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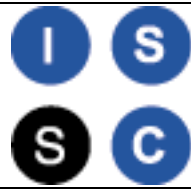
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ISSC DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

THE ROOTS OF INTENSE ETHNIC CONFLICT MAY NOT IN FACT BE ETHNIC: CATEGORIES, COMMUNITIES AND PATH DEPENDENCE

Joseph Ruane
Jennifer Todd

Joseph Ruane is a member of the Sociology Department in University College Cork.

Jennifer Todd is a member of the Politics Department in University College Dublin and a Leader of the Identity, Diversity and Citizenship Programme of the Institute for the Study of Social Change (ISSC) and Leader of the Intergenerational Transmission of Identity Project of the Institute for the Study of Social Change (ISSC).

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The roots of intense ethnic conflict may not in fact be ethnic: categories, communities and path dependence.

By Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd

Abstract

This article criticizes two theoretical strategies of approach to ethnicity and ethnic conflict and proposes an alternative. One strategy emphasizes the intense solidarity generated by the ethnic or ethno-national bond and the resistance to change of the communities thus formed; it explains these phenomena in terms of the deep feeling surrounding the quasi-kin sense of ethnicity. The other strategy emphasizes the contingency, situatedness, variability, even superficiality of ethnic feeling, and shows how the emergent and unstable linkages which constitute ethnic 'groups' are formed from an interplay of ethnic categories and ethnic entrepreneurs within a given institutional and legal context. We adopt an alternative theoretical strategy, seeing ethnicity as a product of a multiplicity of determinants rather than a simple essence, and locating it as one factor among many, which, depending on the tightness or looseness of their interlinkages and mutual feedback mechanisms, may form a path dependent self-reproductive system generating communal opposition and ethnic conflict.

Keywords: ethnicity, ethnic conflict, ethno-national bond, category, community, system, emergent property, path dependence,

Introduction

Ethnicity is a notoriously slippery concept. The phenomenon it describes, in contrast, may be stark and intense. This paper begins with two theoretical strategies of approach to ethnicity and ethnic conflict.¹ One emphasizes the intensity of solidarity within ethnic communities and their resistance to change, and explains these phenomena in terms of the deep feeling surrounding the category of ethnicity. The other emphasizes the contingency, situatedness, variability, even superficiality of ethnic feeling, and argues that the emergent and unstable linkages which constitute ethnic 'groups' are formed from an interplay of ethnic categories and ethnic entrepreneurs within a given institutional and legal context. In this article we argue that neither strategy adequately grasps the multiple determinants, the variability or the social embeddedness of the ethnic phenomenon, and we propose an alternative.

Two theoretical strategies, foundationalism and cognitive interactionism

¹ For the purposes of this paper we take ethnicity and ethno-nationalism as points on a continuum. The distinction between the ethnic and the ethno-national – which is made primarily in terms of political aims and organization – is not central to the argument of this article.

This section of the paper outlines and criticizes two major theoretical strategies of approach to ethnicity: foundationalism and cognitive interactionism. It takes as representative of these strategies two figures – Walker Connor and Rogers Brubaker – who give admirably clear statements of the strategies, although the general approaches are much more widely shared. The strategies have different strengths: foundationalism promises robust explanatory power, cognitive interactionism (a variant of constructivism) promises methodological sophistication and subtle empirical grasp. Our critique shows that neither meets its own goals.

Theoretical strategy 1: foundationalism

Much of the comparative political science literature on ethnic conflict views ethnic and ethno-national communities as persistent, resilient and robust, strong and deep at the motivational level, capable of eliciting deep loyalty and intense attachment and in consequence particularly resistant to change (Connor, 1994; Connor 2002; Horowitz 1985; Horowitz, 2002; Conversi, 2002; Smith, 1986; Shils, 1995). A classic theoretical elaboration of these insights is given by Walker Connor in a series of articles written from 1966 to the present; Connor (1994, esp. 73-76; 197ff.) posits that the resilience of ethno-national solidarity and the strength of ethno-national belonging are an expression of a deep emotional feeling associated with ethnicity which has psychological roots in kinship bonds. Phenomenologically, ethnic feeling is a descent-oriented, quasi-kinship sense of belonging, incorporating a sense of shared blood (eg Connor, 1994, 74, 93, 197, also Fishman, 1980 reprinted in Hutchinson and Smith, 1996, 63; Gil White, 1999).² This description underpins a specific explanation of the strength and persistence of ethno-national community – it is strong and persistent precisely because it is a socio-psychological fact that kinship and blood-ties always produce strong, intense and long-lasting bonding.³ They also produce a sense of opposition. ‘The national bond, because it is based upon belief in common descent, ultimately bifurcates humanity into “us” and “them”’ (Connor, 1994, 207). Contextual changes, inequality, and symbols, it is argued, may all serve as ‘triggers’ for nationalist feeling to emerge and for nationalist mobilisation but the ultimate explanation lies in the character and strength of the feeling itself. This theory also underlies a specific prescription on how (not) to deal with ethnic conflict: if ethnicity is so persistent and strong a motivating force, there is no realistic hope of assimilation of ethnic minorities, nor can social engineering lead to their disappearance, indeed such attempts are not just useless, but also politically dangerous,

² ‘Recognizing the sense of common kinship that permeates the ethno-national bond clears a number of hurdles. First, it qualitatively distinguishes national consciousness from non-kinship identities (such as race or class) with which it has too often been grouped’ (Connor, 1994, p. 74). We speak of the ‘foundationalist’ strategy to emphasise the claim that ethnic feeling is a foundational, primary feeling, with psychological roots in a basic human sentiment; the term ‘primordialism’ which is often used, is misleading to the extent that it suggests a claim about the origins, rather than the character, of the feeling.

³ For a clear statement of the explanation, see McGarry and O’Leary, 1995, pp. 354-5. Connor himself emphasizes the descriptive element rather than the explanatory, but it is clear also that he believes the fault of previous explanations is their lack of grasp of the emotive, descent-oriented character of ethno-nationalism (1994, 73-75, 105)

encouraging unrealistic expectations (Connor, 2002; 1994, chapters 2, 3; McGarry and O'Leary, 1993).

This approach is ontologically realist: ethno-national communities exist and the theoretical question is to identify the nature and explain the strength of the 'ethno-national bond' (Connor, 1994, 73-6). It treats this bond in essentialist fashion as based on one category, ethnicity. Ethnicity is in turn understood psychologically, as based on a primal kin-feeling. The universal strength of this feeling in turn provides the law-like generalization (the covering law) which explains the strength of the ethnic bond: the sense of descent-linkages always produces intense and lasting communal solidarity and opposition. This strategy tends to remove the ethnic bond from relational or social ties: the bond is not dependent on relations with another group, and the social relations and interactions which produce the strong sense of ethnic difference and which give it daily immediacy are reduced to 'triggers'; any attempt to explain the emergence and variation of ethnic feeling in terms of social factors is rejected as economistic instrumentalism (Connor 1994, chapter 6; 2001). Despite appearances, this approach is neither social nor psychological: it works with an unsocial view of meaning, and a simple and uncritical view of psychological traits.

This approach has perennially attracted criticism, particularly on grounds of the essentialism, psychologism and reductionism of the theory.⁴ From a variety of perspectives, Connor's approach has been criticized for ignoring the *relational* character of ethnicity, for emphasizing bonds rather than boundaries, for underemphasizing the situational character and the strategic and rational incentives for ethnic bonding, and the very wide variety of meanings attributed to the ethnic bond, which may vary dramatically from community to community, within a given community over time and between subgroups within it, from one individual to another and for each individual over the life-span and even from moment to moment.⁵ The problematic explanatory structure of the theory which moves directly from the phenomenological immediacy of ethnic consciousness to posit a socio-psychological mechanism of quasi-kinship bonding has repeatedly been noted (for examples, McKay, 1982; Eller and Coughlan, 1993; Smith 2002). We will not repeat these arguments, although we believe that they are cogent. We note a further questionable assumption at the core of the approach: that 'the' ethno-national bond is a simple entity, the same in each case. This point is often presented as obvious, even tautological: yet whether 'the ethno-national bond' refers to a simple entity or a set of family resemblances, or whether the single term disguises great variation in its referents is an empirical matter; the empirical inadequacy of the foundationalist claim will be criticized in the next section of the paper.

Despite the cogency of the methodological criticisms to which it has been subjected, the foundationalist theoretical strategy has retained a wide appeal. This in itself demands explanation. In our view, its appeal lies ultimately in its explanatory power: in situations of ethnic and ethno-national conflict, this strategy appears to explain and predict very

⁴ See for example, McKay, 1982; Scott, 1990; Eller and Coughlan, 1993, Jenkins, 1997; Smith, 2002, pp. 63-5;

⁵ See, variously, Brubaker 2002; Grillo, 1998; Jenkins, 1997.

well the strength and persistence of the ethno-national bond, and the resilience and resistance to change of ethno-national conflict. The temptation for those who study ethnic and ethno-national conflict is to forgo methodological subtleties in order to grasp the strength of the phenomenon at hand. The challenge is to find a more adequate theorization of this strength.

Theoretical strategy 2: cognitive interactionism

Rogers Brubaker's influential cognitivist reworking of constructivist interactionist approaches provides not just an alternative theoretical approach to ethnicity but also a radical critique of foundationalism and ontological realism (Brubaker, 1996, 13-16). Brubaker's theoretical strategy is to prioritise cognitive categories and frames in his analysis, asking when these ethnic mindsets actually kick into play in practical interactions (Brubaker, 2001). He argues that the very concept of an 'ethno-national group' falsely objectifies 'group-ness', which is in fact constituted by cognitive frames, actions and relations and should be described in these terms (Brubaker, 2002). His approach is nominalist in its ontological parsimony, its refusal to accord groups any ontological primacy.⁶ He sees ethno-national group-ness as a function of networks and entrepreneurs, working on a cognitive basis of ethnic categories formed in turn by institutions and laws. His research questions focus on the activities of networking, incipient and dissolving solidarity, the appeal to group-ness, his concepts are those of 'practical categories, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, discursive frames, organizational routines, institutional forms, political projects and contingent events' (2002, 167, cf 1996, 16). In a manner parallel to Connor, with whom in every other respect he disagrees, Brubaker sees the core of what are normally called 'ethnic groups' as based upon the sense, that is the 'practical category', of ethnicity; but, finding no other evidence of community existence, he dissolves community into category.

We are fully in agreement with Brubaker's view that 'By distinguishing consistently between categories and groups we can problematize – rather than presume – the relation between them' (2002, 169). Our argument, however, will be that Brubaker stops short in this problematization, he insufficiently analyses and deconstructs ethnic categories, and he fails adequately to reconstruct the relation between category and group.

At the core of Brubaker's strategy is the insistence that ethnic groups, indeed groups or communities in general, should be seen not 'entities' but as 'contingent events' (1996, 16), constantly being built and rebuilt, by new agents for new reasons in response to new situations, as 'something that suddenly crystallizes rather than gradually develops, as a contingent, conjuncturally fluctuating, and precarious frame of vision....' (1996, 19). This language makes it hard to keep in mind those situations where the building and rebuilding of group-ness is persistently successful, and it offers no obvious avenues for

⁶ Rather like classic nominalists, he prioritises categories rather than the collectivities (or universals) to which they purport to refer. We will argue below, however, that the categories in this case are not innocent of collectivity.

explanation of such consistent success.⁷ Groups or communities are denied not just ontological primacy but also social existence and causal efficacy. That communities may be real social phenomena inasmuch as people act in their name, experience themselves as belonging to them, experience attacks on others as attacks on their group, and are willing to act in solidarity with other members is denied. Brubaker gives analytic recognition only to 'practical categories' not 'collectivities' (1996, 16); conflict is 'ethnicized' or 'ethnically framed' rather than between defined groups (2002, 166). Sometimes Brubaker appears to take nominalism to an empiricist extreme – communities do not exist when we cannot see their networks, when they are not explicitly appealed to or when no-one speaks about them.⁸ This analysis makes it difficult adequately to conceptualise, let alone explain, the persistence of some 'ethnic groups'

Empirically, Brubaker's analysis is most plausible in those societies where community-ness is fleeting. But what of societies where communities have a clear social reality? Despite some mixing, a strong rhetoric of individualism and an often expressed impatience at group constraints, in Northern Ireland people consistently act in concert, as if independently converging on the appropriate community-specific attitudes, actions and goals (see Whyte, 1991). They vote as members of their group, they experience self and other as group members and act accordingly, as much in everyday activities of shopping and collecting children from school as in political acts like voting or rioting (see for example, Whyte, 1991 pp. 33-48; Burton, 1978, 47-67; Harris, 1972 pp. 132-148). It is as Bourdieu (1977, 80-1) describes when 'the practices of the members of the same group or class are more and better harmonized than the agents know or wish...'. In such cases, 'groupness' is recreated by ordinary people in their everyday lives; political entrepreneurs do not so much create group-ness as respond to it (or else they are swiftly replaced by others who will so respond); it is normal everyday interaction, driven by normal everyday concerns, which results in persistent 'communal' division. This cannot be grasped by a focus only on the time of events in which a sense of collectivity crystallizes, but rather on the time of the conjuncture, which makes one type of action and set of events much more likely to occur than another, or even the time of the *longue durée* by reference to which categories are given their meaning (Braudel, 1972).

Most fundamentally of all, however, the rationale for Brubaker's strategy of focusing on categories rather than collectivities must be criticized. This strategy does not let him escape from the fuzziness of social 'collectivity' to the greater clarity of practical cognitive categories, for there is also a collective aspect to practical categories. Categories take on practical social meaning only where they converge within an entire population. To assert 'I am X', where 'X' is an ethnic category, is a simple matter only where self-categorisation converges with the categorization of others within the category.

⁷ Indeed Brubaker's very language dissuades us from lingering on this possibility: he speaks of the 'crystallisation' of groupness as a temporary phenomenon, and he distinguishes his approach from one which looks for 'deep developmental trends' (1996, 19).

⁸ Consider that in some cultural contexts, such as Ireland, much about the ethno-national community is mutually understood and unspoken (thus excluding outsiders while maintaining politeness and friendliness towards them). Overt reactions and responses are delayed, but nonetheless convergent. The experienced 'time' of such ethno-national action and response is not instantaneous, not necessarily observable within one hour or one day, but (understood as) longer term – weeks, months or even years.

Ethnic categories are social phenomena which exist only where there is a convergence of views and understandings among 'the X' of what is and what is not a reasonable claim to 'X-ness'. The very category, then, already presupposes a level of collective understanding and mutual recognition and it is not clear how Brubaker's theoretical strategy allows him to conceptualise this convergence of understanding. Moreover the practical category of ethnicity is, as Brubaker indicates, itself a complex construct: what makes Rumanians and Hungarians different is a whole family of differences (2002, 183-4). How such complexly-determined practical categories come to converge in a large population is not in principle easier to conceive or to explain than is collectivity-formation.

In short, Brubaker's critique reduces communities to categories, yet ethnic categories themselves are problematic in exactly the same way as are communities.⁹ Moreover, Brubaker has no conceptual tools with which to rebuild (conceptually) the successful and persistent convergence of categories, expectations, assumptions and aims that characterize community formation, opposition and ethnic conflict in the extreme case. We note that Pierre Bourdieu, whose work Brubaker refers to in other contexts, explains such convergence only by supposing a homology of habitus and structures of power, such that individuals 'as if spontaneously' converge in their actions and perceptions (Bourdieu, 1990, 56-60). Brubaker, by dispensing methodologically with social structure, leaves himself without the conceptual resources to reconstruct the conditions of ethnic conflict.

Ethnic categories and community bonds: variation and multiplicity

If a constructivist strategy does not adequately explain or even acknowledge the persistence and intensity of ethnic feeling and conflict, are we driven back to a foundationalist strategy? This would be a mistake. The foundationalist theoretical strategy, on our view, is not simply methodologically flawed in its positing of a single and simple category of ethnicity at the base of ethnic conflict and community formation; , this in turn leads to analyses that are unable to grasp the empirical variety of communities or their multiplicity of meanings. The seeming virtue of the theory, its explanatory power, is bought at the cost of empirical grasp and explanatory range. We focus on three core claims of foundationalists, which form the basis of their explanations of the persistence of ethnic community and ethnic conflict: (i) that 'the' ethno-national bond is a simple, singular entity; (ii) that it can be assimilated to feelings of kinship; (iii) that such feelings have universal positive mobilizing capacity. These are – we will argue – false empirical generalizations. Our argument leads us to diametrically opposed conclusions: (i) there is no single ethno-national bond; indeed the very term 'ethnic community' is problematic, in its inappropriately sharp demarcation of ethnic from other communities; (ii) feelings of (putative) kinship are neither necessary nor sufficient for ethnic solidarity (iii) the sense of (putative) kinship has no universal mobilizing capacity.

⁹ Hutchinson and Smith, 1996, p. 6, see category and community as points on a continuum moving from less to more organization and linkage, thus lending support to our argument that community-ness is no more conceptually problematic than category-ness.

Ethnic categories

Like Connor and Brubaker, we are here primarily concerned with the practical category of ethnicity: the category used by actors in distinguishing themselves from others. Connor (1994, 74) analytically defines ethnicity in terms of (putative) descent and argues that actors also practically so define it. This analytic definition is in our view both unnecessary and ill-advised. It is unnecessary because the practical category of ethnicity can be distinguished from other categories in terms of the less precise but potentially richer concept of 'people-hood', with its resonances of shared 'provenance' and 'destiny', of a distinct community which stretches into the past and moves into the future. It is ill-advised because the precision achieved by defining ethnicity in terms of (putative) descent is bought at the cost of prejudging actors' categorizations. It is indeed true that in societies whose social order is organized around kinship relations, ethnicity, descent groups, and kinship tend to blend together, so that the ethnics defines the widest extent of kin relations (Evans Pritchard, 1940). In more complex kin-based societies, kin relations overlap and cross-cut in ways which do not divide populations neatly (Chakrabarty, 1998). In complex modern societies, kinship, ethnicity and (putative) descent are differentiated, and the way actors understand the relations among them, and between them and a range of other categorisations on religious, class, attributional, achievement, cultural and normative criteria, are varied and often problematic; the character of these interrelations should be identified by research not by definitional fiat.

Ethnicity as a practical category is always interrelated with a range of other practical distinctions – language, historic (rather than descent related) commonality, sometimes religion, sometimes other cultural or political values. (Ndegwa, 1997; Fishman, 2002; Jenkins, 1997, chapter 8; Rao, 1999). D. H. Akenson (1992) has shown how – in Northern Ireland, Israel and South Africa – fundamentalist religious discourse emphasizes settler origins and justifies the dispossession of the natives, thus exemplifying a convergence of religious, ethnic and colonial categories. Similarly, religious and national categories converged in the period of English and British nation-building (Hastings, 1997; Colley, 1992; Duffy, 1982); in Kenya, as in Ireland, ethnic distinctions converge with different conceptions of political citizenship and political obligation (Ndegwa, 1997; Miller, 1978); in India, ethnicity overlaps, converges and cross cuts a multitude of distinctions making it a notoriously slippery category (Chakrabarty, 1998); often colonial distinctions take on an ethnic resonance (Grillo, 1998; Memmi, 1990; Fanon, 1967); sometimes class distinctions also do so.¹⁰ It is not that these other categories become (surface) markers of the (deeper) category of ethnicity-as-descent, as is implied in the foundationalist literature. If we are looking at the practical categories used by the actors, then being Hungarian or Romanian, Scottish or English or Irish, traveler or settled, 'Prod' or 'Taig', is a matter of a whole set of interrelated categories, embedded in a symbolic system of contrasts and oppositions.¹¹

¹⁰ Class may be thought of as a form of 'breeding': For a striking example, see Etchegoin and Aron, 2002, 22.

¹¹ The practical distinction between 'Prods' and 'Taigs' in Northern Ireland is of analytic interest since one concept (Prod) refers to an explicitly religiously-defined grouping (Protestants), while the other (Taig) refers to an ethnically- or culturally-defined grouping (identified by the Gaelic fore-name, Taidgh).

Foundationalists maintain that ethnicity retains its original, quasi-kinship resonances, associated with descent and blood, even in complex modern societies. It is often described as an immediately felt difference, a sense of common substance, felt in the 'blood, flesh and bones' (Fishman, 1980; Geertz, 1973). It is this that leads Connor (1994, chapter 8) to emphasise the non-rational character of the ethnic bond, and its distinction from other categories. Yet even when ethnicity is so experienced, it is not in this respect distinct from other categories. In societies with relatively stable class divisions, the sense of class belonging takes on a similar ineffable immediacy: the intuitive, immediate, physical sense of 'fine-ness' that informs, for example, the French bourgeois woman's choice of sweater, or way of knotting her scarf, or scrupulous avoidance of accidental physical contact, or her ensuring that her children develop these same dispositions, manifests an equally immediate, embodied sense of 'us-ness' (Bourdieu, 1984; de Wita, 1994). The class example, however, is easily seen to involve a complex set of learned dispositions, embodied in habitus so that they appear as 'second nature' and are highly resistant to change (Bourdieu, 1974, 86-9; 1990, chapter 3). So too with the ethnic sense; the immediacy of feeling and distinction associated with a strong ethnic consciousness may be attributed to the blood, flesh and bones, but is in fact part of the socialized body. This immediacy and physicality of distinction is common to all important social categories, including class and religion, not specific to ethnicity.

Moreover ethnicity in this practical, embodied, sense is embedded in power relations. For example Protestant pre-teens in Belfast not only *believe* but also *ensure* that Catholics talk differently from themselves: one (Protestant) girl noted 'I used to talk like that, and everybody used to give me a kickin'.... in school everybody used to tease me' (Connolly, 1999, 73). Ethnic categories are also embedded institutionally, so that a set of characteristics associated with one rather than another category – social profile, physical posture, attitude to and habits of authority, openness to dominant values, 'readiness to serve' in public office - become entry tickets to position and promotion (for examples from one divided society, see Barritt and Carter, 1962; Newe, 1964).

The practical ethnic category, the sense of 'people-hood', then, should be seen as a complex product of multiple determinations rather than as a simple essence; it cannot be assimilated to the narrow category of ethnicity-as-descent.

Ethnicity and community

The foundationalist literature discusses ethnic groups and ethno-national communities as if their 'ethnicity' were clear and essential to them. Brubaker questions their 'group-ness' and 'community-ness'. We approach the issue differently. Communities, on our understanding, possess social reality and causal efficacy, although they exist as emergent phenomena not as foundational entities. They depend on shared understandings, shared reference points, shared categorizations of self and other, a shared sense of tradition,

shared values, together with a self-consciousness that these are shared.¹² Beyond this, there are linkages and networks: to the extent that Anderson's 'imagined communities' are more than self-consciously shared cultural categorisations, it is because of the linkages involved - converging career paths, schooling friends, churches, intertwined life paths.¹³ Strong and lasting communities are embedded in social structure. The entrepreneurs who link and mobilise the population, work with the interests of that population, not simply constituting them as 'communal interests' but appealing to pre-existing convergent interests emerging from the particular social and power structure in the region and wider environment. Community is thus a multiply constituted complex product of many determinations.

To affirm the social reality of communities, however, is not to affirm the social reality of *ethnic* communities. All communities, on the picture sketched above, are multiply constituted, by economic as well as national interests and are concerned with religious or cultural as well as with ethnic distinctions. What are usually called 'ethnic communities' are not in this respect radically different from other forms of community. We may wish conceptually to distinguish those communities which strongly emphasise ethnicity from those which do not, but this points to a continuum, the end points of which (pure ethnicity vs no ethnicity) have few if any empirical referents; actual communities move up and down the continuum as they ethnicise and de-ethnicise over time. The entrepreneurs who help produce and reproduce community solidarity and mobilization appeal variously to national, religious, class and ethnic concerns – typically political entrepreneurs appeal to them all – and the 'purely' ethnic entrepreneur is not a common phenomenon.

But surely – it will be objected – we can make more precise the notion of an ethnic community by reference to a shared belief in common descent (Connor, 1994, 102, citing Weber)? However this conceptual strategy is too restrictive, not simply because of the identification of ethnicity and descent, but also because it is centred on reference to shared belief: even in the present, and even more in the past, evidence of mass belief structures is at best indirect and limited. If we need a concept of 'ethnic community' at all, it is better to move away from 'beliefs' to 'ideas', or 'symbols' or 'myths', and to move away from notions of descent to notions of common provenance or peoplehood.¹⁴ The important point is that the 'idea' (or origin myth, or symbols) of common provenance or peoplehood *may* but *need not* take the form of subjective belief in shared descent; if origin narratives are sometimes taken literally, they may also be understood as expressing common history, common values or a common culture rather than common biological ancestors. So, for example, the 19th century exponent of Basque nationalism, Sabino Arana, emphasised the common biological origins and genetic distinction of the

¹² *Self-conscious* convergence in understandings is important in distinguishing community from category, as is implied by Renan's notion of the nation as a daily plebiscite..

¹³ Note that the density of such networks and linkages are not dependent on a face-to-face society or personal contact. In a densely-linked large community, individuals can quickly place one another by reference to mutual acquaintances or contacts.

¹⁴ For proffered definitions, along these lines see Horowitz's (1985, 55) citing of E. Shildkrout, and Hutchinson and Smith, 1996, 6. These definitions are detailed and while we find some of the detail contentious, this is not relevant for the purposes of this paper.

Basques within Spain (Douglas, 2002). This interpretation was, however, roundly rejected by the most extreme Basque ethno-nationalist formation in the contemporary period, ETA, who from their origins adopted a historico-cultural and anti-imperialist interpretation of the past.

In short, there is nothing in the concept of ‘ethnic community’ which requires a shared subjective belief in common biological-descent or shared blood among the members of the community, nor is there anything that requires that they prioritise such descent-based ideas in their political action or motivation. Indeed while the concept requires that an ethnic community *refer* to the category of ethnicity in its dominant self-understandings, it does not require that it *prioritise* this category much less that it is the *only* category to which it refers. It is thus an empirical question for each such community, and for each section within it, whether or not there is a shared belief in commonality of descent or whether the sense of ethnicity is better expressed as a broad sense of peoplehood. Whether the broad or the narrow sense of ethnicity is appealed to, there are the further questions whether and when that category is used for distinguishing self and other and for boundary maintenance, whether and when it is associated with strong emotion, whether and when it motivates communal assertion, and what determines the variation in its role. Given that the relation of ethnicity and community-ness is to be empirically determined, even in those communities which we would normally call ‘ethnic communities’, it is in our view best to keep the concepts of ethnicity and community strictly separate. We should speak of communities and then describe their use of the ethnic category, rather than speak of ‘ethnic communities’.

Variation and multiplicity in the content of the ethnic bond

Where it is considered at all – and that is rarely – it is often presented as an obvious empirical fact that the depth and strength of feeling that ethno-national belonging may induce is motivated primarily by ethnic (descent related) concerns and that ethnicity (narrowly conceived) is the primary distinction foregrounded within what are normally called ‘ethnic communities’. It is a ‘sense of kinship’ that infuses a nation and ‘at the core of ethno-psychology is a sense of shared blood’ (Connor, 1994, 197; cf. Shils, 1995, pp. 94-7, 101).¹⁵ Surprisingly little empirical evidence is presented for these claims, the seeming clarity and obviousness of which dissolves on close analysis.¹⁶ The discussion below is intended to show that the deep feeling, sense of common provenance, kinship bonding, the sense of shared blood, thick affiliation, and community-ness so often

¹⁵ For Fishman (p. 63) ‘The human body itself is viewed as an expression of ethnicity and ethnicity is commonly felt to be in the blood, bones and flesh’. Gil White (790) argues that some people (and he suggests many or even most) ‘possess ethno-biological and therefore “primordialist” models concerning the acquisition/transmission of ethnic statuses’. Note that opponents of nationalisms also take this view (Parekh, 1995, 32-4, although he limits this concept to some European nationalisms).

¹⁶ Connor (1994, chapter 8) details the references to descent and shared blood in the speeches of nationalist ideologues; other evidence from nationalist ideologues is common (see also Edwards, 2002 and Douglass, 2002 who use similar type of evidence). But the speeches of nationalist ideologues are not to be confused with the views of the members of the putative ethnic community. Gil White’s evidence is drawn from casual discussion with two acquaintances and a sample of 59 respondents from a small Mongol pastoralist group (among whom there is no intermarriage with neighbouring Kazakhs).

associated together in theories of ethnicity are in fact distinct, found separately, cross-cutting, and typically unrelated. When sometimes they do come together, in cases of intense ethnic conflict, this is the exception which requires explanation.

Consider first that the emotional power of ideas of kinship and of 'shared blood' are shared by many solidaristic communities, and are by no means exclusive to those who define themselves in ethnic terms. These ideas exist in a wide range of solidaristic groups: evangelical Christians see themselves as 'brothers and sisters in Christ'; militant trades-unionists speak to their 'brothers' and 'sisters'; within the feminist movement, all are 'sisters'; the sense of blood-bonding in situations of danger has to do with shared trauma not shared parentage. An example will show how deeply the imagery can permeate communities which prioritise religious categories. Fundamentalist Ulster Protestants in the Rev. Ian Paisley's Free Presbyterian Church use an imagery of 'shared blood' which motivates them towards religious rather than ethnic animosity.¹⁷ A favourite hymn in this denomination is 'There is power in the blood' which, while explicitly referring to the blood of Christ, implicitly also refers to the blood of believers, has resonances with the 'spilled blood' of Ulster Protestants in the world wars and in the more recent 'war with the IRA', and has more specific reference to the blood of the Protestant martyrs, pictures of whose suffering are prominently displayed over the main Martyrs Memorial Church in Belfast. A sense of 'blood-belonging' thus exists linking contemporary Northern Irish Protestants not just to those massacred in the twentieth century because of their loyalty to Britain, but also to those massacred in Ulster in 1641 because of their religion and settler status, as well as to those Protestants (mostly of Southern French origin) massacred in Paris and in the Cevennes respectively some seven decades earlier and later. The example shows that the kin-related symbolism and emotional resonances which are attributed to ethnicity in fact have much wider applicability, and cannot be used to explain the particular solidarity of those communities which prioritise ethnic or ethno-national categories, nor the particular intensity of their motivation or strength of their assertion.

Second, a set of origin myths rooted in putative historical origins may exist and have strong motivating power without a related belief in shared provenance. Nationalism, like ethnicity, involves communal membership and identity-claims based on a particular historical narrative. However the bonds of nationhood - the felt sense of belonging which encourages individuals to die for the nation - have an even wider variety of origins to those of the ethnies, sometimes involving a myth of common biological descent; sometimes forged in war and shared history more than in imagined distant ancestors. French nationalism is a clear example, and not as exceptional as is sometimes supposed (see Peters' 2002 analysis of the mixture of ethnic, cultural and civic meanings in German nationalism). The French nation is, contrary to some republican theorists, much more than state-centred citizenship or 'constitutional patriotism'; it also involves substantive cultural content and clear origin myths. It does not, however, imply a belief

¹⁷ For overviews of the beliefs of this group, and the connections between religion and politics, see Bruce, 1986 and Smyth, 1987.

in shared descent.¹⁸ Among the great historical origin-figures symbolising France is Joan of Arc. She, however, is symbolic of Frenchness not because all French people are descended from her (although this was the right-wing myth of the French nation, see Grillo, 1998), but (in the dominant centrist and left myths) because she symbolises the honour and courage and political principle of the common people, rising against tyrants and the English Crown to defend the common space. In Joan of Arc, we see the hegemony of a particular politico-cultural interpretation of France and of the French republican tradition transmitted via a historical origin-narrative. For most sections of the French population, these myths presented and present a cultural rather than a biological lineage. It is this that permitted and motivated first and second generation Poles, Jews, Hungarians, Italians, Senegalese, Occitans, Alsatians and Réunion islanders to become French and to live or die for what had become *their* 'patrie'.

Third, a sense of shared provenance can exist without implying any strong sense of kinship *bonding* or political *motivation*. Northern Irish Protestants are a largely endogamous community who trace their provenance to the 17th plantation of Ulster and who have a variety of origin-myths referring to this period (MacBride, 1997; Miller, 1987; Bell, 1990). Ulster – now Northern Irish – Protestants have for centuries allied with one another against a common perceived Catholic (and later nationalist) threat (Ruane and Todd, 1996). Yet between sections of Northern Irish Protestants, there is little sense of commonality or affection, but rather cordial and mutual dislike and disrespect (Todd, 1987; Brown, 1985; Moore and Sanders, 2000; Whyte, 1991). If these people indeed sense each other as distant cousins (and some of them go to great pains to deny it) their cousins form that part of the family with whom they prefer to avoid contact. The motivation for common political action has more often come from perceived mutual need than from perceived mutual provenance, and has seldom involved (real or perceived) mutual bonding.¹⁹ The example suggests that there is as likely to be alienation as affection among the (putative) extended kin group. One might hypothesise that ideas of (extended) kinship are most powerful emotionally when they are used symbolically and metaphorically rather than to express an actual belief in common descent.²⁰

Fourth, a sense of shared provenance can exist and create a sense of mutual bonding, without this being prioritised in ethnic or nationalist mobilisation. The history of Alsace provides a multitude of examples. The population of this region, which stretches from the Vosges to the Rhine, has a strong sense of regional particularity, based in part on a Germanic regional language and a specific geo-political situation; for centuries Alsace

¹⁸ Connor stated (1994, 196. 215) 'at one level of consciousness, the English, French, and German peoples are aware of their ethnic heterogeneity. Their history books record it. But at a more intuitive or sensory level, they "know" their nation is ethnically, hermetically pure'. This accurately captures the sense given by the Front National and the French right wing. But it is not the official, the dominant or the majority view. (see Grillo, 1998, chapter 6; Brubaker, 1996; Bernstein, 1999)

¹⁹ There were moments of mutual bonding and mutual symbolic unity, forged through the anti-Home Rule campaign, orchestrated by political leaders and sacralised in the deaths at the Somme (Gibbon, 1975). But this symbolism only barely kept Protestant divisions recessive during the period of greatest unity (1921-1968) (see, for example, Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, 1995; Ruane and Todd, 2004, chapter 3).

²⁰ It is such symbolic examples that Connor emphasises, see 1994, chapter 8. This symbolism, as we have shown, is not specific to ethno-nationalism.

alternated between the French and German states. In the world wars, choices presented themselves to young men as to their national loyalties. Siblings made different choices and fought and died for France or Germany. What is specific about contemporary Alsace and Alsatian identity is the self-conscious distinction of provenance and descent from nationality and the sense that the distinctive cultural community to which Alsatians belong is defined not just by culture or origins but also by its legacy of nationally divided families and traditions. Provenance and the sense of bonding it brings, may thus cut across as well as underlie the formation of ethno-national communities.

Fifth, belief in biological descent is not – in the cases with which we are most familiar – central to the practice of controlling group membership and policing community boundaries. We have already mentioned the French case where membership of the nation can in principle be achieved in one generation (see also Brubaker, 1996; Grillo, 1998, chapter 6). In Catalonia, a distinction is typically made in the scholarly literature not just between first generation immigrants and Catalans, but also between their children and the children of Catalan parents, because the children of, for example, Andalusian immigrants will have relatives and family memories rooted elsewhere in Spain and the language of the family is likely to be Castilian.²¹ There is, however, no distinction in the third generation – what is being measured is a social, linguistic and familial, not a biological, distinction. In Northern Ireland, among both communities (‘Ulster Protestant’ and ‘Irish Catholic’) a distinction is typically made between in-marriers from the other community (who never achieve full socialisation into the community) and the children of mixed marriages (who are unambiguously members of the community in which they are brought up). Where children of the same (mixed Protestant-Catholic) parentage are separated and brought up in different ethno-national communities, they typically take on the ethno-national identity and community membership into which they were socialised. Where a child is adopted, it automatically becomes a member both of the community and the ethno-national category of its (adoptive) parents.²² In the Irish state, where genealogy is one of many partially overlapping, partially conflictual, and typically contested, criteria of Irishness, it is often overridden if other criteria are met: it is not uncommon for children brought up in Ireland with two non-Irish parents to ‘be Irish’ not simply in terms of citizenship but in terms of culture and belonging. But, as always in Ireland, ‘it depends’, not least on the socialisation and networks of the individual and family concerned and their perceived openness to Irish mores, with religion still an important (not always crucial) variable. In practice as well as in belief, community belonging is determined by a range of factors.

All the above points confirm that there is typically a gap between community belonging, ethnicity and descent. Ethnic categories can exist without communities, as Brubaker has argued, but strong and intense communal bonding infused with a sense of kinship may also exist relatively detached from ethnicity. Indeed if a socio-psychological mechanism

²¹ As a result, the second generation are likely to be distinct in their national identity and aims from the children of Catalan parents (Argelaguet, 2003).

²² It is usually assumed that the child will be of parents of the same religion (since the adoption agencies are church-related) but this is not a matter into which others of the community pry, nor would it be taken to make a difference to the child’s status as community member.

exists which transfers the intense feelings generated by primary kinship relations to a wider sphere, this mechanism is common to all highly mobilized and strongly bonded communities, not specific to those which prioritise ethnicity. Meanwhile, a sense of common ethnic or ethno-national belonging may exist independent of consciousness of common descent. It follows that the foundationalist approach is reductionist in two senses: in reducing the multiplicity of meanings of intensely bonded communities to one – ethnicity – and in reducing the nature of the ethnicity to a belief in descent. Brubaker's critique, however, is also reductionist, in seeing the ethnic category as simple (rather than multiply determined), and in reducing social collectivities to categories. We have argued, against Connor, that ethnicity is not reducible to descent and that the notion of an 'ethnic community' is misleading; we have also argued, against Brubaker, that there is more to ethnicity and ethnic belonging than the ethnic category, and that communities based *in part* on ethnicity are real phenomena. Our insistence on the multiplicity of resonances and fluidity of ethnic, religious and other categories within community-formation, and on the resultant multiplicity of community, is intended not to muddy the conceptual waters but to explain why it is necessary to look beyond the category of ethnicity for an explanation of the strength and persistence of communal opposition and ethnic conflict. A different type of theoretical strategy is necessary, which builds on the multiplicity, mutual dependence, and embeddedness in power structures of ethnic categories and of communities.

Multiplicity, power and systematicity: an alternative theorization of community and conflict

In this section, we begin with the radical multiplicity of elements which go to make up community and ask how, by what mechanisms, is a level of order possible? How is convergence between a range of individuals, meanings, categories and (sub)communities, and, at the limit, intense solidarity and resistance to change, constituted out of such an untidy proliferation of elements? We find the answer in a particular interrelation of categories, communities and power relations which form systemic feedback patterns, or a 'path dependent' system. This theoretical strategy, of which we can only sketch the broad outline here, sees community as an emergent property of a system constituted *inter alia* by the intersection of cultural (including ethnic) categories and power relations. It promises both explanatory power and ability to grasp the multiplicity of meanings, the range of determinants, and the variation in intensity of bonding and opposition.

The concept of 'system' is here used in a qualitative sense, as a set of interrelated and mutually dependent processes which, as the unintended by-product of their intersection, reproduce themselves.²³ A system thus retains distinction from its environment; rather than merging into it, or being changed by outside forces, new elements are assimilated within the system, which 'adapts' to a changing environment. The basic form of a system is thus reproduced even if all the elements within it change. An 'emergent property' of a

²³ A useful example of the qualitative use of this (potentially highly technical and formalisable) concept may be found in Claus Offe, *Contradictions of the Welfare State*, edited by John Keane, London, Hutchinson, 1984.

system is one whose existence is dependent on that of the system, and yet which appears, 'acts', as if an independent, complex, new entity. Holland (1998, 4-8, 225-231) speaks of 'persistent patterns with changing components' (225), not reducible to their simple parts.

Within a system which produces patterns of communal opposition and ethnically defined conflict, categories, and in particular the category of ethnicity, are crucial. But these categories, as we have seen, are themselves organized in systems of concepts, which resonate with one another. They are always also embedded in sets of interlocking and intersecting power structures. They are dependent again on nested sets of linkages which themselves produce a multiplicity of communities at neighbourhood, local, town, and regional levels which may cross-cut but may also, in extreme cases, reinforce and strengthen one another.²⁴ Communities, the product of such complex determinants, are multi-faceted, plural in their cultural substance, manifesting – in collective and individual expressions - a fluidity in shifting from ethnic to national to political to religious identities and reference points, a convergence of interest and feeling, and a capacity to strengthen their ethnic linkages and feeling by moving back and forth in focus from macro to micro contexts.

Once communities are formed feedback mechanisms tend to reproduce them: there is a cost to leaving the community in terms of vulnerability, loss of strength, loss of sense of belonging, anomie, weakness, and there are correlative benefits to staying in terms of safety, sense of belonging, the value of social networks and social capital. Even successful attempts to minimize communal conflict may as a byproduct reproduce community solidarity (Fearon and Laitin, 1996). Once a system of cultural distinctions exists, it has tendencies towards self-reproduction: those who have defined their own qualities as civilized and progressive (or authentic and just) have a strong interest in not blurring or qualifying that definition by admitting value to the opposite qualities. Once an entrenched communal power-imbalance is created, there is a continuing impetus to power-struggle, not just to retain (or redress) a relative (dis)advantage but out of fear (or hope) of total reversal.

Each process may also massively reinforce the others: cultural oppositions legitimate community formation, while justifying and giving meaning to inequality which in turn gives added motivation and urgency for communal solidarity; meanwhile communities insist on cultural distinctions for their own identity and assimilate new resources and institutions into older forms of power struggle. (Ruane and Todd, 1996) The closer and tighter the feedback mechanisms, the more entrenched and resistant to change the community becomes. Where a particular cultural (ethnic, or ethno-religious) distinction is an entry ticket to resources, the social significance of this distinction is reinforced and the power relations which give it such significance come to be reproduced not out of crude material interest, but out of a sense of the proper moral order. Similarly, where these power resources are communally distributed (in situations of structured communal

²⁴ Where the local exemplifies in extreme form the divisions at the macro-level, as in many localities in deeply divided societies, a focus on the local does not detract from but gives depth and intensity to and further incentive for macro-communal organization.

inequality at the cultural and social as well as economic and political levels) this gives a strong strategic interest in communal solidarity in order to retain or gain resources. That solidarity in turn tends to appropriate new resources and institutions into the older communally-based order: in Northern Ireland, for example, changes in the form of the state (the move to direct rule in 1972) were assimilated within the older communal politics, with one community monopolizing newly created jobs in the security industries and appropriating the symbolism of the modern British state as their own (Ruane and Todd, 1996). Similarly, the dominant cultural binary oppositions reinforce communal opposition: one *should* stick together with one's own, who recognize one's virtues and values, rather than mix with others who possess only bad qualities which may corrupt the self. Communal opposition, in turn, means that when new cultural elements emerge they are appropriated within one or other conceptual schema, or given opposing meanings within the two schema, rather than used as alternatives to the older binary oppositions.²⁵

These types of systemic feedback mechanism have been well described in analyses of 'path-dependence', where 'increasing returns' generate feedback effects which reinforce actors to continue to pursue the path on which they have started even when the initial conditions which produced this path have changed (Pierson, 2000; Mahoney, 2000).²⁶ In the schema sketched above, once set in motion, the complex set of feedback mechanisms which reproduce intra-communal solidarity and inter-communal opposition is powered by the normal human sense of rationality and self-interest, even if – looking at the system from the point of view of eternity – it would have been better for all concerned if communal opposition had never been set in place.²⁷ The mechanisms sketched above allow the reproduction of entrenched social relations despite changes in institutions and laws: 'learning patterns' (Crouch and Farrell, 2002) allow dominant actors and ethnic entrepreneurs to adapt new institutions to older communal patterns, to invest them with older cultural distinctions and to assimilate new concepts to old binaries. Of course such systemic feedback mechanisms are not seamless, and in some cases strong countertendencies (or 'contradictions') are produced within the social system when, for example, the ethnic or religious categories of distinction valued in the local field are overturned in the wider state or macro-region, or where there is a lack of fit between power relations and cognitive categories. Even in tightly knit systems, 'redundancies' (Crouch and Farrell, 2002) exist - intermarriages, integrated schooling, a sports team which gets cross-community support - and while these are marginal in normal conditions, when the system is shaken they may become seeds of more radical change.

²⁵ John Doyle (1994) gives examples of the re-adaptation of traditional binaries to deal with the era of fair employment in Northern Ireland, 'Workers and outlaws'. See also Ruane and Todd, 2004, forthcoming, chapters 4, 8, on the appropriation of concepts from 'the politics of recognition' and pluralism within first nationalist, and later also unionist conceptual systems, while these systems remained oppositional.

²⁶ The analogy is not intended as precise; some features emphasized in the path dependence literature are clear and striking here, for example complex matrices where mutual feed-back effects take place between a number of different processes, and weakly self-reproductive 'feedback' effects in each process are massively strengthened by the conjunction of processes (Pierson, 2000); other features, for example an increasing likelihood of continuing on the path over time (as in the Polya urn example) are not exemplified, since, once the initial conditions are set, the likelihood of continuing on the path remains constant.

²⁷ Thus it captures the sense of paradox which Mahoney (2000) sees at the centre of path-dependence analysis.

Under such systemic conditions, solidary, bonded, easily-mobilised communities with intense communal identification are emergent properties of the system. This, not any basic or essential human emotion, is at the root of the strong psychological sense of belonging that Connor emphasizes (1994, 104). The perspective sketched here explains why intra-community solidarity and inter-community opposition are deeply resilient to change, and can survive quite radical social and political change in their environment: the persistence of ‘ethnic’ belonging and opposition through processes of modernization, industrialization, modernization, is directly explicable in terms of system adaptation to environmental change. Yet on this approach, community opposition and conflict are also changeable: if a breakdown of the systemic feedback mechanisms occurs, the reproduction of intense communal solidarity, spreading over entire populations and uniting different subsections among them, becomes vulnerable to change. There are therefore identifiable conditions – ‘critical junctures’ - where particular changes begin to break down the systemic feed back mechanisms, and allow movement in new directions (see Katznelson, 2003; Ruane and Todd forthcoming 2004, chapter 12). The approach sketched here thus at once provides a robust and powerful explanation of the reproduction of communities and their opposition (an explanation which invites further elaboration and specification at any of its levels) while also identifying critical junctures where change is possible and where new paths towards conflict transformation open. This strategy of system analysis does not predict change, or provide general laws about ethnic conflict and its resolution, but rather directs us ‘where to look for critical phenomena, points of control’ (Holland, 1998, 24).

We have focused on the constitution of community opposition and communal conflict in general. But the types of communities that emerge from the systemic relations we have described, for whom the sense of peoplehood is bound up with other religious or cultural differences, inscribed in social networks and power structures, are precisely those which are normally seen as ‘ethnic communities’. The strength and resilience of such communities, and of the conflict between them, can thus be explained by reference to ‘systematicity’ rather than to specific properties of ‘ethnicity’.

This theoretical strategy provides new insight into the old theoretical debate on ‘instrumentalist’ views of ethnicity (Connor, 1994, 73-4, 85, chapter 6; Gil White, 1999). Within the systemic nexus, and informed by their categorizations of their world, actors act rationally, and their attachment to their religion, descent group, and communal cultural values brings mutual recognition, a sense of honour and ‘cultural capital’ as well as economic and political advantage. It is thus not a question of emphasizing strategy and instrumentality as opposed to ethnicity, nor ethnicity as opposed to strategy and instrumentality; ethnic assertion and strategic interests, instrumental and cultural motives, emotion and rationality are intrinsically linked.²⁸

Our emphasis on the radical multiplicity of categorizations which go to make up communities also allows the resolution of some long-standing empirical debates. For

²⁸ There is a very large literature arguing this, including John Macmurray’s seminal *Reason and Emotion*, 1995.

example, there is an unresolved debate in the scholarly literature on the appropriate ethno-national or ethnic category into which to fit Northern Irish unionists and/or Protestants: the contenders are 'British nationalists', a 'Protestant ethnîe', 'Ulster nationalists', a combination of these, or the claim that these are not nationalists at all (see, respectively, O'Dowd, 1998; Loughlin, 1995; Alcock, 1994; Rees, 1985; Moore and Sanders, 2002; Miller, 1978; and for an overview, Gallagher, 1995). The approach presented here, in contrast, allows recognition of the multiplicity and fluidity of dimensions which go to form Northern Protestant and unionist identity, the uneasy unity which has characterised the 'whole Protestant community' since its formation in the late nineteenth century (Brown, 1985; Gibbon, 1975; Ruane and Todd, 2004, chapter 3) and the convergence of a range of ethnic, national, political, religious and economic categories in a common identification and desire to maintain the Union with Britain (see Ruane and Todd, 2004, chapters 3, 5).

Conclusion

We have presented an approach to ethnicity and community which allows a theoretical grasp of the nature of ethnicity and its role in community formation and opposition, at once showing the variation and fluidity of meanings and modes of identification within communities, and the persistence, strength and power of that identification. Thus it incorporates many of the virtues of each of the theoretical perspectives with which we began, while re-appropriating their insights within a more coherent, empirically adequate and theoretically powerful theoretical frame.

The theoretical strategy proposed here undoubtedly requires refinement. Its main features are, however, clear. It questions the essential 'ethnicity' of 'ethnic communities', highlighting the analogies between them and other forms of communities and conflicts. Most persistent and deep conflicts, and most lasting social groups, are likely to have systemic roots; most are overdetermined in terms of cultural categories and interests.²⁹

Ethnicity is, however, by no means totally dissolved into a general theory of community and conflict. The specifically ethnic component of communities and conflicts is here defined in terms of 'peoplehood' or the 'idea of shared provenance'. The idea of 'peoplehood', relating as it does the sense of past and present, territoriality, community, and self, is a particularly powerful way of situating oneself in space and time, although by no means the only way. It may absorb and blend into other categories, but conflicts have a different logic when it is present than when it is absent; in particular, the feedback patterns tend to be tighter, more elements are included within them, and the socialization process takes place from an early age. Sometimes other categories too – class or religion – may come to take on a particularly inclusive and systemic character, leading to conflicts which converge with ethnic conflicts in their form. Ethnic conflict thus remains on a continuum with other types of conflict, rather than qualitatively distinct from them. The core questions which arise in this type of approach are of the conditions of ethnicisation and deethnicisation of communities and conflicts.

²⁹ For an extended discussion with respect to religion, see Mitchell, 2001 and forthcoming, 2004.

The theoretical strategy proposed here borrows from and builds on existing theories. Systemic approaches to ethnic conflict are not new, although they have typically focused on the role of international and transnational actors in the macro-power balance, rather than on the constitution of communities (see Lake and Rothchild, 1998). In explaining the process of constitution of ethnic categories and of communities, our approach owes much to Brubaker's cognitivism, although it departs in important ways from his strategy. In developing a theory of the linkages and feedback mechanisms between community belonging and wider social structure it takes insights from rational choice theories of ethnicity. At the same time, it focuses on the 'non-rational' nature and strength of the 'ethnic bond', emphasized by foundationalists, although it analyses this very differently than they do. Above all, however, it proposes an alternative way of explaining the persistence of community opposition and ethnic conflict, without hypostatizing ethnic groups or treating ethnic bonds as foundational. It shows how ethnic categories enter into a process of community formation, just one of whose bases is ethnicity, with the meanings, emotions and interests associated with ethnic belonging tapping into and feeding off the meanings, emotions and interests associated with other categories, and giving rise to the intensely solidaristic, deeply felt sense of community-belonging and communal conflict which is too often explained in terms of quasi-kin, primordial qualities of ethnicity.

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