

# Introduction: Racial and Ethnic Conflict and Violence

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# Introduction:

## Racial and Ethnic Conflict and Violence

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Racial and ethnic violence takes many forms. Genocides, ethnic cleansing, pogroms, civil wars, and violent separatist movements are the most obvious and extreme expressions, but less organized violence such as rioting, and hate crimes by individuals or small groups are products of racial and ethnic conflict as well. Also, the distribution of criminal violence within societies, which may or may not be aimed at members of another group, is in some places a by-product of ongoing conflicts between superior and subordinated racial or ethnic groups. Although estimates of the number of deaths attributable to ethnic violence vary widely, range of eleven to twenty million given for the period between 1945 and the early 1990s show the gravity of this type of conflict (Williams 1994, 50). So it comes as no surprise that scholars have paid increasing attention to such conflicts over the last decades.

### 1. Major Violent Racial and Ethnic Conflicts

As Donald L. Horowitz stated in his famous *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, “ethnic conflict is a worldwide phenomenon” (1985, 3). The near-universality of multiethnic states and the persistence or immigration of strong ethnic or racial groups in many modern societies make conflicts along ethnic lines quite likely. Racial and ethnic conflicts persist on every continent, except Antarctica as far as we know; indeed, such conflicts are a central feature of contemporary social life and have been for centuries in places where heterogeneous populations live, or people from different ethnic or racial groups come into contact (Horowitz 2001 includes a global overview of ethnic riots). All too frequently these conflicts have involved violence. In the Americas—and in Australia—European colonists and soldiers fought the native populations from the outset, and these conflicts are central to the histories of the three nations of North America, as well as of the Caribbean islands. Colonialism is sometimes cited as an underlying cause of racial and ethnic violence in Africa and Asia, and while this is certainly a credible argument, ethnic conflicts existed before European invasions occurred.

Even though the United States has just elected an African American president, racial conflict remains an important

force in social life, and scholars regard persistently high rates of violence among the black population as an important consequence of racial inequality (Gabbidon and Greene 2005). Hate crimes and activities of racist movement such the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nations members are direct violent expressions of this conflict. And we should be clear that although the most significant conflicts historically have been between the white population and blacks and Native Americans, there are now important other conflicts as well: violence has been aimed at people of Latin American descent and Muslims, and there have been violent conflicts between blacks and some immigrant groups (Koreans, Mexicans, and Pacific Islanders).

Canadian social life was disrupted in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the violent actions of the French Canadian separatists of the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ). Mexico has experienced violent uprisings by indigenous populations in the southern state of Chiapas, and descendants of the indigenous peoples of Central and South America continue to be violently subjugated—and continue to fight back.

Historically, Europe, Africa, and Asia have all experienced racial and ethnic conflicts, some of which are still capable

of flaring into violence today, even as new ones arise. In Europe, some former colonial powers have more heterogeneous populations today, and at times violent conflict has resulted. In Britain we already find anti-immigrant riots in the late 1950s (Nottingham and Notting Hill in 1958, Middlesbrough in 1961, Dudley in 1962), followed by major race riots in the 1980s (Bristol in 1980, Brixton in 1981, Tottenham in 1985) (Panayi 1993). After German reunification refugees were attacked in anti-minority riots in eastern Germany in the early 1990s, while there were arson attacks on Turkish homes in the western part of the country (Karapin 2002). French and Spanish riots in recent years have been linked either to disaffection of minority groups (e.g. Paris suburbs, 2005), or anti-immigrant sentiment (e.g. Madrid, 2007). Alongside ethnic violence directed against immigrants, we also still have violent hate crimes and sometimes even riots against members of longstanding European minorities like the Roma (gypsies) and the Jews (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2009; ODIHR 2007, 2008; Human Rights First 2008).

Of course racial conflicts have existed for centuries in Africa and have been at the heart of many of the continent's violent struggles; ethnic conflicts continue to fuel violence in Rwanda, Congo, Nigeria, Somalia, Kenya, Darfur and elsewhere. It is argued that many of these conflicts have been made more intractable and violent by the way European colonialists carved Africa up, drawing borders according to Europe's national conflicts and interests, disregarding the historic territories of African ethnic and national groupings and forcing traditionally hostile groups under a single flag (Gurr 1994). Following independence, when colonial domination ceased to be an issue, these ethnic groups faced the question of who the new states should belong to (Horowitz 1985). Since Nigeria's independence in 1960 the ethno-religious groups of the Yoruba, Ibo, and Hausa/Fulani have clashed again and again over the division of political power, in conflicts ranging from civil war (Biafra) to communal riots, in which thousands died. Scholars point out that Belgian government policies in Rwanda gave the Tutsi minority power over the Hutu majority, which was much resented, while the British in Kenya did the same with the Kikuyu and other ethnic groups including the Luhya, Luo, Kalenjin, and Kamba. These are considerable minorities: the Kikuyu

are the largest group, but they still constitute less than one quarter of the population. These histories contributed to the genocide in Rwanda and to Kenya's post-election violence in 2007–8.

Former colonies in Asia have experienced similar ethnic problems, especially in India, where the populace has been faced with ongoing violent clashes between the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority since partition in 1947. But there are also conflicts where large modern nations have subsumed the historic territory of an ethnic group, producing what criminologist Thorsten Sellin (1938) called cultural conflict. China has two such ongoing conflicts: Tibet, whose population periodically asserts its independence, and more recently in Xinjiang between the Uighur minority and the Han majority. These conflicts should be seen in the same way as those that occurred in what is now the United Kingdom (between the English, Welsh, Scots, and Irish), in France with the Bretons, in Spain with the Basques, and in the Americas with the indigenous peoples.

These are but a few examples of racial and ethnic conflicts that have produced violence in the past, and continue to do so. Readers can easily find many more. What we want to emphasize is the ubiquity of this phenomena. Racial and ethnic conflict is not the exception that sometimes flares into violence, but rather a central—and certainly unfortunate—part of social life in many, many countries on all of the continents. Which of course leads us to try to develop a better understanding of these conflicts and how and when they produce violence.

## 2. Explaining Racial and Ethnic Conflict and Violence

To understand racial and ethnic conflict we have to look to history and socio-structural arrangements. The conflicts described above must be seen in the context of the historic relationships between the groups. Some are based in long-contested territorial rivalries. The conflict over Tibet is one such example: the Chinese insist that it is a historic part of their nation, while the Tibetans see themselves as culturally, ethnically, and nationally distinct. In the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, indigenous groups want self-determination and a degree of independence from the Latino-based national government. And the violence of Basque separatists

is motivated by their belief that their region of the Pyrenees should not be controlled by Spaniards.

Colonial histories underlie a number of ongoing racial and ethnic conflicts. It is clear that conflicts in the Americas, Australia, and in places in Oceania involve native peoples, former slaves, and the descendents of colonial settlers. As indicated above, the way the organization of the former colonies in Africa and Asia ignored the conflicts and relationships of the peoples of the colonized areas forms the basis of certain contemporary violent clashes. Today, a significant portion of the population heterogeneity in Western Europe is a consequence of those countries' histories of imperial power. Migration from former colonies is a significant source of ethnic conflict in the United Kingdom, France, and Spain. And while some would object to calling Soviet—and more recently Chinese—adventures in Africa colonialism, these activities have resulted in some migration from Africa to these places and racist violence has resulted.

The dissolution of multiethnic empires commonly gives rise to large-scale ethnic conflicts and violence. The disintegration of the Ottoman, Czarist, and Habsburg empires resulted in wars (Balkan Wars), genocide (Armenia), ethnic cleansing (on the Balkans, population transfer between Turkey and Greece), and pogroms (Ladas 1932; Naimark 2001; Dunn and Fraser 1996). Here, ethnic sentiment and conflict were often fuelled by the doctrine of “national self-determination.” In more recent history too, the social and political changes that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union led to some of our current conflicts and the ensuing violence. Clashes in the Baltic states between large Russian minorities and Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian majorities fighting for independence in the early 1990s belong to these processes of dissolution and separation, as do the armed conflicts in the Caucasus (Georgia, Chechnya, Azerbaijan, Dagestan, Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, etc). Conflicts between the peoples of Yugoslavia that had been suppressed by the Communist regime also erupted after the end of the Cold War. The creation and expansion of the European Union has encouraged more migration within the continent, which has increased ethnic heterogeneity and might set the stage for violence under certain social conditions.

Socio-structural explanations of racial and ethnic conflict are based on conflict theory. If we take the notion that social life is characterized by efforts to manage stresses between competing interest groups as being fundamental to conflict theory, and recognize that racial and ethnic groups are virtually always in competition, then heterogeneous societies are engaged in a project to minimize conflict and violence between segments of their populations. These projects frequently fail, sometimes spectacularly, other times more modestly. The violent clashes described above are examples of spectacular failures of efforts to prevent racial and ethnic conflicts from turning violent.

Less obviously, racial and ethnic conflicts can produce other forms of violence too. For example, sociologists explain higher rates of violent crime among African Americans as resulting from racially based economic relations (Wilson 1987) and racial residential segregation (Massey and Denton 1993). Though dated, Sellin (1938) explains how cultural conflicts, sometimes along racial and ethnic lines, produce criminal violence. Sellin argues that cultural conflicts occur when migrants bring with them cultural patterns of behaviour and norms that are at times inconsistent with the laws of the countries they move to. For example, Middle Eastern immigrants to the United States have sometimes been charged with rape after participating in the marriage traditions of their homelands (older, wealthier men consummating arranged marriages with girls under the legal age of consent in the United States). Cultural conflict also can occur when a territory is invaded by a group that proceeds to subjugate the resident population. Language conflicts in Western Europe provide examples: the Welsh in the UK (which has produced acts of violence) and the Bretons in France. Sellin regards border regions as another source of ethnic and cultural conflict, as in the case of Spain historically with the Moors, and along the U.S./Mexican border today.

Horowitz emphasizes that today's ethnic conflicts possess elements of universality and uniformity which they did not have before, proposing that certain worldwide ideological and institutional currents are responsible for the growth of ethnic conflicts: the spread of the norms of equality, which makes any subordination illegitimate; the spread of the

value of achievement, which stokes inter-group competition; and the state system, because the control of the state, control of a state, and the exclusion of control by others are among the main sources of (violent) ethnic conflict (1985, 5). Williams, too, stresses the role of the state as a major actor in “creating, accentuating, or diminishing ethnic identities.” He sees states both as “arenas of rivalry and conflicts” and as “resources for ethnic mobilization and counter-mobilization” (1994, 49). At the heart of ethnic conflicts is not ancient hatred between ethnic groups—which in many cases only formed in the ongoing conflict process and did not previously exist as groups with a clearly defined identity; instead, conflicts are driven by political interests. At stake are collective goods, including language rights, religious beliefs, civic and political rights, economic equality, prestige, and political influence (1994, 49, 59).

Fortunately, not all ethnic conflicts become violent. Which raises the question under which circumstances conflicting parties resort to violence. The breakdown-deprivation approach stresses the importance of grievances, the degree of political or economic discrimination, and the restriction of political access, with violence emerging as a viable “last resort” from a process of conflict (Grant and Wallace 1991; Gurr 1993; also Morgan and Nichols 1973). Breakdown theories of collective action give social breakdown a prominent role in the escalation of conflict into a spiral of violence: it generates losses that are experienced as highly salient deprivations, while also undercutting actors’ confidence that their accustomed routines will provide a satisfactory future. The conjunction of these two factors “gives rise to anger, indignation, and revolt” (Useem 1998, 227). The solidarity-mobilization approach, on the other hand, emphasizes political opportunity structures and the mobilization of contenders. If groups are excluded from effective participation in the polity violent collective action may arise (Jenkins and Schock 1992; Tilly 2003). These political theories of violence see violent action as framed in terms of collective interest, with actions understood as “purposeful and rational” (Rule 1988, 170). Ethnopolitical violence theorists view civil violence as part of a continuum of forms of social action, as a phase of collective action, which may oscillate between violent and non-violent forms (Rule 1998, 170). In recent years other scholars have developed a more emotion-

based approach to ethnic conflict and violence, stressing emotions like resentment, fear, hatred, and rage (Petersen 2002; Kaufman 2001). These emotions are associated with specific negative action tendencies, e.g. to harm or to wipe out somebody. Mobilized emotions are seen as a motivation for groups to take collective action (Suny 2004).

For competition theory inter-group hostility and ethnic conflict are a natural outcome of competition for scarce resources (Giles and Evans 1986; Olzak, 1987). Although David Lake and Donald Rothchild see this kind of competition at the heart of ethnic conflict, too, they do not regard competing policy preferences as “sufficient for violence to arise” (Lake and Rothchild 1996). Violence is not caused directly by inter-group differences, “ancient hatreds,” or modern economic stresses, but by “collective fears of the future,” which can take many forms: ethnic groups may fear for their physical lives and survival, or fear assimilation into a dominant culture. In situations of state weakness (anarchy) the use of violence arises out of strategic interactions between groups. Lake and Rothchild see three “strategic dilemmas” (1998, 11) that make the use of violence between groups more likely: information failure, problems of credible commitment arising in situations of changing power relations, and incentives to use force pre-emptively in situations of state weakness (security dilemma) (1996; 1998, 9–18).

Andreas Wimmer summarizes recent scholarship on ethnic conflicts and formulates some basic insights about their character (2004):

*Complexity.* Conflicts involve more than one single ethnic group, interlocking a whole set of political, legal, and economic institutions. Different actors—warlords, underground organizations, non-violent actors, etc.—are linked in a complex network. In many cases ethnic conflicts do not end at the borders of nation-states. Ethnopolitics “is a crucial global force” and has to be located in the context of international relations (Williams, 50–1; Lake and Rothchild 1998).

*Individuality.* Many researchers are now sceptical about the possibility of a general theory of ethnic conflict and recommend a case-by-case approach to account for the complexity of the patterns involved. This means accentuating the

contextual and historical factors of each case rather than applying a “single master scheme.”

*Depth.* Ethnic conflicts are about “participation and exclusion from state power” (Wimmer 2004, 352), and therefore closely related to the basic political institutions. The main issues in these conflicts preferentialism, nepotism, and clientelism along ethnic lines. Ethnic conflicts are not only about political and economic interests (resource distribution or political power); these interests are intertwined with cultural status and identities. Therefore in many ethnic conflicts a zero-sum attitude predominates, which makes compromise solutions difficult.

*Persistence and durability.* “Ethnic conflicts are long-term phenomena” (Wimmer 2004, 352). In recent years researchers have devoted much attention to the self-sustaining and self-amplifying logic of violence (Azar 1990). When conflicts became violent “war economies,” “markets of violence” or a “culture of violence” emerge, creating their own dynamics and transforming the interests of the actors (Waldmann 2007). For example, warlords are unlikely to have much interest in reaching a peace agreement.

Readers will find examples of Wimmer’s insights in the three focus contributions in this issue, which examine complex, persistent conflicts that result from institutional exclusion of groups and illustrate the difficulty involved in generating a general theory of racial and ethnic violence.

### 3. This Focus Issue

The three papers in this focus issue are very different, reflecting the broad scope of research into racial and ethnic violence. As we have described above, a wide variety of acts and underlying causal forces are in play when such violence occurs, and the contributions reflect the heterogeneity of acts involved: from criminal violence to territorial violence, violence as a means of identity politics, and in-group integration.

The contribution by María B. Veléz, “Banks and the Racial Patterning of Homicide: A Study of Chicago Neighborhoods” (2009) is an example of racial and ethnic conflict leading to criminal violence. She considers the influence of bank mortgage decisions on black, and Latino minority neighborhoods and homicide rates, finding that important

economic decisions—which are external to the communities—affect rates of this particular crime and the ethnic distribution of homicide in Chicago. This paper fits into the literature that documents how racial residential segregation in cities concentrates the negative impact of social problems (Massey and Denton 1993), and violent crime (Peterson and Krivo 2005) onto the economically and socially most marginal segments of populations. Of course, bankers do not realize that their decisions contribute to racial or ethnic violence, but to the extent that they are a determining force in higher levels of homicide in black and Latino neighbourhoods, as Veléz demonstrates, they in fact are. It is a challenge for scholars to explore and document how other public and corporate decisions raise or lower the likelihood of racial and ethnic conflict and violence.

Challenging interpretations of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims in India as a defensive rejection against Western ideas or the threats of globalization and modernity, Julia Eckert’s contribution on “The Social Dynamics of Communal Violence in India” (2009) focuses on “the social dynamics that evolve in relation to conflicts within a group.” She sees the construction of hostility between Hindus and Muslims as a part of the identity politics of the Hindu nationalist project, aiming at “unifying the Hindu population and defining the nation against the republican idea.” In this view the Muslims play the role of a substitute enemy, because violence, which operates via “institutionalized riot systems,” as Paul Brass calls them, serves as a tool to affirm local networks and create experiences of participation and empowerment among the members of the nationalist movement. The ability of collective violence to draw clear boundaries between “us” and “them” is used to overcome internal differences and unify the Hindu population under the banner of Hindu nationalism. Eckert shows that communal violence is at the same time a mass movement and clearly manipulated by Hindu nationalist organizations.

Jonah Leff’s “Pastoralists at War: Violence and Security in the Kenya-Sudan-Uganda Border Region” (2009) is obviously about violence, but it is not, at least on the surface, about racial or ethnic violence. The focus is on conflict between groups of pastoralists over access to scarce water

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and grazing lands, and the way the increasing availability and lethality of guns in the region has made clashes—which have occurred for centuries—much more deadly. It is about ethnicity, nonetheless. The clashing groups are defined by their ethnic affiliation to tribes that have longstanding, conflicting claims to these resources. Recent wars have made small, portable arms more widely available, and worsened violent ethnic conflicts over resources that will, for the foreseeable future, remain scarce, causing problems for the participants as well as those charged with maintaining local security. Here, war, as a factor external to the competing ethnic groups, has exacerbated longstanding ethnic group conflicts and made them more lethal.

These three contributions highlight the importance of exclusion as a major social force underlying racial and ethnic conflicts. Exclusion can come from many sources: economic institutions or systems, political arrangements, or resources; each made more problematic by historical patterns of winners and losers. These contributions remind us of the futility of “blaming” racial and ethnic conflicts on explanations based on the particular cultures of the groups involved. In these instances, broader institutional forces, not group norms or values, are important.

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