Is Ethnic Conflict Inevitable?

Parting Ways Over Nationalism and Separatism

Better Institutions, Not Partition

JAMES HABYARIMANA, MACARTAN HUMPHREYS, DANIEL POSNER, AND JEREMY WEINSTEIN

Jerry Muller ("Us and Them," March/April 2008) tells a disconcerting story about the potential for ethnic diversity to generate violent conflict. He argues that ethnic nationalism—which stems from a deeply felt need for each people to have its own state—"will continue to shape the world in the twenty-first century." When state and ethnic-group boundaries do not coincide, "politics is apt to remain ugly."

Muller points to the peace and stability in Europe today as evidence of the triumph of "the ethnonationalist project": it is only because of a half century of violent separation of peoples through expulsions, the redrawing of state boundaries, and the outright destruction of communities too weak to claim territories of their own that Europe today enjoys relative peace. Elsewhere, the correspondence between states and nations is much less neat, and there Muller seems to agree with Winston Churchill that the "mixture of populations [will] . . . cause endless trouble." He advocates partition as the best solution to this difficult problem.

If correct, his conclusion has profound implications both for the likelihood of peace in the world and for what might be done to promote it. But is it correct? Do ethnic divisions inevitably generate violence? And why does ethnic diversity sometimes give rise to conflict?

In fact, ethnic differences are not inevitably, or even commonly, linked to violence on a grand scale. The assumption that because conflicts are often ethnic, ethnicity must breed conflict is an example of a classical error sometimes called "the base-rate fallacy." In the area of ethnic conflict and violence, this fallacy is common. To assess the extent to which Muller falls prey to it, one needs some sense of the "base."

How frequently does ethnic conflict occur, and how often does it occur in the context of volatile mismatches between ethnic groups and states? A few years

ago, the political scientists James Fearon and David Laitin did the math. They used the best available data on ethnic demography for every country in Africa to calculate the "opportunities" for four types of communal conflict between independence and 1979: ethnic violence (which pits one group against another), irredentism (when one ethnic group attempts to secede to join co-ethnic communities in other states), rebellion (when one group takes action against another to control the political system), and civil war (when violent conflicts are aimed at creating a new ethnically based political system). Fearon and Laitin identified tens of thousands of pairs of ethnic groups that could have been in conflict. But they did not find thousands of conflicts (as might have been expected if ethnic differences consistently led to violence) or hundreds of new states (which partition would have created). Strikingly, for every one thousand such pairs of ethnic groups, they found fewer than three incidents of violent conflict. Moreover, with few exceptions, African state boundaries today look just as they did in 1960. Fearon and Laitin concluded that communal violence, although horrifying, is extremely rare.

The base-rate fallacy is particularly seductive when events are much more visible than nonevents. This is the case with ethnic conflict, and it may have led Muller astray in his account of the triumph of European nationalism. He emphasizes the role of violence in homogenizing European states but overlooks the peaceful consolidation that has resulted from the ability of diverse groups—the Alsatians, the Bretons, and the Provençals in France; the Finns and the Swedes in Finland; the Genoese, the Tuscans, and the Venetians in Italy—to live together. By failing to consider the conflicts that did not happen, Muller may have misunderstood the dynamics of those that did.

Of course, ethnic divisions do lead to violent conflict in some instances. Violence may even be so severe that partition is the only workable solution. Yet this extreme response has not been required in most cases in which ethnic divisions have existed. Making sense of when ethnic differences generate conflict—and knowing how best to attempt to prevent or respond to them when they do—requires a deeper understanding of how ethnicity works.

Muller offers one explanation for why ethnic identities figure so centrally in political conflict. Corresponding as it does to "enduring propensities of the human spirit," he argues, ethnonationalism "is a crucial source of both solidarity and enmity." This explanation echoes a fairly conventional account of ethnic conflict according to which people tend to prefer members of their own group and, in some cases, have active antipathy toward outgroup members, making conflict the inevitable result. This is an appealing narrative. It helps outsiders make sense of the seemingly gratuitous violence of Africa's bloodiest conflicts. It resonates with the demonization of immigrants and the threats of ethnic domination that politicians around the world invoke in election campaigns. It appears consistent with demands for greater autonomy and self-government by ethnic enclaves in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. If ethnic diversity generates antipathies so deep that they cannot be realistically resolved, separation becomes the obvious and, perhaps, only feasible antidote, as Muller concludes. But positive feelings

toward in-group members and antipathies for out-group members might not be the correct explanation for why political action is often organized along ethnic lines.

Indeed, recent research points to at least two alternative explanations. One argument suggests that members of the same group tend to work together to achieve collective ends not because of their discriminatory preferences but because of efficiency: they speak the same language, have access to the same types of information, and share social networks. In environments with scarce resources, they may even choose to work together against other groups, whether or not they care for or even like their peers. Thus, political coalitions form along ethnic lines not because people care more for their own but simply because it is easier to collaborate with their ethnic peers to achieve collective ends.

A second account emphasizes the norms that may develop within ethnic groups. Even when people see no efficiency gains from working with their co-ethnics and have no discriminatory preferences, they may still favor their own simply because they expect them to discriminate in their favor as well. Such reciprocity is most likely to develop in environments that are devoid of the institutions and practices—for example, enforceable contracts and impartial state institutions—that protect people from being taken advantage of by others. In such cases, reciprocity is a protection against being cheated.

Distinguishing these different theories is important because each one suggests a starkly different strategy for dealing with ethnic conflict. If the problem is tribal or national antipathies, there may well be some utility in separating groups. But if it stems from the technological advantages that accrue to members of the same ethnic group, then initiatives that break down barriers to cooperation (for example, Julius Nyerere's introduction of Swahili as a common language in Tanzania in the 1970s) are more likely to bear fruit. If instead discrimination in favor of one's ethnic peers is a coping strategy that individuals employ to compensate for the absence of functional and impartial state institutions, then the best response may be greater investment in formal institutions so that individuals are assured that cheating will be punished and that cooperation across ethnic lines will be reciprocated.

To discern these competing perspectives, we set out to study ethnicity and conflict using experimental games. We put people in strategic interactions with members of their own and other ethnic groups and examined the decisions they made. We carried out our research in Uganda, where differences between ethnic groups have been a basis for political organization and the source of persistent national political crisis and violent conflict since independence.

Remarkably, we found no evidence that people care more for the welfare of individuals from their own ethnic groups than for the welfare of those from other groups. Given the opportunity to make anonymous donations of cash to randomly selected partners, individuals were just as generous to out-group members as they were to their co-ethnics. One could easily tell a story that links Uganda's decades of ethnic conflict to tribal antipathies (and many have), but our research provided no evidence of such antipathies at work among a diverse sample of Ugandans.

We also found only weak evidence that impediments to cooperation across group lines explain the ethnic dynamics of Ugan-

dan politics. In another set of experiments, we randomly matched participants with a partner and confronted the pairs with tasks that put a premium on successful communication and cooperation. We found no relation between the success in completing these tasks and the ethnic identities of the participants; success rates were just as high when individuals were paired with members of their own ethnic groups as when they were paired with people outside their ethnic groups. Hence, efficiency gains alone cannot easily account for the propensity of political coalitions to take on an ethnic character.

Instead, our studies suggested that patterns of favoritism and successful collective action within ethnic groups should be attributed to the practice of reciprocity, which ensures cooperation among group members. Our subjects showed no bias in favor of in-group members when given the opportunity to make cash donations anonymously, but their behavior changed dramatically when they knew that their partners could see who they were. When they knew that other players would know how they behaved, subjects discriminated strongly in favor of their co-ethnics. This shows, at least in our sample of Ugandans, that ethnic differences generate conflict not by triggering antipathy or impeding communication but by making salient a set of reciprocity norms that enable ethnic groups to cooperate for mutual gain.

Our experimental findings—from a setting quite different from the European context that Muller treats but in which ethnic divisions run equally deep—reveal that what might look from the outside like an intractable problem of discriminatory preferences may instead reflect norms of reciprocity that develop when individuals have few other institutions they can rely on to police the behavior of others.

Of course, ethnicity may not work in Uganda today the same way that it does in other parts of the world or that it did at other points in history. But our results do point out a need to consider seriously the possibility that the conventional view is at best an incomplete and at worst an incorrect explanation for why ethnic nationalism generates conflict when and where it does.

If ethnic hatreds are not at work, separating groups may not make much sense as a strategy for mitigating the corrosive effects of ethnic divisions. It might be far more important to invest in creating impartial and credible state institutions that facilitate cooperation across ethnic lines. With such institutions in place, citizens would no longer need to rely disproportionately on ethnic networks in the marketplace and in politics. In this respect, modernization may be the antidote to ethnic nationalism rather than its cause.

JAMES HABYARIMANA *is Assistant Professor of Public Policy at Georgetown University.* MACARTAN HUMPHREYS *is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Columbia University.* DANIEL POSNER *is Associate Professor of Political Science at UCLA.* JEREMY WEINSTEIN *is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Stanford University.*

Separatism's Final Country

RICHARD ROSECRANCE AND ARTHUR STEIN

Muller argues that ethnonationalism is the wave of the future and will result in