

In its most direct definition, ethnic conflict is conflict between different ethnicities, but both the words “conflict” and “ethnicity” can be incredibly vague. For instance, one form of ethnic conflict occurred during Yugoslavia’s breakup in the early 1990s. Yugoslavia was made up of many different nationalities, which fought each other in civil war as Yugoslavia fractured and broke apart. However, civil war is by no means the only type of ethnic conflict, and nationalities are not the only form of ethnicity. In the case of Rwanda in 1994, the ethnicities were the Hutu and Tutsi peoples, and the conflict was genocide. In order to understand these conflicts, it is vital to understand how they began, and the general consensus is that ethnic entrepreneurs used ethnicities for their own political gain. In order for these ethnic entrepreneurs to cause ethnic conflict, though, they must need supporters. Here, there is much less consensus on why people follow ethnic entrepreneurs. Some argue that ethnicity is immutable and primordial, and ethnic entrepreneurs take advantage of these pre-existing differences to gain a following. However, while the popularity of ethnic entrepreneurs can be partly explained by primordial differences, it is better explained by historical and political factors, both of which are only amplified by these ethnic entrepreneurs to pursue their self-interested goals.

One of the two major schools regarding ethnic conflict in comparative politics is the primordialist school. Their argument claims ethnicity is something designated at birth that cannot be changed, and everything about a person is defined by their ethnic identity.¹ Due to this immutability, it is impossible to separate one’s ethnic identity from oneself. The inability to separate ethnicity from one’s identity is only furthered by the primordialists’ view that ethnicity has physical characteristics, further defining one’s ethnic identity.² Hence, it is impossible to not

¹ Harold R. Isaacs, “Basic Group Identity: The Idols of the Tribe,” *Ethnicity Theory and Experience* 1, no. 1 (1973): 31-34.

² Isaacs, “Basic Group Identity,” 36-37.

identify oneself with their ethnicity and feel like a part of that group. Such grouping is only furthered by the idea that ethnicities can act like one large family, and everyone within that ethnicity is bound to each other by blood.³ So, the primordialist argument is that because ethnicity is immutable, people group themselves among their own ethnicity, and because not everyone is the same ethnicity, it leads to multiple sides being formed, which causes conflict. However, these ideas fail to consider why ethnic conflict occurs at a set time, as well as other factors outside ethnicity itself.

In response to the primordialist school's downsides, the instrumentalist school argues something much different. Generally, this school claims that ethnic identity is not immutable, and can be changed. Moreover, states can even construct entirely new ethnic identities for political gain.⁴ Because ethnic identity is a variable tool in this approach, ethnic mobilization can be increased when it is important for politics, and can be mobilized along specific borders rather than as a whole.⁵ Instead of being completely immutable and predetermined, ethnicities can be made and mobilized for political gain. While this school also has its issues, most notably the inability to account for the strength of ethnic bonds, it allows for a more complete understanding of ethnic conflict when used with other factors, such as the history of the region.

Yugoslavia was formed as an amalgamation of many different cultures, and that is what ethnic entrepreneurs used to tear it apart in the 1990s. They were able to do this because they emphasized the different ethnicities' histories and because administration was split along ethnic lines. The region that would become Yugoslavia had been split among many different lines in its history, and almost every ethnic group that was in Yugoslavia had been an independent kingdom

³ Clifford Geertz, "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States," in *The Interpretations of Culture* (New York, United States: Basic Books, 1973), 260-62.

⁴ Joane Nagel, "The Political Construction of Ethnicity," in *Competitive Ethnic Relations* (Cambridge: Academic Press, 1986), 99.

⁵ Nagel, "The Political Construction," 102-106.

at least once before joining Yugoslavia.⁶ The primordialists would argue that this alone would define ethnic identities, and a large variety of ethnicities with different cultures and backstories would have a large amount of tension. This is bolstered by the Croats being staunchly opposed to the Serbs in Yugoslavia's parliament in the years between World War I and World War II as well as the massacre of Serbs by the Croats in World War II.⁷ However, this is countered by the fact that both sides wanted union and that there was a large amount of integration among the peoples of Yugoslavia, from the Serbian and Croatian languages being nearly the same language to a small amount of people in Yugoslavia thinking of themselves as Yugoslavs rather than any distinct ethnic identity.⁸ Hence, it would not be sufficient to say that people followed ethnic entrepreneurs' lead solely based on primordial beliefs, for the ethnicities peacefully coexisted before. Instead, it is better explained that the ethnic entrepreneurs emphasized historical and institutional factors to rally support.

Instead of capitalizing on the integration and coexistence of Yugoslavia, ethnic entrepreneurs like Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman used the histories and politics of the region to split it apart for their own gain, and by doing so, caused ethnic conflict. For instance, Milošević stoked Serbian nationalism to get control of Serbia, claiming that the Serbian nation was under attack by the rest of Yugoslavia and that it could only be held together by the Serbs taking full control of Yugoslavia.⁹ Milošević's argument was incredibly effective, and Yugoslavia's organization as a federation of equals based on ethnic boundaries only sectionalized the population, easing Milošević into power in Serbia.¹⁰ Tuđman used much of the same tactics, stirring up Croat nationalism and anti-Serb resentment in order to win the first multi-party

⁶ Mihailo Crnobrnja, *The Yugoslav Drama, Second Edition* (Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 25-35.

⁷ Crnobrnja, *The Yugoslav Drama*, 55-57 and 65-66.

⁸ Crnobrnja, *The Yugoslav Drama*, 19-22, 48-50 and 253-54.

⁹ Crnobrnja, *The Yugoslav Drama*, 97-102.

¹⁰ Crnobrnja, *The Yugoslav Drama*, 69-70.

elections in Croatia.¹¹ Hence, people followed ethnic entrepreneurs because they emphasized the different histories and cultures of the region, no matter how small those differences were. Because they used these tactics to get into power, they also fueled ethnic hatred, and in turn caused ethnic conflict.

Rwanda devolved into ethnic genocide for much the same reasons Yugoslavia did, albeit in a more extreme fashion. It had a history of ethnic tension that colonial powers took advantage of, and while both sides had much in common, the tension between the ethnicities and institutionalization of ethnic roles ultimately led to genocide. The two largest ethnic groups in Rwanda are the Hutu and the Tutsi, who had both migrated to Rwanda.¹² While the Tutsi became the rulers over the more numerous Hutu, both also came to live together and intermarry, making it difficult to discern between the two ethnicities.¹³ During the colonial period, Rwanda was colonized by Germany and then Belgium, both of whom enforced and institutionalized the divide between Tutsi and Hutu in order to maintain their control.¹⁴ From a primordialist view, this institutionalization and history of one being above than the other would certainly cause ethnic conflict. The divide between the two would be the sole reason for ethnic hatred and conflict, which devolved into genocide as the power structure was flipped post-colonialism, and the Hutus became the rulers of the Tutsis.¹⁵ However, this does not account for the aforementioned intermarriage, and it does not accurately explain why Rwanda devolved into genocide.

In Rwanda, ethnic entrepreneurs capitalized on the pre-existing divides between the Hutu and Tutsi, using the institutionalization given in colonialism to more adequately split the two groups and discern who was Tutsi and who was Hutu. Hutu ethnic entrepreneurs also cultivated a

¹¹ Crnobrnja, *The Yugoslav Drama*, 114.

¹² Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Picador, 1998), 47.

¹³ Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You*, 47-50.

¹⁴ Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You*, 53-56.

¹⁵ Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You*, 58-61.

hate for the Tutsis for their own gain; in one case, Hassan Ngeze used the magazine *Kangura* to achieve this goal via anti-Tutsi propaganda.¹⁶ As these tactics of popularizing hate increased in prevalence, so did the backlash from the Tutsis, culminating in the Rwandan Patriotic Front, a Tutsi-led guerilla group, fighting against the Hutu-led Rwandan government in 1990-93.¹⁷ This only led state leaders to act even more as ethnic entrepreneurs and popularize theories of “kill or be killed”.¹⁸ All of this culminated in the Rwandan genocide in 1994, for people were so surrounded by this propaganda the ethnic entrepreneurs used that they began to believe it. When the order was given for the Tutsis to be killed, it was either that or being killed by the Tutsis in the Hutus’ minds, making them follow the entrepreneurs’ orders and commit genocide.

Primordial differences can explain ethnic conflict, but historical, institutional, and political factors offer a much more complete explanation of ethnic conflict and why people follow ethnic entrepreneurs. However, primordial differences still can play much of a factor. It was by bringing up these differences that ethnic entrepreneurs were able to form an ideology for people to rally behind in Yugoslavia and Rwanda. This was furthered by the history of each region and how the entrepreneurs rallied support. Due to the similarities between the two cases, both can be used to work towards a general theory on why ethnic conflict happens and how to prevent it, as well as explaining other cases of ethnic conflict to bolster the theory.

¹⁶ Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You*, 85-88.

¹⁷ Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You*, 88-100.

¹⁸ Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You*, 93-94.

NOTES

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