and that cultural leaders are especially unlikely to emigrate because they abandon their personal sense of identity by doing so. As a result immigrant cultures are comprised of weak ethnic identifiers, and they lack cultural leaders; hence they assimilate easily. Finally, a state-selection explanation suggests that states with liberal and tolerant cultures become immigrant states because they allow more immigrants to enter than more xenophobic states, and because immigrants prefer to move to these more tolerant states. Then, goes the argument, these tolerant states proceed to treat their immigrants better; hence the identities of their immigrants, unhardened by oppression, fade more easily. In this view immigrant states are different to start with, having aspects that are conducive to identity change.

Whatever the explanation for this empirical regularity, its implication is that the assimilation of immigrant groups in the United States is atypical of the wider world, so extrapolation from the U.S. experience is misleading. Most important, it suggests that prescriptions drawn from the U.S. experience will likely fail in nonimmigrant societies. Americans cannot bring ethnic peace to other lands just by advertising the American example of mutual ethnic tolerance. Ethnic groups in Bosnia, Iraq, Sri Lanka and the Caucasus cohabit in a non-immigrant setting to which American experience is largely irrelevant. Simply hectoring them to adopt American habits of non-discrimination will not improve their relations.

In summary to this point: mass literacy, violent conflict, and non-immigrant character are all barriers to identity change. I further think these factors interact in synergistic fashion. Specifically, groups with any one of these attributes may still change identities, but groups that are both mass literate and are either non-immigrant or are in violent conflict with others

5 This explanation confronts large empirical anomalies, however. Specifically, it seems to predict that immigrants should compromise with all groups in their new homelands, while in fact settlers compromise with each other but deal harshly with indigenous people.

6 Daniel Byman suggests the self-selection and state-selection arguments.
almost never change identity. Since most of the world is now both mass-literate and non-immigrant, and will increasingly fit this description as literacy spreads further in the years ahead, we should expect little identity change in the future. And we should expect little identity change among mass-literate ethnic groups in conflict. Hence we must seek to remedy most ethnic violence by means other than identity change.

4. Ethnic identities can be made more benign. The basic direction of most identities--an identification as German or Basque or Croat or French--is quite fixed, but the texture or flavor of identities can be reconstructed. Specifically, identities can be remade from malignant to benign. For example, German nationalism has been dramatically remade from hegemonic to tolerant since 1945. Germany once viewed its neighbors as dangerous and inferior and claimed a right to dominate them. That worldview has been replaced by a tolerant German nationalism that claims no right to dominate. Other European nationalisms have also assumed a much more benign aspect since World War II, mainly because Europeans have largely abandoned the spreading of chauvinism through the schools and moved to commonize their teaching of European history.

Non-immigrant mass-literate groups are bound to remain who they are. Serbs will be Serbs and Croats will be Croats. Neither will assimilate to being something else. But Serb and Croat nationalism can be tempered into something more benign. The German example shows how far this tempering can go and how much can be achieved by nurturing it. Redirecting identities is usually a Quixotic project but reflavoring identities shows great promise as a palliative to ethnic conflict.

What about multiple identities and permeable identity boundaries? In addition to claiming that identities are constructed, constructivists make two further claims in support of arguments that identities are not fixed: that individuals have multiple identities, and that ethnic identities have permeable boundaries. Both claims are weak.

Individuals do have multiple identities, but in modern times ethnic identities tend to become paramount; and once they become paramount, ethnic identities tend to remain paramount. The worldwide trend of the past two centuries has been toward giving greater loyalty to one's national or ethnic group, while giving less loyalty to one's clan, region, religion, state, or--since the collapse of Marxism--one's political ideology. Exceptions can be found to this rule but it is a strong tendency.

There is seepage around the edges of most ethnic groups. Even groups with firm identities see some intermarriage with other groups. But this gives us little hope for managing ethnic conflict. Intermarriage among Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks was fairly common in Bosnia before 1992 but this did little to slow the Bosnian slaughter of 1992-95. The lesson is that ethnic groups and ethnic conflicts can survive a good deal of intermarriage. If so, the permeability of ethnic boundaries that constructivists observe must be very large to offer a solution to ethnic conflict.

Those who underestimate the strength and endurance of ethnic identities are bound to blunder in their dealings with nationalism. Hence the constructivist tendency toward this underestimate is dangerous as well as incorrect.

For example, United States foreign policy has often erred because it underestimated the strength and endurance of ethnic identities. The U.S. launched its Cold War intervention in
Vietnam (1961-73) partly because Americans failed to realize that they would collide with a powerful Vietnamese nationalism too strong to overcome. Other U.S. Cold War interventions--in Iran, Guatemala, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Angola, Nicaragua, Cambodia, El Salvador, and elsewhere--were launched to prevent the Soviet Union from extending its empire, in ignorance that powerful Third World nationalisms already made a wider Soviet empire impossible (as the Afghan resistance showed during 1980-1989). Later the U.S. bungled in its efforts to prevent and then manage conflicts in the Balkans because it failed to appreciate the power of the ethnic identities in that region. U.S. troops are still policing the 1995 Bosnia settlement because that settlement was naively premised on the expectation that Bosnia's three ethnic groups would curb their identities and learn to get along.

Constructivist arguments that downplay the strength and endurance of ethnic identities thus move U.S. thinking in the wrong direction. Americans have erred far more often in underestimating than overestimating the strength of these identities, with tragic results.