Ethnic Nationalism: Politics, Ideology, and the World Order*

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have catalogued widespread, often persistent ethnic conflict and ethnic nationalist movements occurring around the world in widely diverse settings. Such constancy in the face of diversity suggests that ethnic mobilization might better be understood by focusing outside national borders, asking: What is it about the modern world system that promotes ethnic nationalist movements? Two international factors contribute to ethnic conflict and ethnic movements: ideology and competition. Ethnic movements find their legitimacy in the ideology of the global order; an ideology that embraces such conflicting principles as, self-determination, sovereignty, territorial integrity, representative government, and home rule. Ethnic movements find their material support in the marketplace of international competition; major and regional powers support dissident ethnic groups as they compete for economic and geopolitical advantage in the global arena.

During the Cold War many ethnic movements, particularly in the Third World, were supported (some would argue, created) by East-West competition. The global realignment following the disintegration of the Soviet Union has reduced ethnic tensions in some cases (e.g., Angola) and increased ethnic conflict in other cases (e.g., Iraq). This realignment appears to be precipitating a new era of state making that is likely to set into motion a nationalist-subnationalist dialectic in which ethnic minorities, enclosed in newly formed states, challenge new regimes for autonomy or independence, creating further Balkanization.

Introduction

The twentieth century has taught us to respect the power and durability of ethnic differences, that is, divisions among populations according to language, religion, culture, national origin, even appearance. Researchers have catalogued an enormous amount of ethnic conflict among the world's nearly 200 states to such an extent that ethnic antagonism, ethnic violence, and ethnic mobilization may comprise the one common ground shared by the world's diverse population of independent countries.

Perhaps most notable about the ubiquity of ethnic conflict is the diversity of settings in which it occurs. Ethnic conflict and particularly ethnic political claimsmaking, occur around the world in industrial as well as in developing states, in one-party and in multi-party systems, posing challenges to civilian and to military governments, taxing the resources of both the rich and the poor.

The widespread prevalence of ethnic conflict suggests that systemic processes are at work, processes that span national borders and that produce the impetus to ethnic mobilization in many states. The question arises: What is it about the modern world system, particularly since the close of the Second World War, that has produced ever increasing numbers of ethnic nationalist

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movements? Put another way, the question becomes: What could there possibly be in common among such diverse movements as the Kurdish movements in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey; the Basque and Catalan movements in Spain; the conflict in northern Ireland; the Angolan civil war; Scottish nationalism; the Polisario movement in the Western Sahara; the Lithuanian independence movement; the Puerto Rican nationalist movement; Quebec nationalism; the Lebanese civil war; of the Eritrean independence movement, to mention but a few?

The answers presented here rest on the premise that ethnic nationalism occurs within an international context, and that the extent and outcome of ethnic nationalist movements depend on the stance of powerful international actors as well as the position taken by the symbolic institutions of the world system (e.g., the United Nations). Where ethnic movements are supported by world system forces, they will endure and sometimes succeed. Where such movements are not externally supported and legitimated, they will languish and fail.

There are two common factors which unite the many instances of ethnic mobilization cited above, and both are properties of the world system: ideology and politics. Ideology refers to the international ideological system that supports the global order. This legitimating ideational system simultaneously upholds and challenges the current configuratin of the world state system. Politics refers to political competition at two levels, local political competition for self-rule and politically-controlled resources (of lesser interest here), and international political competition until quite recently organized into an East-West struggle for global alignment. Ethnic conflict and ethnic nationalism arise out of both forms of competition-national and international.

The next sections discuss the ideological and political competitive forces that continue to fuel both historical ethnic conflicts as well as a new wave of ethnic nationalism following the break up of the Eastern Bloc. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the international realignment currently underway and the ongoing pressures for decentralization and devolution in the Soviet Union.

The Nationalist-Subnationalist Dialectic

Despite the certain truth contained in the expression, "All politics is local," too myopic a view of ethnic nationalism produces a reductionist understanding of a phenomenon whose worldwide occurrence might better be understood from a more cosmopolitan vantage point. The bulk of literature on ethnic nationalism focuses on particular movements and the unique historical, economic, political, and cultural circumstances that led to their development (see Horowitz, 1985). However, recent world history is clearly marked by waves of ethnic nationalism, particularly during the period since the end of the Second World War.