IDENTITY AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

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Description

This chapter explores the relationship between identity, in particular ethnic identity, and political violence. To what extent are war and violence the outcome of antagonistic identities? And once violence erupts, what impact does it have on how people identify themselves and others? There are two dominant approaches in the literature. The identity-based approach tends to regard conflict and violence as a consequence of pre-existing ethnic antagonism. Violence-based approaches, in contrast, have challenged this causality, stressing that ethnic antagonism is often the outcome of violence rather than its direct cause. The chapter argues that both are problematic in different ways: whereas identity-based theories do not take the generative power of violence seriously enough, violence-based theories run the risk of taking it too seriously and often do not pay significant attention to individual agency and people's ability to resist violence. However, it is not only individual responses to violence that differ but attitudes towards violence can also change over time.

Synonyms: ethnic conflict, nationalism, violent conflict

Introduction

With the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, the 1990s witnessed the eruption of several major "ethnic wars," which in many cases resulted in ethnic cleansing and the forced expulsion of people from their homes. This includes the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, which produced several millions of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), as well as the lesser known wars in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh that led to the emergence of so-called unrecognized states and the long-term displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians. But atrocities were not just limited to the European and Eurasian context: there was also the genocide in Rwanda, in which over half of the country's Tutsi population was killed. What these conflicts have in common is not just the brutality with which they were fought, but also the degree of intimacy involved. Often, the people who were fighting each other had a long history of co-habitation. This raises important questions: how did bloodshed on such a large scale and between people who had been living side by side peacefully for decades become possible? Was this violence the culmination of long-standing ethnic or national cleavages that finally surfaced?

The aim of this chapter is to address these issues by exploring the causal relationship between identity, in particular ethnic identity, and political violence. To what extent are war

and violence the outcome of antagonistic identities? And once violence erupts, what impact does it have on how people identify themselves and others? There are two dominant approaches in the literature. The identity-based approach tends to regard conflict and violence as a consequence of pre-existing ethnic antagonism. Violence-based approaches, in contrast, have challenged this causality, stressing that ethnic antagonism is often the outcome of violence rather than its direct cause. The chapter argues that both are problematic in different ways: whereas identity-based theories do not take the generative power of violence seriously enough, violence-based theories run the risk of taking it too seriously and often do not pay significant attention to individual agency and people's ability to resist violence. However, it is not only individual responses to violence that differ but attitudes towards violence can also change over time.

The chapter thus highlights the importance of studying violence not simply as epiphenomenal, but as a phenomenon in its own right. By attending to the experience of those affected on the ground, it also goes beyond a more traditional focus on military and political institutions (for a detailed discussion of the relevance of an anthropological approach in peace and conflict studies, see "Culture, Anthropology, and Ethnography in Fieldwork"). As anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom (1997, p. 115) has argued, "to understand war is to understand not only the places where it is formulated and directed, but the places where violence is enacted in the name of war." Such a bottom-up and agency-centered approach not only accounts for the ways in which ordinary people reproduce ethnic antagonism, but is also sensitive to people's ability to resist antagonistic nationalism and violence, both during warfare and in its aftermath.

The sections that follow discuss the two dominant approaches and identify their main gaps and shortcomings. The first section focuses on primordialist and constructivist theories of identity that tend to regard violence as an outcome of either innate antipathies or antagonistically constructed identities. The second section shifts the attention from the role of elites to the sphere of the "everyday," focusing on how mass violence can profoundly change social realities on the ground. The third section looks at the *post*war condition and asks: how is co-existence possible once war is over? Drawing on ethnographic research from Bosnia, it demonstrates that even though postwar societies are characterized by a polarized atmosphere, postwar identities are not necessarily unambiguous. The chapter concludes with a brief summary and some reflections.

Violence as the culmination of ethnic antagonism: from ancient to modern hatred

The question of how neighbors turn into deadly enemies has received significant scholarly attention in recent decades. From a rationalist perspective, people are expected to choose peace over war, as the economic consequences of war and violence are usually disastrous. As Rui de Figueiredo and Barry Weingast (1999, p. 262) put it, "the individuals and groups locked in these struggles forgo the enormous benefits of economic and social cooperation in favour of bitter violence and hardship. Why do citizens take actions leading to this negative-sum outcome?"

Some have looked for answers to this paradox in the realm of collective identity, i.e. our belonging to a group. Psychologists have argued that it is a natural function of the brain to categorize ourselves and others into collectives (Hogg & Abrams, 1998; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; e.g. Tajfel & Turner, 1986). According to Michael Hogg and Dominic Abrams (1998, 64), "categorization is a fundamental and universal process [...] because it satisfies a basic human need for cognitive parsimony." It "imposes structure on the world and our experiences therein" and "brings the world into sharper focus and creates a perceptual environment in which things are more black and white, less fuzzy and ambiguous." However, while psychological theories have highlighted the cognitive foundations of group identification, they make no assumptions about the kind of group with which people identify.

In recent times, it has been the nation, or ethnic group, that has been singled out as the most meaningful source of collective identification. So-called primordialists conceive of ethnic and national groups as timeless and naturally occurring; they believe "that humanity is naturally divided into separate and distinct nationalities or nations" and that "members of a nation reach full freedom and fulfillment of their essence by developing their national identity and culture, and their identity with the nation is superior to all other forms of identity – class, gender, individual, familial, tribal, regional, imperial, dynastic, religious, racial, or state patriotic" (Suny, 2014, p. 870). Applied to war and violent conflict, this thinking has manifested itself in the belief that current conflicts are eruptions of so-called "ancient hatreds" that have existed between certain groups throughout history. These antagonisms are seen as a direct consequence of the unchanging, essentialist nature of the identities of ethnic groups, making them prone to out-group hostility, and ultimately, if too close in proximity, inter-group violence. In short, according to primordialists, "ethnic violence results from antipathies and antagonisms that are enduring properties of ethnic groups" (Fearon & Laitin, 2000, p. 849).

Primordialist assumptions, which date back to the 18th-century German Romantic philosophers Fichte and Herder, have long lost their credibility in academia and there is

hardly a scholar who would apply this label voluntarily in relation to their work (the two names most commonly associated with primordialism are Pierre van den Berghe [1978] and Edward Shils [1957]). Instead, it has become common sense to look at nations – and ethnic groups – not as ancient entities that have a timeless existence in the world, but as fundamentally modern phenomena. Of particular significance in this context were the ground-breaking works of Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson. Gellner (1983) famously argued that nation-states were constructed by elites in order to facilitate industrialization. While he recognized that elites draw on some pre-existing "stuff" in their construction of the nation, he did not regard any *specific* pre-existing material as necessary; as he put it, "[t]he cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism are often arbitrary historical inventions. Any shred and patch would have served as well" (1983, p. 55). Anderson (1991, p. 6), on the other hand, has referred to the nation as an "imagined political community" – a community that is based on communicative practices that create an "imagined" bond between people who are, in fact, strangers. Both Gellner and Anderson regard nations as top-down constructions that rely on the homogenizing power of educational and cultural institutions, and – in Anderson's case – the media, in particular.

Anderson's focus on language paved the way for post-modern and post-structuralist approaches that highlight the power of discourse in creating a sense of "we-ness". In his book *Banal Nationalism* (1995), Michael Billig turned to the production of a national common sense through symbolic practices. Whether it is a sports event or the weather forecast, "in so many ways, the citizenry are daily reminded of their national place in a world of nations" (1995, p. 8). Seemingly banal practices of "flagging," such as the flashing of an emblematic flag on the screen when a television newscaster mentions a foreign country, instill a deep-seated natural division of the world into "us" and "them," as they "continually remind us that we are 'us' and, in so doing, permit us to forget that we are being reminded" (1995, p. 175). Billig's emphasis on the power of language as something that does not simply describe but *constitutes* reality thus further dismantled the idea of groups as natural and timeless and highlights the constitutive role of discursive practices. As critical discourse theorists have argued, the "group" is not a real thing in the world, but an object of constant discursive re-creation and re-negotiation – and manipulation (Wodak, Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 2009, p. 9).

Despite certain differences, what both modern and post-modern approaches to nationhood and nationalism agree on is that the nation is fundamentally a social construct that in some way or another serves the interests of those in power. Against this background,

scholars of political violence have moved away from the "ancient hatred" model and instead focused on how elites invoke a discourse of centuries-old nationhood to mobilize the public in favor of violent interventions. Stuart Kaufman (2001), for instance, has argued that ethnic conflict is the outcome not of ancient but "modern" hatreds – modern in the sense that they "are renewed in each generation by mythologies that are typically modern revisions of older stories with quite different messages" (2001, p. 11). He thus distances himself from the primordial conception of ethnic groups as timeless and naturally occurring, but is also critical of so-called "elite manipulation" approaches which sharply differentiate between the interests of elites and that of the masses (e.g., Brass, 1991, 1997). Instead, Kaufman aligns himself with the tradition of ethnosymbolism, which views nations as modern constructs that have their origin in pre-modern ethnic communities (so-called "ethnies") which provide the basis for the myths, symbols, memories and key values that, according to ethnosymbolists, define modern nations (Smith, 1986, 2009). Ethnosymbolism thus stresses the relationship between elites and masses as a two-way street, and, in doing so, seeks to explore "the 'inner world' of the members of nations" (Smith, 2015, p. 2).

From this perspective, ethnic symbols are indeed used by manipulative elites, "but they only work when there is some real or perceived conflict of interest at work and mythically based feelings of hostility that can be tapped using ethnic symbols" (Kaufman, 2001, p. 12). What is essential for the outbreak of violence is a combination of hostile myths, ethnic fears, and a window of opportunity to act on them. An example is the to date unresolved Georgian-Abkhaz conflict (for a detailed discussion, see "Georgian-Abkhaz conflict"), which, according to Kaufman, was fueled by two mutually exclusive myths: whereas Georgians stressed that Abkhazia was a historical part of Georgia and therefore belonged to the Georgian state, ethnic Abkhazians grounded their claims for independent statehood in their own self-understanding as the indigenous inhabitants of the region. Perestroika provided the opportunity for these ambitions to be voiced more prominently. While elites initially tried to restrain mobilization, "violence quickly resulted anyway because hostile feelings and attitudes led the groups to rule out compromise" (2001, p. 86). Yet, the hostile myths at the heart of the conflict were not simply "ancient" but served a contemporary purpose: to claim exclusive territorial ownership, a notion that was significantly strengthened by the Soviet territorialization of national identity through homeland republics (Kaiser, 1994). As Donald Horowitz (1985, p. 99) has noted, although "history can be a weapon, [...] a current conflict cannot generally be explained by simply calling it a revived form of an earlier conflict."

Everyday ethnicity and the transformative power of violence

The approaches discussed in the previous sections demonstrate that there is nothing – or at least not much – "natural" about national consciousness and that group antagonism is more often than not the result of certain political interests or policies rather than innate differences or antipathies. However, while there is an abundance of studies on how elites construct or reinforce – often antagonistic – identities, much less is known about ethnicity as "lived experience," i.e. how people on the ground engage with these policies and practices.

In fact, although the scholars discussed in the previous section are generally critical of primordial assumptions and stress the constructed nature of ethnic or national identity, their focus on "state-sponsored ethnicity" as a representation of "the sum total of ethnic meaning in all of social and political life" (Fujii, 2009, p. 11) runs the risk of taking the existence of stable "ethnic groups" for granted. For instance, grand theories like Gellner's and Anderson's show how national identification is produced through certain institutions and practices, but they do so without paying much attention to the individual agents themselves, and in particular their *strength* of identification; instead, "it [the nation] appears to exist above and beyond the agency of any of us as individuals" (Thompson, 2001, p. 20). But ethnosymbolists are not immune to this criticism either, for even though they claim to explore the "inner world" (Smith, 2015, p. 2) of the members of an ethnic or national community by paying attention to myths, memory, value, traditions and symbols, they similarly tend to assume rather than reconstruct the power of nationalism on the ground. Thus, accounts that start off as constructivist all too quickly fall into a primordial mode, for once "constructed," national identity is conceived of as supreme, monolithic and unchangeable.

As Eric Hobsbawm (1992, p. 10) has argued, although nations are "constructed essentially from above," they "cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist." To counter the top-down tendency of the literature on nationalism and ethnicity, sociologists such as Rogers Brubaker and Jon Fox have developed an everyday approach that, instead of inferring the meanings ordinary people ascribe to and the uses they make of the nation or ethnic group from the intentions and meanings that elites impose on them, examines "the actual practices through which ordinary people engage and enact (and ignore and deflect) nationhood and nationalism in the varied contexts of their everyday lives" (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p. 537). This approach

has important implications for both how to study group identities and the way we understand identities. Methodologically, it shifts the focus from the study of texts and utterances to contextually situated social interactions. Where discourse analysts would include interviews and focus groups to understand *how* individuals talk about the nation, analysts of the everyday are equally if not more interested in the *when*: "When called upon, ordinary people can call forth and articulate their more-or-less taken-for-granted assumptions about what the nation means to them. But *when* are they called upon? Just because people *can* talk about the nation doesn't mean that they *do*" (2008, p. 540).

Conceptually, the everyday approach replaces the traditional view of groups as "discrete, concrete, tangible, bounded and enduring" (Brubaker, 2002, p. 167) with attention to group*ness*, i.e. "phases of extraordinary cohesion and moments of intensely felt collective solidarity" (2002, p. 168) and group-*making*. To study groupness as a variable, Brubaker proposes a distinction between ethnic *groups* as bounded collectivities on the one hand, and *categories*, which are "at best a potential basis for group-formation or 'groupness'" (2002, p. 169), on the other. Ethnicity, then, is no longer conceptualized as something that we "have," but something that we "do." As Brubaker and his colleagues (2006, p. 208) observed during their fieldwork in Romania, "although we routinely speak of them as *being* Hungarian or Romanian, we might more aptly speak of them *becoming* Hungarian or Romanian, in the sense that 'Hungarian' or 'Romanian' becomes the relevant, operative description or 'identity' or self-understanding at that particular moment in that particular context."

Consequently, an everyday approach can advance our understanding of ethnicity by paying attention to when ethnicity matters, how it matters and when it does not (and why not). Yet, it does not necessarily treat the "everyday" as a sphere of unconstrained individual agency. Rather, it aims to uncover "the different options that actors may pursue to react to existing boundaries, to overcome and to reinforce them, to shift them to exclude new groups of individuals or include others, or to promote other, nonethnic modes of classification and social practice" (Wimmer, 2013, p. 46). The notion of the "social situation" is particularly helpful to conceptualize agency in this context. Instead of a narrow focus on "the macroscopic political, administrative, and economic structures," social situations reveal the "different courses of action actors may then pursue according to their understanding of their personal circumstances within this framework" (Okamura, 1981, p. 453). The everyday perspective is therefore closely linked to the situational approach to ethnicity within anthropology, which, drawing on Max Gluckman's (1940, p. 29) notion of situational selection, sees ethnic salience in a given situation as dependent on the different values, interests and motives of individuals,

allowing them to assert "either their primary ethnic identity or other social identities, such as those derivative of class or occupation" (Okamura, 1981, p. 460).

But what are the kinds of "situations" in which ethnicity can become salient? According to Brubaker (2002), violence – whether from above or below – is one of the most effective strategies of turning categories into groups. Writing about how the attacks by the Kosovo Liberation Army on Serb policemen provoked massive regime reprisals that ultimately led to a vicious cycle of attacks and counterattacks and thus significantly increased groupness on both sides, he argues that ethnic polarization was largely the result of violence, not its cause. For even though groupness was relatively high before the attacks were carried out, there was still significant scope for conscious "group-making" strategies: "Certain dramatic events, in particular, can serve to galvanise and crystallise a potential group, or to ratchet up pre-existing levels of groupness. This is why deliberate violence, undertaken as a strategy of provocation, often by a very small number of persons, can sometimes be an exceptionally effective strategy of group-making" (2002, p. 171).

Over the past decades, an increasing number of works both in anthropology (e.g., Appadurai, 1998; Feldman, 1991) and civil war studies (e.g. Kalyvas, 2008; Sambanis & Shayo, 2013; Wood, 2008) have indeed shown that highly antagonistic identities are often the result of violence and not the other way around. These studies have criticized identity-based approaches for paying little attention to violence in its own right, i.e. why it happens in a particular place and how it then impacts the communities (and identities) where it occurs. One of their key findings is that violence itself does not have to be "ethnically" motivated; however, once it unfolds, it can have powerful "ethnicizing" consequences. For example, in his ground-breaking study of the genocide in Rwanda, Scott Straus (2006) has argued that it was not pre-existing ethnic animosity that caused Hutus to kill Tutsi. Rather, it was a climate of insecurity following the assassination of president Juvénal Habyarimana and the renewed onset of war that triggered a process of antagonistic collective ethnic categorization, whereby "a whole category of people is blamed for the actions of one or a few" (2006, p. 165), paving the way for genocide.

The concept of "antagonistic collective categorization" put forward by Straus was further developed by historian Max Bergholz (2016) in his in-depth study of the dynamics of violence in Kulen Vakuf, a small town in rural north-West Bosnia, where a massacre took place in 1941 in which 2,000 people were killed. In this work, he shows that deep-seated ethnic cleavages on the ground are not a necessary precondition for mass atrocities to erupt. Rather, it is often situational factors – such as greed – that motivate micro-level actors to

pursue violence on an ethnic axis. However, once violence is employed, it can have "a deeply polarizing effect on intercommunal relations, leading to a rapid transformation of neighbors into collective categories of enemies, and calls for retaliation along such lines" (2016, p. 111). What is remarkable about Bergholz's work is not only that he, like others before him, demonstrates how situational violence has the power to produce highly antagonistic ethnic identities, but that he also uncovers instances of inter-ethnic rescue where intercommunal friendship was not suspended by violence but instead grew even deeper, suggesting that "contexts of extreme inter-ethnic violence, which often produce the antagonistic collective categorization that may further intensify violence, can simultaneously strengthen inter-ethnic social ties, or create new ones" (2016, p. 137).

To account for individual variations, political scientist Lee Ann Fujii (2009, p. 12) has conceptualized state-sponsored ethnicity as a "script" for violence, i.e. a "dramaturgical blueprint" that is typically created by threatened elites in the center and then diffused through various channels – such as the mass media, meetings and rallies – to local elites, which then create their own local version of the "production" that fits local needs and allows them to consolidate their power. The realization of the script, however, depends on the actors, whose skills, motivations, interests and level of commitment can be expected to be of different degrees. What follows is a variety of performances, where "some actors will follow the text closely, such as when killers go after Tutsi and only Tutsi. Some will stray from the text as when killers target Hutu as well as Tutsi for killing. Some may abandon the script altogether as when killers help Tutsi instead of hurt them" (2009, p. 13). The notion of the script thus provides an alternative lens that shifts attention to "the directors and actors, and by doing so, provides the possibility for agency at every level, not only on the part of leaders, but also among their supposed followers" (2009, pp. 13–14). This demonstrates that while it is indeed important to take the force of violence seriously, one should also be careful not to take it for granted, for even if violence is successful at generating high levels of groupness, it does not suspend individual agency and alternative forms of solidarity altogether.

Beyond the "event": identity after violence

But there is another important question: How does groupness develop when war is over? Just like it is necessary to ask what there was before violence broke out, it can be equally insightful to ask what happens after. Yet, while many studies have focused on how war and violence produce high levels of groupness, fewer studies have adopted a longer-term perspective and investigated changing levels of groupness beyond the immediate experience of war and

violence. The implicit assumption seems to be that, once identities are "hard," it becomes almost impossible to soften them. However, that experiences of violence produce highly cohesive "ethnic groups" does not imply that those "groups," once formed, are then unchangeable – believing so would be just another case of "groupism," i.e. "the tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous, and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis" (Brubaker, Loveman, & Stamatov, 2004, p. 45). As Brubaker (2002, p. 177) has noted, "once ratcheted up to a high level, groupness does not remain there out of inertia. If not sustained at high levels through specific social and cognitive mechanisms, it will tend to decline, as everyday interests reassert themselves, through a process of what Weber (in a different but apposite context [1968 (1922): 246-254] called 'routinization' (*Veralltaeglichung*, literally 'towards everydayness')."

Some answers can be found in the literature on reconciliation and postwar reconstruction, in particular in the former Yugoslavia, as well as the literature on everyday peace (e.g., Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Mac Ginty, 2014). Much of the scholarship on reconciliation supports the assumption that identities remain "hard": For example, in Bosnia, where the war ended in 1996 with the Dayton agreement, which stipulated not only the right of internationally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees to return to their place of origin but also to have their property restored (e.g. Stefansson, 2006), many chose not to return, and those who did faced significant challenges. As political geographers Gerard Toal and Carl Dahlman (2011, p. 174) observed, returning not only meant "confronting a landscape of trauma and fear where one's persecutors were most likely still in charge" but also unemployment and economic hardship. In their assessment, "violence and war had not only ethnically divided Bosnian space but also broken its infrastructural coherence, legitimated its material division, obstructed movement, and implanted fear and dread in the minds of the displaced. Bosnia-Herzegovina's partition ran deep" (2011, p. 174).

Adopting a more localized lens, anthropologist Anders Stefansson (2006) has described the estrangement and isolation that many Muslim Bosnian repatriates experienced in the once multi-ethnic town of Banja Luka that was now Serbian-dominated. Although the international community saw repatriation as essential to postwar reconstruction, in reality, people who returned not only felt culturally estranged but were often fearful to leave their houses. The house thus "functioned as a sort of 'prison' because the returnees perceived the society beyond the protective walls of the house or the local neighbourhood as a 'Serb' and non-homely place" (2006, p. 125). According to Stefansson (2006, p. 132), "war and mass

displacement bring profound changes to society, and it is illusory to believe that all those transformations can be, and perhaps should be, reversed after the signing of peace agreements." Gëzim Visoka (2020) has described similar difficulties in Kosovo, where Albanians wanting to return to the Serbian-dominated north as well as Serbs returning to other parts of Kosovo are often faced with peace-breaking acts of what he calls "everyday vernacular nationalism," such as hate crimes, robbery, or property damage. According to Visoka (2020, p. 442), "[t]hese vernacular acts can serve as bottom-up signals for mobilising populist sentiments and side-lining efforts for reconciliation. They demonstrate that nationalism is not only found in the actions of ethnic elites, but it is also prevalent in the wider population."

Yet, amidst widespread segregation and isolation, scholars, especially those working on Bosnia, have also noted cases of inter-ethnic engagement. For example, Stefansson (2010) observed instances of renewed inter-ethnic contact between the Bosniak (Muslim) returnees and displaced Serbs who moved to Banja Luka from their homes in other areas and thus shared the experience of displacement. Although these encounters were based on economic interest, initial economic transactions were often followed by coffee visits. Inter-ethnic cooperation was thus not only driven by material gains, but "also provided a first and seemingly quite 'neutral' stage for social interaction between members of different ethnic groups on which a measure of respect, civility, and tolerance for the Other had to be publicly displayed" (2010, p. 68). Similarly, Torsten Kolind (2007, 2008), who conducted ethnographic research among Muslim returnees in the Bosnian town of Stolac, noticed that even in the aftermath of war, people continued to employ a variety of categorizations to identify themselves and others. In the everyday lives of the returnees, moral qualities such as decency – i.e. behaving like a "decent" person even in the context of war – were just as important as ethnicity.

As anthropologist Stef Jansen (2010, 2015) has argued, people in postwar Bosnia have in many ways been much more concerned with re-establishing "normal lives" than with issues of identity. When Bosnians engaged in inter-ethnic encounters after the war, this was not usually perceived "as moral acts in a reconciliation process," (2010, p. 45) like abstract, foreign-imposed notions of reconciliation would suggest, but as a process of securing a sense of normality or a "normal life". Like Stefansson, Jansen stresses the importance of avoiding controversial issues through "selective silence" in order to make these "normal" encounters possible (for a detailed discussion of the different roles that silence can play in conflict-affected societies, see "Silence and Peacebuilding"). Although this might cast doubt on the

prospect of ever reaching reconciliation in a "thick," idealist sense that foregrounds the restoration of relationships through dialogue, empathy and forgiveness (e.g., Amstutz, 2005; Lederach, 1997), these studies nevertheless demonstrate the ability – and to some extent even the willingness or desire – of postwar actors to engage with those associated with the enemy on the basis of non-ethnic bonds of neighborhood or gender, among others. Hence, without denying the reality and strength of ethnic cleavages in the wake of war, they also highlight the multiplicity of social entanglements on the ground. As Kolind (2008, p. 40) noted, "violence plays a part in constructing a general polarised atmosphere of 'us and them', but this does not say anything about how people react or relate to such a dichotomised space of identity."

Summary and concluding reflections

The aim of this chapter was to explore the causal relationship between identity and political violence. In the first section, it outlined "identity-based" approaches which tend to conceive of violence as a by-product of antagonistic identities. As the chapter stressed, it is no longer common sense in academia to look at ethnic and national groups as timeless entities; instead, it has become widely accepted to view groups as social and political constructs. To say that violence is the outcome of "antagonistic identities" therefore not necessarily refers to innate antipathies that ancient-old nations hold vis-à-vis each other, but invites us to take a closer look at how identities are socially and politically constructed in a way that can foster violent conflict. From this perspective, then, identities are not essentially primordial, but can be constructed in a primordial way.

However, the problem with this view is that it does not sufficiently attend to ethnicity as lived experience. While it is tempting to think of the ethnic wars of the 1990s as mere "escalations" of politically constructed animosities, a closer look at the social realities on the ground often reveals a more ambiguous picture that complicates clear-cut categorizations into "us" and "them." But if there was no widespread and deep-seated hatred that turned people into enemies, what was it? To answer this question, the chapter looked at approaches that argue that causal relationship between identity and violence is reverse, conceiving of violence as the cause, not the result of ethnic antagonism. Often, violence is less an "escalation" than facilitated by certain situational factors. For example, in the case of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, the war did not start with the escalation of micro-level unrest but with the decision to send troops to Abkhazia that was taken on the level of the republican

center in Tbilisi. Even Kaufman (2001, p. 126), who, as shown earlier, stresses the highly symbolic nature of the conflict, concedes that "in many ways the war in Abkhazia was highly artificial. [...] In sum, if mass passions were driving political conflict and personal confrontation, individual leaders' decisions turned those elements into war."

Therefore, while war does not have to be triggered by ethnic passions, mass violence certainly has the power to transform realities on the ground and "construct actors or meanings or relationships that did not previously exist" (Gagnon, 2004, p. 12). For those who survive atrocities or have lost family members or friends, the experience of extreme violence can instill a trauma that goes so deep that it becomes almost impossible to undo. In this sense, antagonism can become imprinted into the psyche and thus very "real." As Kate Brown (2003, p. 2010) has noted, during war identities are "not simply 'imagined,' but [...] bestowed, dispensed, and forged through violence." Thus, without wanting to negate the significance of nationalist or ethnic sentiments, the chapter urges to treat mass violence not as epiphenomenal, but as a phenomenon worth looking at in its own right.

However, while the chapter highlights the generative force of violence, it also stresses the significance of human agency. Not only can individuals respond differently to violence, but people's attitudes towards past events might change over time, depending not only on their personal histories and experiences, but also on their interests and concerns in the present. It thus invites those with an interest in violent ethnic conflict to look beyond the "event" of war and attend to the many ways in which ethnic antagonism continues to be resisted by postwar actors. Torsten Kolind (2007, p. 124), for example, has described everyday life in the Bosnian town Stolac as marked by "a constant tension between a nationalistic discourse informed by war – excluding the ethnic other in general and arguing for the impossibility of future co-existence – and local modes of identification related to concrete situations – rejecting ethnic stereotypes and trying to facilitate co-existence and rebuild everyday life." Hence, what defines postwar and post-violence societies is not necessarily a lack of ambiguity, but complexity, flexibility and inconsistency.

Cross-references

Culture, Anthropology, and Ethnography in Fieldwork
Georgian-Abkhaz conflict
Silence and Peacebuilding

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