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Sandra F. Joireman

University of Richmond, [sjoirema@richmond.edu](mailto:sjoirema@richmond.edu)

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# Nationalism and Political Identity

Sandra Fullerton Joireman

# Identity and the Politics of Belonging

The Cold War ended and wars of ethnic nationalism began; or so it seemed to many observers of world politics at the turn of the twenty-first century. It appeared as if people stopped killing each other for ideological reasons, as they did during the Cold War, and started killing each other because of primal, deeply embedded hatreds. The power of ethnicity to mobilize people to action and threaten the state became visible to the world. The eruption of ethnic wars in Europe, Africa and Asia punctuated the fact that this was not a problem specific to the developing world, but a security threat to developed states as well.

Ethnicity is not new. It has deep historical roots and has manifested itself differently over time, reflecting the global, strategic environment. Ethnicity may have appeared dormant at different points in history only to revive again. Ethnicity is not new but the recognition of its role in international politics is. Over the past fifteen years we have witnessed an internationalization of ethnic conflict that has defied the boundaries of the state. This has been the case in Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia and even in Northern Ireland.

Many observers of the outbreak of ethnic violence around the world have attributed this violence to the existence of ancient hatreds, as if the mere presence of differences in identity between people groups were enough to drive them to violence. This, however, is not the case. There are too many examples of people groups living in close proximity for hundreds of years and never taking up arms against one another. An excellent example is that of the Flemish and Walloons in Belgium. How is it that these two peoples, as different as the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, have never in the modern era had cause to go to war? The Flemish do not want to be Walloons and the Walloons do not want to be Flemish, but the two groups do not fight. The example of the Flemish and Walloons is typical of the peaceful coexistence of many different peoples and nationalities around the globe. Violent ethnic conflict is rare, and serious enough to merit close examination for its deviation from the norm of constructive dialogue and integration.

One of the goals of this text is to help the reader understand the critical difference between ethnicity as a *cause* of conflict and ethnic identity as a *mobilizing factor* in conflicts. While ethnic identities can lead people to see their personal interests as united with the interests

of a group, the mere existence of that group does not necessitate conflict.

### WHO AM I?

A French-speaking Canadian  
A New Yorker  
A Scot  
A Jew  
A Latina

Consider how you might answer this question; possibilities abound. You could answer giving your race, sex, religion, heritage, generation, country of birth or political persuasion. Though it might not be immediately obvious, how you choose to answer this very simple question has strong political implications. Your answer will identify the group of people to whom you have the closest emotional and psychological attachment – the group to which you feel you belong. This may influence the way you vote in elections, the types of political activities in which you engage and even whether or not you would ever consider using violence or taking up arms against the state. We will discuss this in greater detail later on in the chapter, but for now, think about how you would answer these questions. Who are you? Why do you choose a particular identity? Why do you not choose other identities that might be available to you?

The types of identities that people choose for themselves tend to fall into a few categories: regional, religious, racial and linguistic. The study of ethnic identity is often referred to as *the politics of belonging*. We each decide for ourselves which identity is most important. We decide the group to which we belong. Because the decision is an individual one, not everyone finds each of these identities to be important. For example, though I speak English as my native language I do not see my interests as primarily tied to those of other English speakers. This is because there are so many English speakers and we are a majority in my country. I am more likely to see the dissimilarities between myself and other native English speakers, rather than the similarities.

### Regional identities

A regional identity can be related to citizenship. For example, I may identify myself as Canadian because I live in Saskatchewan and hold a Canadian passport. However, identifying with the state is not necessarily the first identity choice for many. Some people, particularly those from culturally distinct areas, more readily identify

themselves with a region rather than a country. For example, a Welshman might identify himself as Welsh before he would identify himself as British. Similarly, a woman may call herself French Canadian, or Quebecois, rather than referring to herself as just Canadian, because she feels a greater identification with those from Quebec. People from distinctive cities may identify themselves directly with that city before their region or their country. The most obvious example is New Yorkers; many of whom see New York as not only the centre of the world, but as culturally distinct from the rest of the United States. In the case of New York, the distinctiveness of the city is generally recognized, to the extent that other Americans, indeed people from other countries, understand that the moniker 'New Yorker' carries an identification of cultural distinctiveness. In fact, in all of these regional examples, the meaning is generally clear when a person refers to themselves as Welsh rather than British, and French Canadian rather than just Canadian. They are claiming the distinctiveness of that identity to define themselves. They are identifying the group to which they feel a sense of belonging.

Among immigrant groups around the world there is a second regional identity phenomenon, whereby people identify themselves with an ancestral homeland from which their parents or grandparents (or sometimes many further generations back) originally came. Someone may refer to himself or herself as Mexican, Irish or German without speaking the language of that country or perhaps having never seen it! This is somewhat unique to America as an immigrant country with a policy of granting citizenship to anyone born within its borders (*jus sanguinis*). Among immigrant groups in other countries of the world, this identification with an ancestral homeland is also evident.

Regional identities are most often those of the state of which people are a part. But they can also be that of a region within one's state, a city, or another state entirely; it is the psychological attachment of an individual rather than their specific location that matters most.

## **Religion**

Religion is another identity that creates a sense of belonging for many people around the world. Religion, however, is slightly more controversial than a regionally defined identity. Consider the case of New Yorkers discussed previously. If I live in New York City but do not consider myself a New Yorker as my fundamental identity, that is not particularly problematic. However, it is problematic if I am a Jew, a Christian or a Muslim and I do not see this as critical to my identity. The difference arises because other adherents to my religion will know what I ought to believe or think or do. There will be those of my faith who may think that I am following the wrong path, that I am 'like a sheep that has gone astray'. Therefore, religion is slightly more

complex because of the push for orthodoxy (correct beliefs), and/or orthopraxy (correct practices), among the adherents of any faith.

## Race

Race is a peculiar case of ethnic identity. It is peculiar because there are many ways in which appearance signals ethnic identification: style of dress, hairstyle, particular types of jewelry or the presence or absence of facial hair in men. Race, however, is unusual, as it cannot be altered simply by changing clothes or hairstyles. It is an immediately perceptible outward appearance that is generally unchangeable throughout a person's lifetime.

In the nineteenth century, biologists divided the world into three racial groups. They identified people with light skin and fine hair as *Caucasian*. *Negroid* referred to people with darker skin and coarser hair and *Mongoloid* identified people with yellow skin and distinctive folds on the eyelids. These categories have since been abandoned as they are no longer useful. Indeed, they were of limited use even in the nineteenth century. They do not identify groups that are biologically similar, nor are they even very accurate in reflecting physical appearances. For example, some people who would have fallen into the category of Caucasian, such as Southern Indians, are far darker than people who would be called Negroids, such as light skinned Ethiopians or some African-Americans. Therefore, thinking in terms of racial categories is not biologically accurate nor particularly helpful in identifying ethnic groups.

Race only indicates ethnicity in particular contexts. For example, race would not allow a person to discern ethnicity for most European Union nationals, where the ability to identify whether someone is Irish, French or Belgian is more an issue of speech and dress than the colour of skin or hair. Even in the United States, where race would presumably identify darker-skinned individuals as African-Americans, rifts are developing. This is nowhere more obvious than in New York City, where West Indian and African immigrant populations increasingly see themselves as distinct from the wider black American population (Fears 2002). Throughout this book, race is treated as just another ethnic identity. It is discussed in that way because our understanding of race, like our understanding of ethnicity, is socially constructed. Let us discuss further what that means.

Scientists have never come up with any conclusive evidence to show that there is any such thing as race. Despite this fact, we all know what we are talking about when we discuss race. We know whether we are white or black or Asian or something else entirely. Even if a person is to consider herself of mixed race, she invariably knows how others view her and categorize her, based solely on her appearance. We know what race other people are; we can tell just by looking at

them. Or can we? I used to think that it was possible to just look at someone and determine their race until I started meeting people who lived in South Africa under the apartheid regime. I remember quite clearly sitting through an academic presentation in the United States given by a South African man. He was discussing his work with the African National Congress (ANC) during the apartheid years. The ANC was known for its inclusiveness of anyone who opposed apartheid so it was not surprising to me that this man was white. However, during the question and answer period, a student asked the man how he had come to work with the ANC during the apartheid years as a white man. The speaker looked closely at the student and said, 'Am I white?' Well, he certainly passed my eyeball test, but in fact he was not classified as white by the apartheid regime, but as coloured. As a result, his educational opportunities were limited, he was only allowed to live in certain places and he had to carry a passbook. Not surprisingly, he joined the ANC in the struggles against a regime that would both label him and restrict his freedom based on such an arbitrary measure.

Conceptions of race are different across cultures. How could this be if race was an inborn trait, a fact or a concept that was agreed upon across cultures? If race was any of these things, people would just know what they were and there would be no confusion, but this is simply not the case. Once we try to move our conceptions of race across cultures and contexts, they fail. This is why sociologists tell us that race is socially constructed. It is something that is determined by a particular social or cultural context and not exclusively by the amount of melanin in your skin.

## Language

In certain societies it is possible to find distinct linguistic groups that set the boundaries of belonging. Belgium is a society in which approximately 32 per cent of the population speaks French and another 58 per cent speaks Flemish or Dutch. The Belgians have found several creative ways of coping with this bifurcation of their society, including establishing a language line. North of the line, French is the language of commerce and education; south of it, Dutch is the language of commerce and education. Additionally, Belgium has developed a federal system in which power is shared between the two linguistic groups, with each having legislative and administrative responsibilities over the areas in which their language is dominant. These strategies have helped the Belgians to accommodate the diversity within their country while still maintaining a democratic and developed society. There are other countries which face similar linguistic divides in which language becomes the key identifying characteristic of distinct ethnic groups. One excellent example is

Canada, which has faced a secessionist movement from within the Francophone population of Quebec. The movement for the independence of Quebec has been violent on occasion and always virulent. Both the English-speaking and the French-speaking Canadians see a cultural and ethnic split that follows linguistic lines. It is language, rather than religion or region, which defines ethnicity in both Belgium and Canada.

## Custom

Nearly all of the preceding categories could be captured under the category of custom, yet it is deserving of a separate category because of the fact that we see the use of particular customs establishing a divisive line in communities. This typically happens in cases where one ethnic group sees itself as the bearer or possessor of a more sophisticated or advanced culture, which really ought to be adapted by other groups for their own benefit. The Amhara in Ethiopia are one example. The Amhara have a long Christian history filled with beautiful works of art and architecture, ancient written manuscripts describing the correct actions of kings and religious leaders, and a long history of rule in Ethiopia. Many within the group see the Amhara as a bulwark against Islamic influences from the north and the south as well as the possessors of a rich culture that ought to be emulated by those individuals seeking a higher level of civilization. It is the culture and customs of the Amhara that separate them from other groups. They have formed their own distinctive identity on the basis of superiority. It is not necessary for a culture to see itself as superior in order to be separate or unique, though this usually contributes at some level. Separate cultures and customs are typically defined symbolically. It is worth a digression here to discuss the importance of symbols as signifiers of belonging as well as exclusion.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SYMBOLS

Symbols guard the borders of collective life. Symbols indicate who is 'us' and who is the other, or, as a sociologist might explain it, symbols identify who belongs to the in-group and who belongs to the out-group. In-groups are those groups with which an individual identifies psychologically. Out-groups are those groups of people with which an individual has no psychological affinity.

Symbols can be related to diet, etiquette, arts, rituals and language. For example, we can think of the different symbols that define the borders of religious groups in India. The importance of food taboos in both Hindu and Muslim cultures is one clear definition of the borders



between these two groups. Hindus have a taboo against eating any beef products as the cow is religiously revered. Muslims are distinguished by their taboo against eating pork products. This distinction is further defined in the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, when not only are the traditional food taboos upheld, but Muslims fast throughout the entire month during the daylight hours.

Symbols are particularly important when in-groups and out-groups cannot be determined on the basis of physiognomy or physical appearance such as stature and skin colour. When two or more groups are similar in appearance, other identifiers must be used to establish in-group boundaries. A good example from the United States is the similarity of physiognomy between some Native Americans and people of Mexican descent. One might be able to generalize and say that on average Native Americans are taller, but beyond that the two groups are very similar in skin colour, hair colour and features. Yet, once we set aside these basic physical traits, there are many symbols that would set the two groups apart. Hairstyles in men are a particular indicator of difference between the two groups. In the Native American culture it is traditional for men to wear their hair very long. This is not at all the case with people of Mexican descent. Distinguishing the women of the two groups is more difficult, but might be possible through the identification of jewelry or beadwork that they might wear. These symbols of ethnic identity that would set Native Americans apart from Mexicans or other ethnic groups are all changeable. It is not necessary or in any way biological for Native Americans to wear their hair a certain way or to choose particular types of jewelry. When they choose to adopt these symbols of identification, they are identifying themselves as part of an in-group.

## STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In the following pages of this book we will begin to investigate the issues of political identity and nationalism. In Chapter One the definitions of ethnicity and nationalism are presented. Three chapters which outline the basic themes follow: Chapter Two examines the oldest way of thinking about ethnicity – primordialism. In discussing primordialism we will be addressing the understanding of ethnicity that held sway through most of the twentieth century. This primordial understanding of ethnicity has been supplanted by two different approaches to ethnicity that we call instrumentalism and social constructivism. Instrumentalism and social constructivism are both relatively new approaches to understanding the politics of ethnicity that have arisen in the years following the Cold War. Instrumentalism is discussed in Chapter Three and social construct-

ivism in Chapter Four. The third section of the book, which comprises Chapters Five through Eight, is a collection of case studies. Each case study gives a detailed description of a particular ethnic conflict and allows the reader to apply the theories discussed in the earlier chapters. The case studies have been selected both on the basis of geography and by the nature of the particular conflict. Therefore, the case of Quebec to illustrate ethnic conflict that is defined by the issue of language is included, and Yugoslavia to identify a case where ethnic conflict is defined by religion and culture, and so on. The case studies can be read on their own or in conjunction with the theoretical chapters. The theoretical chapters present multiple ways of interpreting the genesis of nationalist movements and the conduct of ethnic conflicts. The book concludes with a chapter on possible solutions to nationalist and ethnic conflicts.

### ***Bibliography***

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