PAUL R. BRASS

14 Ethnic Groups and Ethnic Identity Formation

There are three ways of defining ethnic groups—in terms of objective attributes, with reference to subjective feelings, and in relation to behavior. An objective definition assumes that though no specific attribute is invariably associated with all ethnic categories, there must be some distinguishing cultural feature that clearly separates one group of people from another, whether that feature or features be language, territory, religion, color, diet, dress, or any of them. The problem with objective definitions is that it is usually extremely difficult to determine the boundaries of ethnic categories in this way.[1] The difficulty with subjective definitions is that they make it impossible to answer the basic question of how a group of people arrives at subjective self-consciousness in the first place. Behavioral definitions are really a form of objective definition since they assume that there are specific, concrete ways in which ethnic groups behave or do not behave, particularly in relation to and in interaction with other groups. Behavioral definitions merely suggest that there are cultural differences between ethnic groups, but that the critical distinctions reveal themselves only in interaction with other groups.[2] But, the existence of explicit codes of behavior and interaction is rather more characteristic, more all-pervasive, and more evident in simple than in complex societies in which people may establish their separateness with reference to specific attributes without adopting an entirely distinct code of behavior.

Subjective definitions will not, therefore, serve the analytical purpose of this book, which is to specify the conditions for the formation, persistence, and transformation of ethnic identities over time, whereas interactive definitions lack the universality required. The most appropriate definition for the aims of this book is one that begins with objective cultural markers but which also recognizes that they are susceptible to change and variation. Any group of people dissimilar from other peoples in terms of objective cultural criteria and containing within its membership, either in principle or in practice, the elements for a complete division of labor and for reproduction forms an ethnic category. The objective cultural markers may be a language or dialect, distinctive dress or diet or customs, religion or race. The inclusion in the definition of the phrase 'contains within its membership, either in principle or in practice, the elements for a complete division of labor and for reproduction' is designed to emphasize the cultural basis of ethnicity and to distinguish ethnic categories from other social categories based on class or gender or age grades.

Ethnicity is a sense of ethnic identity, which has been defined by De Vos as consisting of the 'subjective, symbolic or emblematic use' by 'a group of

people...of any aspect of culture, in order to differentiate themselves from other groups.'[3] This definition can be used for the analytic purposes required here by altering the last phrase to read 'in order to create internal cohesion and differentiate themselves from other groups.' An ethnic group that uses cultural symbols in this way is a subjectively self-conscious community that establishes criteria for inclusion into and exclusion from the group. At this point, matters of descent, birth, and a sense of kinship may become important to ethnic group members, for the methods of inclusion and exclusion into the group often involve the explicit or tacit adoption of rules of endogamy and exogamy. Ethnicity or ethnic identity also involves, in addition to subjective self-consciousness, a claim to status and recognition, either as a superior group or as a group at least equal to other groups. Ethnicity is to ethnic category what class consciousness is to class.

Ethnicity is an alternative form of social organization and identification to class, but it is a contingent and changeable status that, like class, may or may not be articulated in particular contexts or at particular times.[4] Ethnic groups that use ethnicity to make demands in the political arena for alteration in their status, in their economic well-being, in their civil rights, or in their educational opportunities are engaged in a form of interest group politics which became prominent in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s and which sought to improve the well-being of group members as individuals.[5] However, some ethnic groups in other contexts go further and demand that corporate rights be conceded to the group as a whole, that they be given not just individual educational opportunities on the same basis as others, but that they be given control over the public system of education in their areas of concentration so that they can teach the history, language, and culture of their group to their own children. They demand a major say for the group in the political system as a whole or control over a piece of territory within the country, or they demand a country of their own with full sovereignty. In the latter case, the ethnic group aspires to national status and recognition. Insofar as it succeeds by its own efforts in achieving any one of these goals either within an existing state or in a state of its own, it has become a nationality or a nation.[6] A nation, therefore, may be seen as a particular type of ethnic community[7] or, rather, as an ethnic community politicized, with recognized group rights in the political system.[8] [...]

This process of development of communities from ethnic categories is particularly associated with the early stages of modernization in multiethnic societies where languages have not yet become standardized, where religious groups have not become highly structured and compartmentalized, and where social fragmentation is prevalent. However, the transition may occur even in postindustrial societies such as the United States, where Negroes have become Blacks, Mexican-Americans Chicanos, and many other ethnic groups have rediscovered their origins and identities.

The second stage in the transformation of ethnic groups involves the articulation and acquisition of social, economic, and political rights for the members of the group or for the group as a whole. Depending upon the perceived needs and demands of the group, its size and distribution, its relations with other groups, and the political context, demands may aim at relatively modest civil, educational, and political rights and opportunities for the individual members of the group or for recognition of the group's corporate existence as a political body or nationality. Insofar as an ethnic group succeeds by its own efforts in achieving and maintaining group rights through political action and political mobilization, it has gone beyond ethnicity to establish itself as a nationality.

The delineation of the process of nationality-formation in this manner suggests several problems that require explanation. First, what are the conditions under which ethnic groups become communities and under which ethnic demands, ethnic competition, and ethnic conflict take place? Second, what are the conditions under which an ethnic community is likely to make the major demand for status as a nationality and what are the requirements for success? Third, how does one explain the transformations that take place in the culture, behavior, and boundaries of a people as it undergoes the movement from ethnic group to nationality? Fourth, since it is also evident that ethnic and nationality movements frequently ebb and flow over time within the same group, how can one explain the resurgence of ethnicity and nationalism among diverse groups of people at different times and in different places? The focus of the remainder of this chapter will be on the first two questions, but the analysis will also touch, at several places, on the last two.

Ethnic differentiation: from ethnic groups to communities

The movement from ethnic group to community is a transition that some groups never make, that others make initially in modern times, and that still others undergo repeatedly at different points in time. In the first category are the various 'lost' peoples and speakers of diverse dialects who have merged into or are merging into other peoples—the Cornish in the United Kingdom, the Frisians in Holland, the Sorbs and Wends of Eastern and Central Europe, the Maithili-speaking people and numerous other dialect-speakers in north India. In the second category are the newly-formed ethnic groups and nationalities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—the Welsh and the Irish, the nationalities in Austria-Hungary, the Ibos in Nigeria, the Naga tribes in northeastern India and most of the language communities of contemporary India, the Malays in Malaysia. In the last category are the ancient peoples of the world, Jews, Han Chinese, Egyptians, and the major nationalities of Western Europe.

The process of creating communities from ethnic groups involves the selection of particular dialects or religious practices or styles of dress or historical symbols from a variety of available alternatives. It will be shown below that it is always the case that particular social groups, leaders, or élites stand to benefit and others to lose from the choices that are made.

Ethnicity and élite Competition

Ethnic communities are created and transformed by particular élites in modernizing and in postindustrial societies undergoing dramatic social change. This process invariably involves competition and conflict for political power, economic benefits, and social status between competing élite, class, and leadership groups both within and among different ethnic categories. Several scholars of ethnicity and nationality have pointed out that modernization and industrialization in large, multiethnic societies tend to proceed unevenly and often, if not always, benefit some ethnic groups or some regions of a country more than others.[13] However, inequality between different ethnic groups or culturally distinct regions does not by itself spur the development of communal or national consciousness. Speakers of an unstandardized local dialect in a backward rural region of a modernizing country may very well go on speaking their language and cultivating their fields without becoming concerned that their language is being neglected and without developing any sense of solidarity.[14] They may do so either because they are completely in the backwash of modernization, remote from urban lifestyles and only marginally affected by new educational opportunities and new means of mass communication and transportation, or because the locally powerful economic, religious, and political élites find it to their advantage to cooperate with external authorities and adopt the language and culture of the dominant ethnic group in order to maintain or enhance their own power. Relevant examples here are the Anglicized Welsh aristocracy in Wales in the nineteenth century, the Polonized Lithuanian nobility in Lithuania, and the Magyarized Romanian nobility in Transylvania. This kind of cooperation between internal élites and external authorities usually leads to a situation of persistent ethnic differences among the mass of the people, but without the articulation of ethnic demands.

Ethnic selfconsciousness, ethnically-based demands, and ethnic conflict can occur only if there is some conflict either between indigenous and external élites and authorities or between indigenous élites. Four sources of élite conflict that may spur the development of ethnic communalism or separatism in preindustrial or early modernizing societies are those (a) between a local aristocracy attempting to maintain its privileges against an alien conqueror; (b) between competing religious élites from different ethnic groups;

What are the conditions that determine whether or not one group will merge into another group, or will establish or reestablish and redefine its identity? The richness of a group's cultural heritage, the stage of development of its language, and the distinctiveness of its religious beliefs do not by themselves predetermine that one group of people will be more internally solidary than another and will be more likely to perpetuate itself through time. Absence of or loss of a distinctive language has not prevented Blacks in the United States or Celtic groups in the United Kingdom, or non-Hebrew, non-Yiddish speaking Jews in the United States from acquiring or maintaining a sense of ethnic identity. By the same token, over the centuries in Europe, old, fully standardized, written languages—Latin, Anglo-Saxon, Provençal, Low German, Church Slavonic—some of them spoken by peoples occupying compact geographical areas, have been 'submerged' while other languages have replaced or absorbed them.[9] Moreover, despite the fact that European culture, civilization, and science have for centuries been dominated increasingly by the three great languages, English, French, and German, this has not prevented 'the growth of linguistic diversity in Europe from 16 [standard] languages in 1800 to 30 in 1900 and to 53 in 1937',[10] and the attendant development of language communities among many of them.

Distinctive minority religious groups in modern times have often developed into ethnically selfconscious communities, but it has also often happened, particularly in Eastern Europe and in South Asia, that religious differences have been used or even created to establish or emphasize between peoples barriers that have non-religious origins. The attempt to establish a Uniate Church in Bulgaria, which culminated in the development of a separate hierarchy of Eastern Orthodoxy, has over time served to reinforce the ethnic separateness of Bulgarians from Greeks, but it was not religious distinctiveness that initially inspired the rise of Bulgarian ethnic consciousness. Islam in non-Muslim states has often provided a strong basis for Muslim separatism, but again it is not the distinctiveness of Islam as such in relation to other religions that is decisive, for the degree of Muslim communal self-consciousness varies in different contexts. For example, in Eastern Europe, Islam has served more effectively as a basis for ethnic separatism in Yugoslavia than in Albania.[11] Nor can Jewish religious distinctiveness explain Jewish ethnic separatism that culminated in Zionism, for often enough Jews chose to assimilate in Eastern Europe when conditions were favorable. In South Asia, Sikhism as a distinctive religion has its origins in the early sixteenth century, but it was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that a militant body of believers began the process that continues up to the present day, i.e., of shaping and defining the boundaries of the Sikh community to conform to a particular view of Sikh orthodoxy and instilling in large segments of the Sikh population a sense of communal solidarity and separateness from Hindus.[12]

(c) between religious élites and the native aristocracy within an ethnic group; and (d) between native religious élites and an alien aristocracy.

[Ethnicity and Nationalism (New Delhi, Newbury Park, London: Sage Publications, 1991), 18–20, 22–6.]

MICHAEL HECHTER

15 Ethnicity and Rational Choice Theory

Rational choice considers individual behaviour to be a function of the interaction of structural constraints and the sovereign preferences of individuals. The structure first determines, to a greater or lesser extent, the constraints under which individuals act. Within these constraints, individuals face various feasible courses of action. The course of action ultimately chosen is selected rationally: in Parson's words,¹ 'individuals adapt means to their ends in such a way as to approach the most efficient manner of achieving them'. When individual preferences are assumed to be known, transitive and temporally stable, behaviour can be predicted in the face of any combination of structural constraints.

How can these assumptions be justified in macro-sociological research, especially when rational choice theorists also assume that each individual may have a set of preferences that is unique?

Whereas a certain (but unknown) proportion of every individual's preferences are idiosyncratic, the rest (such as preferences for wealth, honour and power) are commonly held by many others. These common preferences impel everyone in the group to act similarly. Some of the idiosyncratic preferences may result in singular action, but so long as the common preferences are known (a significant caveat, and one to which I will return below), then the idiosyncratic ones will cancel one another out and their average will be zero.

This may be true enough, but how can these common preferences ever be known? They can't be assumed a priori, for there is no practical limit upon them: as the adage has it, chacun à son goût. But it can be expected that everyone will prefer more wealth, power and honour to less, because attaining these goods often makes it easier for individuals to attain other (perhaps more idiosyncratic) goals. Although it would be foolish to predict the behaviour of any given individual, the law of large numbers allows predictions for the aggregate to be rather precise.²

According to such reasoning, individuals will only fulfil their corporate obligations when they receive a net benefit by doing so. As a result, both collective action and social order depend on the belief of most people that free riding and crime do not pay.³ The rational actor will commit crime to attain

his or her goals, unless deterred by the fear of incarceration (or some other punishment). Similarly, in large groups, where informal social controls lose their efficacy because individual networks rarely overlap, collective action is problematic because free riding is hard to detect.

Now unlike the other theories—both of which are curiously static—this one is eminently capable of explaining changes in behaviour. The mechanism it proposes in this respect is refreshingly simple. Changing relative prices leads to corresponding changes in behaviour: the more costly it is for people to choose a traditional course of action to achieve a given benefit, the more likely it is that they will consider an innovative alternative to reach the same end. Further, the causes of these price changes are endogenous to the explanation, since they are at least partly the result of a myriad of independent individual decisions which together comprise aggregate demand. Aggregate demand, in turn, pushes supply.

In contrast to both normative and structural theories, then, rational choice offers the prospect of arriving at predictive statements, rather than at the post hoc descriptions for which sociologists have had to settle too frequently in the past. This is a cherished goal for those who are committed to the development of a more scientific discipline. Three examples should suffice to illustrate something of the range of applications of rational choice theory in the field of ethnic and race relations.

Sowell⁴ uses rational choice principles to explain patterns of racial discrimination in the job market. Consider a society having a low-status racial group whose members command a relatively low price in the labour market. Distancing typically occurs as a result of this kind of racial interaction with members of the high-status group prefer to limit their social interaction with low-status individuals. If it is assumed that employers are profit-maximisers, and if they cannot effectively collude against the members of a particular group, then racial discrimination in hiring should be greater in non-profit-making organisations and regulated industries than in unregulated and profit-making enterprises.

Why should this be so? Even if all employers prefer to exclude low-status workers from their firms, whenever their pay is lower than their productivity there is an economic incentive to hire them. However, if employers are prevented from maximising profits by government regulatory agencies, or are legally non-profit-making, then they have no opportunity to earn more profit by hiring relatively inexpensive (and racially low-status) labour. Regulated industries are usually controlled by political bodies, so their hiring policies are less subject to economic constraints and more subject to political ones. This fact suggests an additional implication: should public objections to racial discrimination arise, the racial hiring policies of regulated industries will undergo a more rapid turn-around than those of unregulated industries.