# Chapter 13
# Identity Politics on the World Stage

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In the late 1980s and early 1990s the scholarly study of world politics was dramatically altered as the Soviet Union finally collapsed. In its wake, the Soviet Union left behind something that it was supposed to have done away with – nationalism and expressions of national identity. As the Soviet Union crumbled, conflict erupted between various ethnic groups remaining in the former Soviet republics. Russians, Armenians, Chechens, Georgians and Tajiks all engaged in open and violent conflict in the name of national and ethnic identity. Why was nationalism such a force for violent conflict in the early 1990s when it had remained dormant for much of the Soviet era? And why did these various ethnic groups still identify with their ethnic kin when the Soviet Union was supposed to have replaced their loyalty to their kin with loyalty to the cause of revolutionary Communism?

The devastating effects of ethnic conflict re-emerged elsewhere in Europe during the same period as the former nation of Yugoslavia collapsed into several distinct states. Serbia, led by a nationalist leader in Slobodan Milosevic, engaged in a brutal and protracted war against Kosovars, Croats, Bosnians and Albanians. At the end of the twentieth century, Europeans were shocked to learn that concentration camps had once again been constructed under their noses. The wars of the former Yugoslavia claimed over 100,000 lives, and displaced over four million people.

This chapter explores the powerful effects identity – especially ethnic identity – has on international politics. Though at one time understudied, scholars of world politics have become interested in issues of identity as it has become clear that the field's main theory, neorealism, has failed to account for a variety of events such as the violent dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, increases in religious extremism and the effects these events have on world politics. This chapter introduces the study of identity and ethnicity in the context of a heated debate between two prominent scholars of world politics: Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington. The chapter discusses in depth how students of world politics should understand issues of identity, and explores how identity and ethnicity affect important issues – like domestic and international conflict – in the study of world politics.

Identity is a difficult concept to grasp in the study of world politics. Are identities fixed from birth, or are individuals able to alter their identity throughout their lifetime? What makes ethnicity and identity a powerful force for mobilization in some instances and not others? How should scholars of world politics conceive of ethnicity and identity? This chapter addresses many of these questions. The chapter introduces concepts such as Primordialism and constructivism with regard to identity while exploring how the study of ethnicity itself often shapes how identity is defined. No longer a marginal field of study in world politics, the study of identity is not firmly established in the mainstream of the discipline.

**Key Words:** Activated Identity, Civilization, Constructivism, Ethnicity, Identity, Nominal Identity, Primordialism, Socially Constructed.

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## INTRODUCTION

Theories of world politics have historically kept questions of identity hidden in the antechamber of the sub-field. Recent studies on identity and international relations by prominent scholars suggest that this may be changing (Mearshimer 2011; Snyder 2011; Toft, Philpott and Shah 2011; Toft 2010; Hale 2008: Cederman, Min and Wimmer 2010; Cederman, Weidmann and Gleditsch 2010; Cederman, Girardin and Gleditsch 2009; Posen 1993). Moreover, contemporary events in world politics, such as the onset of new civil wars, armed insurgencies and sectarian violence in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, the overthrow of despotic Middle Eastern regimes by popular protest, terrorist attacks carried out by Islamist organizations such as Al-Qaida, and many other examples, point to the powerful influence of identity on the world stage.

During the Cold War, policymakers and scholars of world politics were preoccupied with the superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. World politics was viewed as a struggle for domination between great powers. The United States and the Soviet Union – and the grand ideologies that they represented – were thought to be the only political entities that influenced high politics. To the extent that identitarian groups (such as ethnic groups or religious sects) influenced world politics, it was assumed that they were assisted either by Washington or Moscow. When the Cold War ended, the scholarly community was caught unawares by identity issues. Just as ethnic cleansing during World War II was fading from memory, the population of Europe was shocked to learn that, from 1991–99, concentration camps had been set up by Serbian forces with the explicit goal of ethnically cleansing Bosnians, Croats and other non-Serb ethnic groups (Toal and Dahlman 2011; Guss and Siroky 2012). Similar dynamics among Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups in Rwanda left half a million people dead in the course of just over 100 days (des Forges 1999). In both of these conflicts, identity played a large role.

The collapse of the Soviet Union also had an ethnic hue. Ethnic elites in the various Soviet republics framed their economic problems in ethnic terms (Giuilano 2010). Ethnicity provided individuals with a means to interpret events happening around them in the world and to reduce cognitive uncertainty regarding these events (Hale 2008). Ethnic groups in the Soviet Union feared mistreatment by Moscow, and to the extent that they were ethnically different from the majority Russian populations in many areas of the Soviet Union, sought to redress this fear of discrimination through secession. Strong emotions – including fear, hatred and resentment – may spur such groups to engage in conflict in order to redress these grievances (Petersen 2002). In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fragmentation of that once homogenous state into various ethnically homogenous states, scholars of world politics began to take identity issues more seriously in world politics.

This chapter will address many of these theories and take stock of what we currently know about the role of ethnicity in world politics. In the course of reviewing the major theories of

identity, it will situate them in the context of a 'great debate' involving two scholars of world politics, and show how their arguments bear on identity issues in world politics today. Because the scholarly literature on identity is too vast to condense into one chapter, we will focus our attention on an especially important form of identity politics on the world stage – **ethnic** politics. Other aspects of identity influence world politics, including class, gender and sexual orientation, but we limit our attention here to ethnicity, with brief mention of religious identity, and forego some coverage in the hopes of increasing precision.

## IDENTITY: WHAT IS IT?

Scholars of world politics define **identity** as a social category – such as Latino, African-American, Frenchman, Japanese, Muslim, Christian, Jew and so on. Typically, individuals belonging to such groups take some pride in their membership, and view it as a more or less unchangeable and socially consequential attribute (Fearon and Laitin 2000). The two key features that tend to be crucial are clear rules of membership that determine who is (and who is not) a member, and characteristics (like beliefs, desires and physical attributes like skin colour) thought to be typical of the category, or behaviours expected of members in certain situations. To give a concrete example, male Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem's Mea Shearim neighbourhood wear distinctive long black coats and top hats, while women wear dresses that cover their ankles and have long sleeves. Married women wear head coverings and men grow long beards. An outsider can easily identify a member of that community by their distinctive dress. Strict observance to the laws of Judaism is used to define membership in the community, and exclude all others.

> **Identity** – a social categorization by which social and political actors are defined. Those adhering to a certain identity view it as consequential.

In sum, identity serves at least three critical functions. First, an identity is a social marker, it designates to which group of things an actor or object belongs. Second, since identity acts as a social marker, it also provides individuals with appropriate social roles to follow. That is, it can act like a script that individuals follow in order to provide meaning to how they act in different social settings. For example, Mormons abstain from drinking coffee and alcoholic drinks. Immigrants from France may like to congregate in certain cafes to discuss French politics or cinema while drinking wine. French Mormons may congregate in the same cafes, but will abstain from drinking coffee or wine. Third, an identity provides a way for individuals to interpret and make sense of the world around them. For example, a religious identity can provide a way for individuals to make sense of world events. Religious individuals may think they have been blessed with divine fortune, or cursed by evil forces, depending on how events unfold. Religious identity thus offers individuals a way to interpret the world and to make sense of why certain events happen the way they do.

In political science, identity had four broad meanings (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). One involves understanding identity as the grounds for a particular social or political action. Here, identity is invoked, as opposed to interest, so as to highlight non-instrumental modes of political action. It is used to underscore how collective action is governed by particular self-understandings rather than by pure self-interest. Second, identity can be understood as a collective institution

describing how a group of individuals are related and share similar characteristics. The similarities among members of a particular identity group may be objective – for example, skin colour – but are also frequently mixed with a strong subjective and socially constructed component – dark is lower in the social hierarchy than light skin in many places, but this ordering is not objective. It is simply pervasive. Third, identity may refer to some fundamental condition of a social actor – something foundational for that individual or group. We will refer back to this concept of identity later on when we discuss theories of identity broadly known as Primordialism. Finally, identity is understood as the ephemeral product of multiple and competing discourses. Here, identity is invoked to highlight the multiple, ever changing and fragmented nature of an individual's concept of 'the self'. This strand of thinking is particularly characteristic of post-structuralist and post-modern theories of social science that view identity as fundamentally socially constructed.

Identity is a category of practice, but identity is also used in other more political ways. Politicians and political entrepreneurs make appeals to identity in order to persuade people to understand themselves and their interests in particular ways, or to vote for certain candidates. Segregationist politicians in the American South during the civil rights era bridged the class divide between white voters and appealed directly to their concept of race. In doing so, many of these politicians were able to garner large amounts of support for segregationist policies, including Jim Crow laws. Similarly, Martin Luther King Jr and other African-American civil rights leaders were able to unite other African-Americans against this agenda.

In order to understand the effects of identity on *world* politics, as opposed to individual and group behaviour in domestic politics, we turn to a debate between two important scholars – Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington.


## THE END OF HISTORY OR THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS?

Scholarly interest in identity politics, including the study of ethnic politics, blossomed with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and overtook the all-consuming superpower rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States. During the Cold War, states were the primary actors in world politics. The international arena was viewed as an anarchic battleground where great powers strove to dominate other great powers. The main focus of international security was to prevent a nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. This thinking left little room within existing theories of international politics for identity. If identity mattered at all, it was a concern for domestic politics, and systemic Realism was unconcerned with domestic politics. As a result, identity issues were relegated to a dim corner of the study of world politics.

When the Soviet Union came to an end, after over half a century of Soviet rule that was supposed to replace loyalty to one's ethnic kin with loyalty to the Soviet state, Kazaks, Uzbeks, Chechens, Ukrainians, Georgians and other ethnic groups still remained, and still identified themselves according to their ethnic identities. Marxist ideology proposed that modern nations were simply the results of the capitalist mode of production. It predicted that, with the end of Capitalism, the nation as an ordering principle for social and political relations would simply disappear. Yet 60 years of Soviet rule could not wipe Nationalism away. As the Soviet Union fell, nationalist movements rose up to challenge Moscow's rule.

Realism could not explain why various domestic groups would choose to organize themselves along ethnic lines. The dominant theory of world politics had misfired on two fronts. First, it failed to predict the break-up of the Soviet Union (Kuran 1991). Second, it had failed to predict the rise and power of nationalist movements across the former Soviet Union. State death was supposed to occur only as a product of war when one state militarily defeated another, not as a result of ethnic mobilization. Yet the fall of the Soviet Union and rise of the Russian Federation was mostly peaceful (Bunce 1999; Giuilano 2010). Scholars wondered if the fall of the Soviet Union heralded a new era of peace, or if the return to a multipolar world would bring with it the potential for new conflicts (Mearsheimer 1990). The future of world politics became the subject of an important debate between two scholars – one envisioned the end of history and thus an era of peace, whereas the other forecasted a future filled with conflict along civilizational – that is, ethic – lines. Rather than basing their analyses on realist theories of international politics, they took a new direction, and focused on the concept of identity.

## Francis Fukuyama: the End of History and the Last Man

Francis Fukuyama fired the opening salvo in this debate. His theory contended that the collapse of the Soviet Union presented a unique opportunity for the United States and for the entire Western world. Relying on history and philosophy to construct his argument, Fukuyama argued over time the world had come to be governed less by 'traditional' ideologies such as religion, Feudalism and the divine right of kings, to modern democracy and private Capitalism, which offers the world the twin benefits of individual freedom and the creation of vast amounts of private wealth. The power of these two forces, Fukuyama claimed, would culminate in what he called 'the end of History' (capital H). Fukuyama claims that the end result of history is the inevitable triumph of democracy over more antiquated systems of government and the victory of individual freedom over the forces of both ancient tradition and modern Communism.

Two factors played a key role in this story. First, capitalist economics has placed the individual at the centre of an important and influential intellectual tradition. The individual is the master of his or her own destiny, and the right of the individual to pursue that destiny is seen as the ultimate moral and political good. Economics shows us the way societies must mature to compete successfully in the world. The nature of economic competition is such that nations reject free markets at their own peril, for those that cannot compete will disappear from the world stage. Their social customs, intellectual contributions and even their military victories are doomed to fade into historical obscurity. The second dynamic that Fukuyama points to is the worldwide impact of this ideology. Fukuyama highlights the movements for greater personal freedom that spread across the former Soviet Union as dispositive evidence that the natural desire for humanity is to live in a free and open society where individuals are unencumbered and allowed to reach political, economic and intellectual maturity. The collapse of the Soviet Union, in this view, was thus completely natural, since totalitarianism was antithetical to human nature.

Fukuyama makes a distinction between history, with a small h, and History, capitalized. When referring to history, Fukuyama simply refers to events that occur over time, while History is understood to be 'a single evolutionary process' (Fukuyama 1992, xii). History as a single evolutionary process is linear, moving from traditional societies governed by autocratic monarchs

and absolutist rulers to modern, liberal, democratic and capitalist governments. Fukuyama argues that the formulation of the scientific method and the resulting scientific discoveries during the Renaissance and European Enlightenment allowed societies, especially European societies, to improve technologically, to industrialize and to compete against other societies that failed to instil a spirit for scientific discovery, did not develop economically and were thus relegated to the dustbin of history. Liberal democracy, Fukuyama claims, is the superior form of government, for it fosters an open ethos of inquiry, freedom of ideas and the development of science. As a result, democracies develop strong economies and armies, allowing them to compete against other forms of government and to triumph. Liberal democracy recognizes freedom from governmental control of individuals, protects private property and separates religion from governance, so that all people are seen as equals, and provides for the free and fair election of representative politicians who are held accountable by the public.

Those societies that have become liberal democracies have built up the capacity over time to exploit science, technology, economics and superior governance, and will hence become stronger than those that have not. Eventually, in order to compete with the most powerful states in the world, all societies will seek to take advantage of this source of strength. As realist theories of international relations suggest, all societies struggle for power internationally and, since democratic states are the most powerful and most competitive, all states will seek to converge on the path towards becoming democratic and capitalist in order to successfully compete with other states. It is in each state's interest to do so in order that it does not fall behind and become a state that can no longer compete in the international battle for power and supremacy, which all nations constantly wage. Many but not all countries are already democratic. Fukuyama claims those nations that are not democratic are still mired in History. It is these nations, with their systems of government that are still ruled by 'backwards' systems, including ethnic kinships, totalitarian dictators or religious absolutists, that pose the major problem for world politics in the future. Of course, these nations struggle for power against liberal democracies in the international system, and Fukuyama is quick to point out that they will not survive without democratic reforms. In the interim, they will pose problems on the world stage.

Here, Fukuyama comes to his central problem: identity. For Fukuyama, any identity that is not crafted to be liberal, democratic and capitalist is problematic. Identities based on traditional institutions, for example, ethnicity or religious creed, must be replaced. That an individual refers to himself first as a Muslim and second as a citizen of Iran, for example, is problematic for Fukuyama, for it shows that History still has a powerful hold in such a society. Religion represents an ethos of anti-Enlightenment, a rejection of science in favour of supernatural explanations, and a preference for absolutist government steeped in religious law rather than tolerant, secular and democratic rule. For the people who still suffer under such regimes, Fukuyama claims that the only route to political empowerment must come through democratic change and the creation of a more democratic identity to replace that of the old and more traditional society.

For Fukuyama, identity can be good or bad. Identities based on liberal democratic notions, such as Frenchman, citizen, American, capitalist or cosmopolitan, are acceptable in Fukuyama's worldview, for these kinds of identities are modern and not mired in History. Identities based on ethnicity, such as Kurd, Muslim, Catholic or Ibo, are problematic for Fukuyama, for societies where more individuals identify themselves according to their ethnic identity are still mired in History and it is precisely in those societies where social ills develop. These societies have not developed strong political and economic institutions. People in these societies are more likely to

be poor, and these societies are more likely to be riven by conflict. Fukuyama's vision, however, is optimistic, for he sees all societies inevitably transitioning towards modern Western liberal regimes in which parochial identities will be replaced by more modern ones.

## Samuel Huntington: The Clash of Civilizations

In 1993, Samuel Huntington published an article in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', which presented a more pessimistic prediction for the future of world politics. Rather than seeing the development of a global liberal democratic identity, Huntington predicted that, with the end of the Cold War, identities would become increasingly fractured and conflictual along **civilizational** lines. Instead of economic prosperity

> **Civilization** – the penultimate cultural ordering of social groups and the broadest category of cultural identity.

and democracy leading the world to greater peace and prosperity, the great divisions among individuals and the resulting sources of conflict will be primarily cultural and civilizational.

Like Fukuyama, Huntington also relies on the concept of social evolution to make his argument but, unlike Fukuyama, Huntington claims that the natural process of social evolution differs between civilizations. For Huntington, civilizations are 'cultural entities' that include villages, regions, ethnic groups, nationalities and religious groups. The culture of a village in southern Italy may be different from a village in the north, but these Italian villages will share a common culture that distinguishes them from German villages. European communities, in turn, share cultural identities that differentiate them from Arab or Chinese communities. Arabs, Chinese and Europeans share no common cultural traits, according to Huntington's typology, and thus a civilization is the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity. Huntington claims that conflicts between civilizations are natural and inevitable as different cultures provide civilizations with different ways of viewing the world.

Civilizational identity provides an individual with membership in a social group, rules for individual behaviour and a unique way of making sense of the world around them. Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and religion (Huntington 1993, 25). Huntington says these differences are the product of centuries of social evolution and are thus more fundamental than political ideologies. Over the centuries, Huntington claims, civilizational conflicts have been the most prolonged and the most violent.

Scholars of world politics have been quick to realize the value of both Fukuyama's and Huntington's arguments about the role of identity in world politics. Whether scholars believe that identity is something primordial and unchanging, or more instrumental and socially constructed, informs theories of identity in world politics. We now turn to an in-depth discussion of these theories.

## THE NATURE OF IDENTITY

Identity most often refers to an umbrella concept that encompasses groups differentiated by race, ethnicity, language and religion. It also covers smaller groups including tribes, castes

and regional identities (Horowitz 1985). **Ethnic groups**, which are our focus in this chapter, are defined as social groups for which eligibility for membership is determined by attributes associated with – or believed to be associated with – ancestral descent. Scholars who study ethnicity often treat ethnicity as arising from a familial resemblance (Fearon 2006; Chandra 2006; Horowitz 1985). Such attributes can include traits inherited genetically (for

> **Ethnic group** – a social group for which membership is determined by descent from one's ancestral kin.

example, skin colour, gender, eye colour, height and hair colour), through cultural inheritance (for example, language), or through the course of one's life (for example, ritual scarification, or specific patterns of speech) (Chandra 2006, 400). Two primary lenses for understanding identity – and specifically ethnicity – can be found in Huntington, Fukuyama and many of the other scholars cited in this chapter. They are **Primordialism** and **Constructivism**, and these theories are based on fundamentally different assumptions and make distinct predictions, yet more often than not the hard line between these two schools of thought is overemphasized. It is more accurate to characterize them as two poles along a latent dimension in which identity is hard and fixed at one hand, and soft and fungible at the other (Horowitz 1998).

> **Primordialism** – the belief that an individual's identity is fixed and unchanging. Often primordialists refer to identity through certain immutable characteristics like biology or ethnic ancestry.
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> **Constructivism** – the theory that certain aspects of one's identity are not fixed and unchanging, but instead malleable and fluid.

## Primordialist Theories of Ethnicity

There are several ways in which primodial and constructivist theories of ethnicity differ, but the main differences can be reduced to hard views versus soft views of ethnicity, with 'hard' and 'soft' referring to the malleability of ethnic identity (Horowitz 1998). Hard views of ethnicity are often referred to as primodialist, because scholars working in this tradition view ethnic identities as primordial identities that are fixed at birth, ascriptive, firmly bounded and engendering strong bonds of group loyalty and solidarity which persist over time and incline communities towards a strong sense of ethnocentrism which make ethnic groups hostile to non-co-ethnic groups and likely to pursue conflict. Scholars who view ethnic identities in this way view them as fixed in stone, and emphasize the affective properties of ethnicity (Brown and Langer 2010). Ethnicity is the natural end result of biological differences or long historical processes that have shaped distinct cultures (van den Berghe 1978). Because ethnicity is derived from biology and history, primordialists generally view ethnic identities as slow changing and in effect largely fixed.

'If you were born poor, you may die rich. But your ethnic group is fixed' (*The Economist*, 14–21 May 2005, 80, quoted in Chandra 2012). Each person belongs only to one ethnic group whose boundaries remain fixed and unchanging over generations. Mountains erode over time, glaciers recede, cities are created and disappear, but through all those events, ethnic identities remain more or less the same (Chandra 2012).

Primordialists thus understand ethnicity as 'a primordial attachment that stems from the "givens" of social existence … congruities of blood, speech, custom and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times, overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves. One is bound to

one's kinsman … as the result not merely of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but at least in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself' (Geertz 1973). These ties generate a sense of community, and because an ethnic group consciously defines itself as a community in this way, this awareness necessitates an awareness of other communities. Ethnic identities and senses of affiliation are highly charged and central to an individual's sense of self. The awareness of others spills over through psychological mechanisms into conflict and violence. In particular, emotions including fear, resentment and hatred can motivate individuals to engage in conflict against other groups (Petersen 2002).

A prominent example of primodialist theorizing is contained in an op.-ed written by two prominent political scientists for the New York Times (Mearsheimer and Van Evera 1999) during the aftermath of the Bosnian Wars that shook the former Yugoslavia throughout the 1990s. The federation of Yugoslavia broke into constituent states beginning in the 1990s, and conflict within the Balkans coalesced along ethnic lines. Ethnic Serbs, led by a nationalist government, began a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing against other ethnic groups in the region including Croats, Bosnian Muslims and Kosavars. Mearsheimer and Van Evera attribute this destructive conflict (in which 140,000 people were killed and more than four million were displaced) to deep-seated and historical hatreds that these groups have harboured against one another for centuries. Mearsheimer and Van Evera conclude that ethnic cohabitation will fail because these groups are fundamentally different from one another and long-running grievances and ancient hatreds make conflict the only outcome as long as these groups are integrated. They claim that ethnic separation is the only way to promote peace. They write, 'the history of Yugoslavia since 1991 shows that ethnic separation breeds peace, while failure to separate breeds war. Slovenia seceded from Yugoslavia with little violence in 1991 and has sense been at peace with itself and its neighbors. The key is its homogeneity: 91 per cent of the people are Slovenes: less than three per cent are Serbs'.

While the extreme primordialist viewpoint is still prominent in journalistic media like newspapers and magazines, among academics the strict version of the theory has fallen out of favour. Consequently, it is now very rare to find a political scientist who openly advocates a primordialist position (Chandra 2001). Further, the primordialist view runs into a great deal of trouble when attempting to explain ethnic conflict. Whereas it is entirely possible that ethnic affiliations produce strong emotions and these emotions can drive individual behaviour, primordialists have generally failed to provide a convincing explanation as to why ethnic affiliation rather than other aspects of identity are so emotive, or why violence occurs at some times, and in some places, but not others.

While Ukrainians and the Baltic Republics choose to break away from the Soviet Union in 1991, the Central Asian Republics remained within the structure of the USSR (Hale 2008). Additionally, when some states in India were swept by riots between Hindus and Muslims in 2002, others were not. Some states remained peaceful even though they bordered other states where widespread violence occurred (Varshney 2003). Even within states where ethnic conflict has raged, there is regional variation in violence that remains to be explained. Despite the reports of massive violence across Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein, only five of Iraq's 104 districts averaged more than three incidents of significant violence per 1,000 residents from 2004 to 2008, and within these violent districts, some were more violent than others (Berman, Shapiro, and Felter 2011). The question for primordialist theories is why is ethnic

conflict so variable? Even the Yugoslav case referred to by Van Evera and Mearsheimer fails a strict primordialist test, for even the supposed 'age-old enemies' of Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia have been at peace for far longer than they have been at war (Hale 2008). Another question is why conflicts *within* civilizations appear more common than conflicts *among* civilizations. If ancient hatreds do not explain the prevalence of ethnic conflict and the salience of ethnic identity, but ethnic conflict remains common where individuals still show strong affiliation with their ethnic identity, how do we explain ethnic conflict? In answering this question, scholars have turned towards a different conception of ethnicity. They have moved away from viewing ethnicity as something primordial and fixed to conceptualizing ethnicity as something that can be molded and constructed. If primordialists view ethnicity as set in stone, these scholars view it as made of putty (Horowtiz 1998, 2).

## Constructivist Theories of Ethnicity

Constructivism is less a theory of ethnic identification than a family of theories regarding ethnicity and ethnic identity. Whereas primodialist theories regard ethnicity as a given, constructivist theories contend that the meaning individuals attach to their ethnic identities is **socially constructed**. By emphasizing that it is socially constructed, scholars imply that an ethnic identity is not fixed and unchanging, but rather fluid and malleable. If primordialists view ethnic identity as always salient, constructivists stress that ethnicity is only relevant in certain social cases. Ethnicity is socially relevant when people notice and condition their actions on ethnic distinctions (Fearon 2000). Social relevancy, however, does not

> **Socially constructed** – the meaning or interpretation of an identity is not fixed by immutable characteristics like biology, but is determined by the relevance of certain political attributes of that identity.

make ethnicity politically relevant. Ethnicity is politicized when political coalitions are organized along ethnic lines, or when access to political and economic resources is dependent upon ethnicity (Fearon 2000; Wimmer, Cederman, and Min 2009). By themselves, social relevance and politicization are insufficient to explain conflict between ethnic groups. Ethnicity can be socially relevant without being politicized, and politicization matters little if people do not notice or act on the basis of recognized ethnic differences. Only when both factors are present, constructivists claim, are the conditions for ethnic conflict primed.

Constructivist theories of ethnicity do not depart wholly from primordialist theories. Despite recognizing that ethnic identities change over time according to varied circumstances, constructivists still define ethnic identity as a subset of identities for which descent based attributes are necessary (Chandra 2012; Fearon 2000). These theories differ from primordialist theories by splitting ethnic identity into two different categories. Ethnic identities can be either **nominal** or **activated**. Nominal ethnic identities are ethnic categories for which an individual's descent-based attributes make her eligible for membership of that particular group. Activated identities are a subset of nominal identities for which an individual attaches importance to or

> **Nominal Identity** – ethnic categories based on attributes related to ancestral descent.
>
> **Activated Identity** – a subset of nominal identities that are considered to be especially important to individuals identifying themselves according to a certain categorization.

professes to be an especially salient aspect of their identity. Ethnic identities may be activated by the individual, or may be activated by one's co-ethnics. For example, the number of Muslims in Bosnia increased by more than 75 per cent between 1961 and 1971. During the same period, the number of individuals who identify themselves as Yugoslavs in Bosnia decreased by 84 per cent (Bringa 1995, 28, cited in Chandra 2012). During this ten-year period in Yugoslavia, something happened that caused Bosnian Muslims to cease thinking of themselves as Yugoslavs and instead caused them to identify with their religious identity. Constructivist theories of ethnic identity seek to understand why and how such dramatic changes in the relevance of ethnicity occur and what impacts, if any, these changes might have on the likelihood of ethnic conflict.

Constructivists stress the fluidity of ethnic identities. But why are ethnic identities fluid, and when might they change? Constructivist scholars stress the importance political factors have in influencing individuals to activate one aspect of their nominal ethnic identities rather than other aspects. Access to political power and economic resources takes pride of place in these accounts of ethnicity. Horowitz (1985) remarks that during the 1953 reorganization of Madras state in India, the separation of Tamil Nadu from Andra Pradesh took place. Horowitz writes that in Madras state, 'with large Tamil and Telugu populations, cleavages within the Telugu group were not very important. As soon as a separate Telugu-speaking state was carved out of Madras, however, Telugu subgroups quickly formed the basis of political action' (Horowtiz 1985, 66). Ethnic differences among the Telugu and Tamil groups were unimportant until a separate Indian political unit was created for the Telugu ethnic group. From that point on, the Telugu ethnic identity became important and activated because it could guarantee access to political power and economic resources from the Indian state. In Africa, studies have shown that people tend to identify themselves more along ethnic lines as presidential elections draw closer. In Zambia, for example, ethnic coalitions formed along the lines of language or tribe, depending on whether the elections were at the national or local level respectively (Posner 2002). Further, for every month closer a country in Africa is to a presidential election, ethnic identity for Africans increases in salience by 1.8 per cent (Eifert, Miguel and Posner 2010). The governing institutions of a state can also affect how groups mobilize to seek political power. In Zambia and Kenya, ethnic groups organize along narrow aspects of their activated identities, such as tribe or clan, when states are governed by single parties. When these countries are governed by multiparty systems, ethnic groups emphasize broader aspects of their identity including region, language and religion (Posner 2007). One party systems provide incentives for individuals to identify themselves as members of small and localized groups like clans. One-party systems shrink the locus of political competition to smaller and more local parliamentary districts, thus giving incentives for individuals to vote for candidates who share similar ethnic identities. Voters vote for candidates who can redistribute needed resources towards their own ethnic group. Voters assume that co-ethnics are most likely to do this. In multiparty systems, electoral competition moves from the local to the national level, forcing individuals to identify with broader coalitions of voters. Individuals will thus have incentives to activate broader aspects of their ethnicities including language, religion and region of origin.

Constructivists stress that individuals activate aspects of their latent, nominal ethnic identities at different times, often for strategic reasons. Contrasting the primordialist argument where ethnic groups are locked perpetually in conflict because of ancient hatreds and animosities, constructivists contend that individuals are primarily rational actors. They choose which aspects of their ethnic identities to activate at different times depending on what the benefit of activating

a certain aspect of one's identity might have. Individuals are not unthinking automatons who engage in conflict with others simply because of differences in how they choose to define each other. Nowhere is this clearer perhaps than in Malawi and Zambia where two ethnic groups, the Chewe and Tumbuka, reside (Posner 2004). In Malawi, relations between the two groups are often antagonistic, while in Zambia, relations between the same groups are peaceful. In Malawi, the Chewe and Tumbuka see each other as political adversaries and the two groups have generally voted for opposing political parties. In Zambia, these groups see each other as electoral allies and vote for the same political parties. Why, when all aspects about these two groups remain the same across the border between Malawi and Zambia, does their behaviour differ? In Zambia, neither the Chewe nor Tumbuka are large enough compared to the rest of the national population to significantly impact the results of national elections. Hence, there is little reason for these groups to differentiate themselves. They join the same political coalition to gain access to political and economic resources that are then distributed between the two groups. In Malawi, however, these two groups represent large segments of the population and hence serve as powerful political coalitions. Electoral competition between the two groups translates into competition over resources. Each group wants to maximize its slice of the political and economic pie. Hence, political competition has spilled over into competition between the two ethnic groups. The relative sizes of these ethnic groups in either country constitute a basis for political power, and thus the likelihood of electoral conflict between the two groups.

## PRIMORDIALISM, CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE GREAT DEBATE

Constructivism represents a major departure from primordialist theorizing about ethnicity. Yet Primordialism's influence on the study of identity in international politics remains. Further, whereas Constructivism offers a more theoretically nuanced way to study ethnicity, many of its arguments remain difficult to incorporate into our theories of ethnicity and international relations (Chandra 2012). Although it makes sense to speak of the fluidity of ethnicity on the one hand, many studies of ethnicity in international politics implicitly assume the stability and permanence of ethnic identity when crafting ethnicity as an object of study. It is difficult to capture the fluidity of ethnic identities. Have the categories of Chewe or Tumbuka persisted in Zambia and Malawi since Posner's study in 2004? Where did these ethnic identities even come from? Have these groups always identified themselves according to these descriptive labels, or were they once known by other designations? In the former Yugoslavia, a similar problem remains. The splintering of Yugoslavia occurred along ethnic lines, but where did these ethnic identities come from? Primordialist theories still pervade our thinking about ethnicity. Our use of ethnic categories like Serb, Chewe, Hutu, Russian, Native American, Latino and so on implicitly set these groups apart from others by defining what these groups share in common, and how they differ from other groups that are unlike them.

Although scholars recognize that ethnic identities do change, they often attempt to place these changes into recognizable categories based primarily on primordialist thinking. An identity based on an African clan or tribe may give way to one based on language, depending on the electoral context, but we still consider both these identities as arising from some primordial aspect of identity which is unlikely to change much over time. Often the categories into which

we fit an identity are already given beforehand so that we can easily categorize them into neat compartments that are easy to study because they have characteristics which are already known, like skin colour, language, religion, caste and so on. Whereas the theoretical problems with Primordialism are widely acknowledged, our empirical analyses remain embedded in the primordial framework. Ultimately, to make sense of identity, some limits must be put on how individuals can define themselves. This generally means fixing the borders of identity at some point, and this point is often subjective. While Constructivism has rightly pointed out the arbitrariness of these borders, they are still widely employed to analyse identity. Despite its limitations, Primordialism offers justifications for the borders that must inevitably be placed around identities. Scholars must keep in mind the arbitrariness of these borders, however, lest we slip back into the depths of essentialism.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How do scholars of political science conceptualize identity? What are the three main functions identity provides to individuals?
2. Why have scholars of international politics only recently begun to study issues related to identity?
3. What is Primordialism? How do primordialists understand ethnicity and what predictions do they make regarding the likelihood of conflict between ethnic groups?
4. How do constructivist theories of identity and ethnicity differ from primordialist theories? What is the difference between a nominal and activated identity?
5. What predictions did Huntington and Fukuyama make regarding identity, ethnicity and conflict? Where did they go wrong, and in what ways have their theories been empirically verified?
6. What common ground do primordialist and constructivist theories of identity share? What roles do primordialist conceptions of ethnicity play in constructivist theories?

## REVISION QUIZ

1. When social scientists refer to identity, they mean:

    a. An ordering principle an individual uses to make sense of the world
    b. A fluid and amorphous discourse which defines an individual
    c. A social category defined by membership requirements and physical characteristics
    d. A political ideology

2. During the Cold War, scholars of international relations:

    a. Studied issues of identity in great detail
    b. Were not concerned with the political ramifications of identity politics

    c. Were concerned with explaining the rise of transnational terrorism
    d. Were primarily interested in explaining variation in the severity of civil wars

3. Francis Fukuyama's concept of History is best understood as:

    a. A single evolutionary process
    b. The occurrence of random and haphazard events
    c. The study of past events
    d. The superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union

4. Huntington predicted that the major outbreaks of violence would occur between:

    a. States
    b. Civilizations
    c. Religious groups
    d. The United States and the Soviet Union

5. Primordialists consider ethnic identity to be:

    a. Socially constructed
    b. Fluid and changing
    c. Devoid of meaning
    d. Derived from biology and history

6. Constructivists emphasize two features of ethnic identity. They are:

    a. Nominal and activated
    b. Activated and purposive
    c. Nominal and primordial
    d. Constructed and primordial

7. Ethnic identity is determined by:

    a. A familial resemblance
    b. Ancestral descent
    c. Religion
    d. Both 'a' and 'c'

8. Constructivism and Primordialism:

    a. Are two completely contrasting theories of identity with nothing in common
    b. Are rooted in biological theories of ethnicity
    c. Two poles along a latent dimension in which identity is hard and fixed at one hand, and soft and fungible at the other
    d. Are different ways of expressing membership in an ethnic group

9.  An individual's nominal ethnic identity is defined as:

   a.  Any characteristic which is typical of the group and required for membership
   b.  Any characteristic which an individual feels is especially salient
   c.  Skin colour
   d.  Any politicized aspect of a person's identity

10.  Despite its lack of favour within the scholarly community, Primordialism is still utilized in studies of identity and international relations because:

   a.  Ethnic differences actually do derive only from biology
   b.  It emphasizes the fluid nature of ethnic identification
   c.  It helps set boundaries between ethnic groups, making scientific study of ethnicity and identity possible
   d.  It explains why ethnic groups engage in conflict

**Answers:** 1: c;  2: b;  3: a;  4: b;  5: d;  6: a;  7: d;  8: c;  9: a;  10: c.

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