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# Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity

James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin

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Paul Brass. 1997. *Theft of an Idol*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Francis M. Deng. 1995. *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.

Bruce Kapferer. 1988. *Legends of People/Myths of State: Violence, Intolerance, and Political Culture in Sri Lanka and Australia*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.

John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary. 1995. *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Gérard Prunier. 1995. *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Susan L. Woodward. 1995. *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.

Is there case study evidence of a relationship between the social construction of ethnic identities and the probability of ethnic war? The mere observation that ethnic identities are socially constructed does not by itself explain ethnic violence and may not even be particularly relevant. Our purpose here is to see if we can reject the null hypothesis that the social construction of ethnicity has little or no bearing on the likelihood of ethnic violence. Our procedure is to examine closely the narratives of expert observers of some highly violent episodes of ethnic relations. Although a different set of case studies might yield different overall conclusions, the narratives we examined contain useful clues about the mechanisms that link identity construction and ethnic violence.<sup>1</sup>

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1. On mechanisms and social explanation, see Hedström and Swedberg 1998.

We first develop the theoretical implications of the observation that ethnic identities are socially constructed for explaining ethnic violence. After analyzing what the statement “ethnic identities are socially constructed” might mean, we develop two ways to construe the claim that processes of constructing identities help to explain ethnic violence. If individuals are viewed as the agents who construct ethnic identities, then constructivist explanations for ethnic violence tend to merge with rationalist, strategic analyses, particularly those that emphasize elite manipulation of mass publics but also those that see violence stemming from ethnic interactions “on the ground.” In contrast, if “discursive formations” or cultural systems are seen as the agents that construct ethnic identities, then constructivist explanations for ethnic violence tend to merge with culturalist accounts that stress the internal logic of culturally specific ways of thinking, talking, and acting. In this approach, some or all discourses of ethnicity create a disposition to violence.

In the second section we turn to the books under review, using them as a “sample” to assess which mechanisms from the theory section seem to matter empirically and as a source for new ideas about links between identity construction and ethnic violence. We find considerable evidence linking strategic aspects of the construction of ethnic identities to violence, and more limited evidence implicating specific cultural or discursive systems. If there is a dominant or most common narrative in the texts under review, it is that large-scale ethnic violence is provoked by elites seeking to gain, maintain, or increase their hold on political power. An interesting feature of several of these case studies is that internal conflicts between extremists and moderates belonging to a single ethnic group spur leaders or dissidents to provoke violence with members of an out-group. Violence has the effect, intended by the elites, of constructing group identities in more antagonistic and rigid ways. These newly constructed (or reconstructed) ethnic identities serve to increase support for the elites who provoked the violence while favoring the continuation or escalation of violence.

A major puzzle in this story is why ethnic publics follow leaders down paths that seem to serve elite power interests most of all. None of the authors systematically addresses this question, but their case studies provide a number of interesting suggestions. Two of the authors, Bruce Kapferer and Gérard Prunier, answer the question by arguing that ethnic publics are conditioned or constituted by ethnic discourses that predispose them to violence against ethnic others. At least in Kapferer’s book, we note that this discursive constructivist approach all too easily falls into a primordialist mode of interpretation that constructivists eschew; it tends to treat ethnic discourses as unchanging essences that strongly determine individuals’ actions.<sup>2</sup> Several other possible answers to the “why do publics follow?” question receive some support in the case studies, the most intriguing of which is the possibility that “followers” often are not so much following as pursuing their own local or personal agendas not directly related to ethnic antipathy.

2. A major problem besetting culturalist accounts, as Brubaker and Cooper argue, is that to avoid the trap of “essentialism” by stipulating that identities are constructed, fluid, and multiple,” culturalists are hard pressed to “understand the sometimes coercive force” of identity. Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 1. We address this irony in the second section.

In the second section we also present evidence that ordinary folk (not just elites) strategically construct ethnic boundaries. Here ethnic violence arises out of the policing efforts of those who are unhappy with assimilation or by marginal members of a group who want to gain status with those whose membership is not in doubt. Francis M. Deng's discussion of border areas in Sudanese civil war contains some interesting examples of violence emerging from these mechanisms.

In the third section we conclude that the constructivist approach has been successful in discrediting primordialist explanations. Its present mission, we suggest, ought to be more rigorous testing of the three constructivist approaches shown as plausible in the books under review—those based on discursive logics, those based on the strategic actions of elites, and those based on the strategic actions of the masses.

We should stress at the outset what is probably already apparent. This article is not a conventional book review. In the first place, we make little effort to assess the considerable contributions of each author to the literature on the politics of the country in question. Second, although we offer opinions on each author's main arguments, we are generally more concerned to mine these case studies for evidence relevant to our inquiry. We do not pretend that these books constitute a random sample; different books might have suggested somewhat different mechanisms and different assessments of relative importance.<sup>3</sup> Our goal was to find recent studies written by scholars who were sensitive to the politics and culture of their cases both "on the ground" (among the mass public) and "at the top" (among the elites). The books under review are all exemplary in relating the global facts of large-scale ethnic violence to both local mechanisms and more structural causes. We make no claim that these are the best in this regard. However, we were sufficiently impressed from first readings to reread them for our main purpose: an inquiry into the relationship between ethnic identity construction and ethnic violence.

## **What Is Ethnic Identity and How Is It Constructed?**

The assertion that "ethnicity is socially constructed" is commonplace among social scientists, and it is widely supposed that anyone who fails to grasp this fact will not be able to explain or understand ethnic violence. Nonetheless, no literature articulating theoretical or empirical connections between the social construction of ethnicity and violence yet exists. No positive theory links processes of social construction as independent variables to the occurrence of ethnic violence as a dependent variable. Instead, as in the books under review, we find constructivist "moves" mixed sporadically with modes of analysis that do not seem particularly constructivist, and as far as we know, perhaps excluding Paul Brass, no one has offered a developed statement of

3. Initially, we searched for self-consciously constructivist analyses of ethnic violence but found almost nothing worth reviewing (apart from Brass's excellent book, which appeared after we started this project). Next, we searched for careful empirical case studies of large-scale ethnic violence by authors from a variety of disciplines.

a constructivist theory of ethnic violence. Our purpose in this section is to suggest possibilities in this direction; that is, we sketch some arguments applying constructivist formulations and concepts to the specific problem of ethnic violence.

We begin by asking what it means to say that identities are socially constructed. This requires a statement of the meaning of both subject and predicate. We take it that an “identity” here refers to a social category—Serb, man, homosexual, American, Catholic, worker, and so on—and in particular to a social category that an individual member either takes a special pride in or views as a more-or-less unchangeable and socially consequential attribute.<sup>4</sup> Social categories are sets of people given a label (or labels) and distinguished by two main features: (1) rules of membership that decide who is and is not a member of the category; and (2) content, that is, sets of characteristics (such as beliefs, desires, moral commitments, and physical attributes) thought to be typical of members of the category, or behaviors expected or obliged of members in certain situations (roles). We would also include in content the social valuation of members of this category relative to others (contestation over which is often called “identity politics”).

The category “professor,” for example, has rules of membership defined by a credentialing process and the requirement of being employed as a professor, and a content that includes a host of norms for proper behavior. Ethnic identities are understood to be defined mainly by descent rules of group membership and content typically composed of cultural attributes, such as religion, language, customs, and shared historical myths.

What does it mean, then, to say that identities are socially constructed? For a first cut, we understand the claim to be that social categories, their membership rules, content, and valuation are the products of human action and speech, and that as a result they can and do change over time. With the somewhat murky term *identities* translated as the more concrete term *social categories*, this hardly seems an exceptional claim. It even verges on tautology. How could social categories be something other than socially constructed?<sup>5</sup>

The answer, implicit in much constructivist work, is that people often believe, mistakenly, that certain social categories are natural, inevitable, and unchanging facts about the social world. They believe that particular social categories are fixed by human nature rather than by social convention and practice. Beliefs in the naturalness of a social category might be rooted in beliefs about alleged implications of biology (for example, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity in some formulations) or about theology and morality. Such beliefs regarding a social category might be termed *everyday primordialism*.<sup>6</sup> Much constructivist labor has been devoted to undermining everyday primordialist assumptions by showing how the content and even mem-

4. This brief summary statement does not do full justice to the complexity of the concept of “identity” as it is presently used; see Fearon 1999, for an extended analysis, from which this summary formulation derives.

5. On this point, see also Hacking 1999.

6. Apologies to Elster, who coined the term “everyday Kantianism.” Elster 1989.

bership rules of taken-for-granted categories like man/woman or heterosexual/homosexual have changed over time.<sup>7</sup>

How does this constructivist observation bear on the explanation of ethnic violence? When discussing ethnic violence, the constructivists' main target is primordialism.<sup>8</sup> Primordialists are said to believe that conflict between two ethnic groups, A and B, is inevitable because of unchanging, essential characteristics of the members of these categories. In particular, primordialists suggest that ethnic violence results from antipathies and antagonisms that are enduring properties of ethnic groups. The constructivist position rejects the notion of unchanging, essential characteristics and thus rejects this claim. The implication is that even if members of A and B are hostile to each other now, this need not be (and probably has not been) an eternal condition.

By itself this is an unexceptional claim against a weak "theory" rarely advanced in pure form in treatises on ethnic violence. It is sometimes found in the mouths of politicians seeking to justify courses of action ("ancient hatreds" arguments) or by journalists reporting everyday primordialist beliefs as historical facts. More important, primordialist assumptions of this sort do sometimes creep into more abstract social science models seeking to make general claims about ethnic violence. Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth Shepsle's theory of ethnic outbidding, drawing on classic works in anthropology including those of M. G. Smith and J. S. Furnivall, assumed that "plural" polities would always contain "well-defined ethnic groups with generally incompatible values."<sup>9</sup> Analyses of consociation border on primordialism as they assume unchanging and unchangeable ethnic identities.<sup>10</sup> But the rejection of these notions is basically a negative point rather than a positive argument about why ethnic violence occurs.

A more provocative and interesting antiprimordialist claim is that the members of any two ethnic groups A and B need not think of themselves as A's and B's at all. For instance, a constructivist might argue that the peoples known as Croats and Serbs might, with a different nineteenth-century political history, be known as the South Slavs, or simply as the Serbs.<sup>11</sup> The claim is that not only does the content of social categories change over time but so do the boundaries between them.

7. Everyday primordialism is thus in part an instance of the is/ought fallacy. It is not true, constructivists assert, that because some system of social categories exists, the system is "natural" and ought to exist. Compare Hardin 1995, 60–65.

8. In the academic literatures on nationalism and ethnic politics, "primordialism" is itself something of a construct of constructivists. For example, the standard cite for the primordialist fallacy is Geertz 1973, 255–310, where the fallacy is nowhere committed. Geertz holds that peoples' beliefs in their primordial attachments, rather than the inherent immutability of those attachments, drive ethnic conflict in noncivic societies. He postulates that primordial identities can exhibit themselves in a variety of fashions (such as ethnically, religiously, linguistically), none of them being a natural category. In other of his essays on Bali, however, he appears to be a primordialist. He writes as if there were an immutable Balinese way of thinking about the world. Here social identities are presented as "givens" rather than, as antiprimordialists would have it, as "takens." On this point, see Laitin 1986, chap. 1.

9. Rabushka and Shepsle 1972, 20. For their sources, see Furnivall 1948; and Smith 1965.

10. See, for example, Lijphart 1977.

11. Banac's evidence suggests that as late as the first decade of the twentieth century there was no agreement among elites in the Balkans that Croats and Serbs constituted two distinct nationalities. Banac 1984. For a treatment of this argument in regard to Somali clan identities, see Laitin 1983.

If this constructivist observation is correct—and for virtually all ethnic groups it surely is, if one goes back far enough<sup>12</sup>—then one might argue that a good explanation for ethnic violence between A's and B's requires an account of why members of these groups divide themselves in this way. A popular awareness of ethnic categories is surely a necessary condition for “ethnic violence.” But is this a necessary condition that needs to be elaborated in order to offer a good explanation? Perhaps, or perhaps not. In explaining World War I, we do not typically demand an account of why France and Germany were separate countries in 1914.<sup>13</sup> Does a good explanation for violence between Serbs and Croats in 1991 need an account of the nineteenth-century origins of the present Serb/Croat distinction, or why Tito's regime failed to replace separate Serb, Croat, Macedonian, Albanian, and Muslim categories with the overarching “Yugoslav” identity? While these are important issues for certain questions one might ask—for example, why a society has a certain cleavage structure—they are not necessarily relevant in an explanation for Serb/Croat or Muslim/Serb/Croat or Albanian/Serb violence post-1991.

It is certainly interesting to know where a set of ethnic distinctions came from historically and why they have persisted, and this information might or might not be deemed important in an explanation of ethnic violence. However, if the process by which either the content or boundary of an ethnic identity is constructed *itself* yields violence, then we would *surely* say that the social construction of ethnicity is relevant to the explanation.

This point returns us to the question of what the proposition “identities are socially constructed” means. The gloss given earlier was really too narrow—the claim can suggest more than just that the intension and extension of, say, “Serb” varies over time as a result of speech and action. It can also invoke a *specific process* by which identities are produced and reproduced in action and speech. Unfortunately, general statements about how this process works are hard to find in constructivist writing.

We suggest three ways to characterize what constructing an identity entails. These approaches differ in whether they see broad structural forces, discursive formations, or individuals as the agents that act to produce or reproduce a system of social categories. We proceed to sketch out what each approach might imply for a constructivist theory of ethnic violence. Keep in mind that “constructing an identity” may refer to either the content of a social category, such as making Serbs believe that Serbs cannot live with Croats, and vice versa, or the boundary rules, such as making Montenegrins believe they are Yugoslavs, or peasants in Gascony believe they are French.

12. But Armstrong shows that at least some boundaries—such as those between Romance and German-speaking peoples—have not changed at all over the course of a millennium. Armstrong 1982. To be sure, change has occurred in the social *content* of what characteristics members of each category ought to exemplify.

13. Nor is an explanation for interstate war in general thought to require an account of why there is a states' system, though the question is certainly interesting and fundamental for international relations theory. See, for example, Ruggie 1983; and Spruyt 1994.

*Social and Economic Processes as Agents of Construction*

The literature on nationalism associated with Karl Deutsch, Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, and others represents perhaps the best developed “case study” of the social construction of an identity—namely, national identity. These authors reject the primordialist view of nations as historically immanent, arguing instead that the idea of nationality became compelling to people only in the modern period as a result of economic and attendant social changes. For these authors, national identities are the local political and psychological consequences of macrohistorical forces. For instance, Gellner argues that by making upward mobility possible for the literate and school-educated, economic modernization politicized facets of culture that were politically irrelevant in the premodern period. National identities arise as people realize that how they communicate (and especially their first language) determines their life chances. Anderson adds the idea that the boundaries of national identities have been shaped as an almost accidental by-product of “print capitalism,” the creation of vernacular reading communities by booksellers seeking markets beyond a defunct Latin and the limited spread of local dialects.<sup>14</sup>

It is difficult to see how such a broad historical process as economic modernization could explain violence between particular ethnic groups, except possibly as part of a “necessary condition” argument concerning the formation of the ethnic identities in the first place. Not all contiguous groups fight—far from it—whereas economic modernization and the creation of ethno-national communities through modern mass media are processes that have affected all groups.

*Social Construction by Discourse*

An alternative interpretation of the process invoked by social construction locates the action at the level of supra-individual things like discursive formations or symbolic or cultural systems that have their own logic or agency.<sup>15</sup> In these analyses, individuals are pawns or products of discourses that exist and move independently of the actions of any particular individual. For example, one might argue that a general modern, Western discourse of ethnicity/nationalism is a crucial underlying factor in explaining ethnic violence. Kapferer makes suggestions along these lines, connecting ethnic violence to modern colonialism.<sup>16</sup> But as with the case of economic modernization, colonialism and its attendant discourses are ubiquitous in Africa and Asia, but violence is not. At best, the modern discourse of ethnicity might be seen as a necessary condition for politicized ethnicity and thus ethnic war.

As another example, take the proposition that the social construction of group identities necessarily involves differentiating one’s self or one’s group from an Other, and that therefore identity construction necessarily entails the potential for a violent, antagonistic relationship with the Other. Although this proposition seems to undercut

14. See Deutsch 1953; Gellner 1983; and Anderson 1983.

15. On “discursive formations” as a source of explanation, see Foucault 1972, chap. 2.

16. Kapferer 1988, 90–91.

the central constructivist claim that identities can be constructed in nonantagonistic ways, it is still a constructivist-type argument due to its claim that not genes but the internal logic of discourses drives identity construction.<sup>17</sup>

The proposition (only implied in this genre) is that one can analyze and discern the logic of the discourse or symbolic system that constructs individuals and groups, and make predictions from this as to the likelihood of a range of practices, including violence. Geertz, for example, examined the discursive formation surrounding the Balinese cock fight. While he warned against using it for predictive purposes, he did suggest that the Balinese so feared their (presumed) capacity to act with the ferocity of their “cocks” that they organize themselves socially so that emotional displays are considered inappropriate. Geertz suggests that his analysis of the symbols used in cock fighting (where we see the ferocious cocks as metaphors of the beneath-the-surface emotions that bedevil their owners) gives us an understanding of the massacres that took place in Bali in 1965, making it seem “less like a contradiction to the laws of nature” that an extraordinarily reserved and peaceful society could be capable of a sudden outburst of unimaginable ferocity.<sup>18</sup>

Sometimes discursive logics are thought of as cultural “scripts” in which people unreflectively play their “roles.” In his reconstruction of a 1990 pogrom in post-Soviet Kirgizia in which 120 Uzbeks, fifty Kirgiz, and one Russian were killed in a week, Valery Tishkov writes that the “young Kirgiz on horseback were trying to demonstrate their strength and superiority by lifting up an opponent by his legs and smashing him down on the ground—exactly in the way the legendary Kirgiz heroes supposedly overpowered their enemies. ‘We have read about it a lot, but this is the first time we’ve had the chance to try it out for ourselves!’, they said.”<sup>19</sup>

This symbolic approach to identity suggests that the development of discursive formations can set one group in opposition to another or predispose them to see the other as a threat or natural subject for violence, independent of any more material basis for hostility. While this approach is elegant and not necessarily subject to primordialist essentialism, we would still like to know how these discourses are sustained and why, on the brink of violence, they are not abandoned or reinterpreted. Indeed, the only extended attempt to apply such an argument in the books under review—Kapferer’s argument concerning the discursive formation of Sinhalese myths of Vijaya, which we treat in the third section—comes out sounding both to us and to some of his critics like a primordialist explanation and not a constructivist one.

This irony is worth exploring. In practice, the construction-by-discourse view has close affinities with an older style of culturalist analysis in that it smacks of essentialism. Older culturalist approaches portrayed cultures as highly bounded, internally coherent, and static entities that strongly determine the behavior of the members of the groups they constitute.<sup>20</sup> The newer constructivist culturalism rejects the idea that

17. Ferejohn refers to “subtler ideational logics” that may exist in the sphere of meanings, seeing them as distinct from the rational choice calculations in the sphere of action in explaining social events and practices. Ferejohn 1991, 285.

18. Geertz 1973, 452.

19. Tishkov 1997, 154.

20. A classic study in this regard is Benedict 1959.



cultures and the discourse that shape or define them are bounded, coherent, or static. For example, constructivist writing on ethnic relations has stressed how the present conception of, say, caste in India derives primarily from British colonial theories.<sup>21</sup> But it retains the idea that discourses/cultures define identities and shape or determine actions.

How is it possible for discourses to shape action if discourses themselves are complex, multifaceted, and subject to all manner of interpretations? To give a concrete example, consider the Catalonian discourse around the concept of *seny*, which implies a pragmatic feet-on-the-ground approach to life that helps Catalans to differentiate themselves from the imagined inefficiency of Spaniards. Can we say that this discourse shapes Catalan behavior? To do so we would need to ask why the equally available Catalan discourse on *raxxa*, which suggests the spontaneous and more ribald aspect of Catalan culture, plays far less a role in contemporary Catalan self-revelations. Catalan discourses are so multifaceted that parts of those discourses can be appropriated to naturalize a whole range of cultural practices. This problem will be raised again when we ask whether there is evidence of specific cultural discourses producing violence in the case studies under review.

### *Individuals as Agents of Construction*

A third possibility is that ethnic identities—the content and boundary rules of ethnic categories—might be constructed by the actions of individuals seeking various ends. Consider, for example, the proposition that ethnic violence occurs when political elites construct antagonistic ethnic identities in order to strengthen their hold on power. In this approach, the insights of a “constructivist” approach merge with, or become hard to distinguish from, a rationalist or strategic choice approach.

**Strategic action by elites.** What the pre-constructivist literature on ethnic conflict termed “elite theories of ethnic violence” provides promising grounds for a constructivist theory of ethnic violence in this sense. Indeed, it is striking and no coincidence that virtually every self-identified constructivist who has written on ethnic violence, and most clearly Brass among the authors of reviewed texts, has tended to blame elite machinations and politicking.<sup>22</sup> In these arguments, ethnic violence is explained as both a means and a by-product of political elites’ efforts to hold or acquire power. Elites foment ethnic violence to build political support; this process has the effect of constructing more antagonistic identities, which favors more violence. Arguments of this sort have been around in political science and sociology for a long time, though without the constructivist language.<sup>23</sup>

The puzzle for such theoretical arguments is to explain how elites can convince their followers to adopt false beliefs and take actions that the followers would not want to take if they understood what the leaders were up to. If the elites are just doing

21. See Pandey 1990.

22. See also Tambiah 1996 and 1986. Kapferer argues similarly (see footnote 58). Kapferer 1988.

23. See Simmel 1955; and Coser 1956. See also the diversionary war literature, for example, Levy 1989.

what their followers want them to do, then it seems inappropriate to blame the elites. In other words, if violence and hardened ethnic boundaries serve elite but not popular interests, then what explains popular ethnic antipathies? Suppose that the leader of one group provokes a violent incident with members of another group. Why or under what conditions should this incident “construct” the group in a more antagonistic manner, increasing support for the leader and disposing the group toward yet more violence?

These are the questions that a coherent constructivist theory of ethnic violence (in this sense of “identities are socially constructed”) needs to answer, and they are difficult questions.<sup>24</sup> Brass, for example, presents an elite theory of ethnic violence that draws heavily on constructivist writing. He argues that Indian elites engaged in contests for power sometimes find it in their interest to publicly frame violent incidents as “communal,” an interpretation that is then accepted by publics favoring more violence. But why do publics so readily credit elites’ framings? At times Brass seems aware that it is odd that he should find the politicians’ machinations transparent while the Indian public is duped. For instance, after describing a particularly absurd allegation reported in the partisan press in India, he explains that “it is likely that [Muslims] would have been so enraged [by this allegation] that they would not have seen through the evident ruse involved in this kind of reporting, which has Goebbelsian qualities.”<sup>25</sup> Susan L. Woodward, equally shocked at mass acquiescence to the machinations of national elites, claims they engaged successfully in “psychological warfare.”<sup>26</sup>

One class of answers to this puzzle proposes that innate or learned psychological bias leads members of ethnic groups to discount or ignore their own leader’s involvement in producing ethnic conflict, so that the Other takes all the blame. For instance, following Tajfel’s “social identity theory,” if people have an innate desire for self-esteem, then they may be irrationally reluctant to believe that members of their own group, and especially their leadership, could be responsible for reprehensible acts.<sup>27</sup> Another set of possible answers proposes that asymmetric information allows leaders to manipulate their (more-or-less rational) followers’ beliefs. For instance, Rui J. P. de Figueiredo, Jr., and Barry R. Weingast observe that even if people do not know which side to blame for the failure of constitutional negotiations, an ethnic riot, or incident of ethnic violence, they do know that one or both sides are to blame. Thus, observing any such event should lead them rationally to increase their belief that the other group or its leaders may be dangerous or at fault, even if it happens in this case that their own leadership provoked the conflict. If an ethnic public is very scared of what might happen if the other group harbors aggressive intentions, this may be enough for them to increase their support of the incumbent as a defensive move.<sup>28</sup>

24. Nor are they well answered in the international relations literature on diversionary war, but see Downs and Rocke 1994; Hess and Orphanides 1995; and Smith 1996.

25. Brass 1997, 142.

26. Woodward 1995, 228.

27. Tajfel 1978. The astonishing denials encountered from Bosnian Serbs confronted with evidence of the Srebrenica massacres may be a good example of this mechanism at work.

28. De Figueiredo and Weingast 1999. By this argument, suspicions that their *own* leadership is trying to manipulate them should also gain currency on seeing an event like this.

More broadly, political leaders usually have better information about whether conflict with another group is the best course of action at a particular time. Followers thus face a classical agency problem, one consequence of which may be that leaders can (temporarily?) increase support by exploiting the trust they have developed with followers.

A third possibility is that leaders are not so much deceiving followers as taking advantage of constitutional and other institutional rules and norms that allow them to centralize or arrogate power if they can claim that the group faces a security threat. In other words, ethnic violence may be provoked simply to legitimize a coup d'état. By fomenting violence with an out-group the leaders of the in-group may be able to "tie the hands" of their co-ethnics. In-group leaders increase their co-ethnics' demand for protection from the out-group and at the same time make sure there is no alternative set of leaders to protect them. To some extent the Hutu leadership in Rwanda and the Serbian leadership in Yugoslavia employed such tactics.<sup>29</sup>

A fourth answer might be developed as a more constructivist variant on the psychological bias approach noted earlier: people may be so totally blinded by a discourse of ethnicity and ethnic relations that it determines how they draw inferences from data on ethnic relations. The accounts by Brass, Prunier, and Kapferer all suggest this possibility at times.

Finally, observers may be concluding too quickly that popular involvement in "ethnic violence" and support for extremist leaders is motivated in a straightforward fashion by underlying ethnic animosities and fears. In some of his essays (particularly in the chapter entitled "Theft of an Idol"), Brass hints at a possible response or resolution of the puzzle along these lines. He suggests that the ordinary folk involved in "communal violence" are in fact pursuing their own diverse agendas that may have little to do with communal antipathies per se. When politicians interpret local disputes in an ethnic frame, they are merely giving people the license to pursue their own agendas under the banner of "communal conflict." This valuable suggestion is taken up later; evidence for it appears in several of the case studies. The mechanism also appears in important recent studies on civil war. For example, Stathis Kalyvas argues that much violence in civil wars is produced by locals who enlist support from the government or rebels to pursue local grudges and feuds.<sup>30</sup>

**Strategic action "on the ground."** The individuals who construct ethnic identities need not be political or other elites. A persistent intuition in constructivist writing is that social identities are produced and reproduced through the everyday actions of ordinary folk, that is, "on the ground." Individuals think of themselves in terms of a particular set of social categories, which lead them to act in ways that collectively

29. In "security dilemma" explanations for ethnic violence, Posen and Hardin argue that when a central authority collapses ethnic violence may occur as individuals coalesce along ethnic lines to seek self-protection. Posen 1993 and Hardin 1995. These arguments treat the collapse of government as exogenous and thus cannot address the question of why followers follow leaders who deliberately bring on "anarchy." The argument in our text has leaders creating "anarchy" because they know that followers will be unable to coordinate on different leaders and thus will have to support the ones responsible for the problems.

30. Kalyvas 1999. See also Bax 1997; and Stoll 1999.

confirm, reinforce, and propagate these identities.<sup>31</sup> Members of marginalized categories, or individual dissidents, may quietly subvert or loudly contest common assumptions about particular categories. Their actions may then result in the construction of new or altered identities, which themselves change cultural boundaries. Efforts to change boundaries may lead to violent strategies by those who have an interest in the previously accepted boundaries. While recent accounts of popular involvement in ethnic violence have focused on security fears of individuals—the motivation to kill one’s neighbors before being killed by them<sup>32</sup>—here we will elaborate on a complementary constructivist account.

As a first cut, it is useful to point out that ethnic groups have more permeable boundaries than states.<sup>33</sup> With considerable success, states in the modern era construct and police definite territorial borders.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, the lines between ethnic and national groups are less definite and much harder to police, since they can be altered or infringed upon by assimilation and other everyday acts that blur or call boundaries into question. In a seminal essay, Frederik Barth argued that ethnicity is defined not by the cultural characteristics of group members but by the differences thought to distinguish them from others.<sup>35</sup> In a more culturalist approach, William H. Sewell, Jr., emphasizes the impossibility of approaching cultural uniformity, even under totalitarian conditions. Cultural practice for Sewell is less that of celebrating uniformity among members of a group than of organizing differences between groups. Sewell’s argument implies that when boundaries are under threat—for example, when a subgroup organizes to assert its difference from the larger group in which it had been a part—those who identified with the inclusive group are likely to oppose separation, even to the extent of threatening violent repercussions. Battles over whether groups on the boundaries are the same as those in the core, or culturally different from them, are for Sewell a normal aspect of cultural practice.<sup>36</sup>

Such battles have the potential for violence. In Basque country, high levels of assimilation by a regional minority into the culture of the central state (thereby expanding the boundary of the social category “Spaniard” to include Basques) threatened the interests of those seeking political separation. Assimilation strategies on the ground led Basque separatists to provoke the center’s police into punitive actions. The separatists hoped to cause not-yet-assimilated Basques to revise downward their hopes for being accepted by members of the dominant society and thereby strengthen the argument for secession. Basque separatists pursued this violent “action-reaction

31. A self-reinforcing system of social categories can be seen as an instance of a *cultural equilibrium*, a pattern of actions and beliefs such that the actions make sense (are optimal) given the beliefs, and at the same time the beliefs are not disconfirmed by the pattern of actions. For instance, if A’s and B’s expect to be cheated in interethnic dealings, it will make sense to avoid interactions and to try to cheat in those that occur, thus reproducing the beliefs that make the actions optimal. For examples of cultural equilibria, see Laitin 1998; Mackie 1996; and Fearon and Laitin 1996.

32. For example, see Posen 1993.

33. International relations theorists, such as Posen, find it useful to ignore this distinction. Posen 1993. See also Hardin, who portrays ethnic groups as well-delineated “teams.” Hardin 1995.

34. See Lustick 1993; and Sahlins 1989.

35. Barth 1969, 17.

36. Sewell 1999.

cycle,” as they described the strategy, for a generation.<sup>37</sup> In such cases, ethnic violence is a consequence of the ambiguity and uncertainty of the boundaries delimiting ethnic categories. It emerges from reactions by elites to efforts by ordinary people that threaten to redefine social boundaries.<sup>38</sup>

The permeability of boundaries can lead to violence not only as a reaction to potential “defection” but also as a strategy by marginal members to gain greater acceptance in some valued category. Here violence is used against presumed outsiders by individuals of marginal status in the group. Explanations for violence in these cases typically proceed as follows: marginal members of group A internalize the belief that A’s are superior to B’s. They may then attack members of B in order to prove to themselves or to others securely in A that they are indeed members.<sup>39</sup> This mechanism might be described as a strategy for gaining acceptance in a valued category by out-Heroding Herod (with the Austrian half-Jew Hitler as the notorious example).

## Evidence on Identity Construction and Ethnic Violence

Is ethnic violence a result of processes of ethnic identity construction? These case studies of large-scale ethnic violence and Brass’s volume on episodes of violence at the local level provide evidence to support four responses to this question. First, the books contain ample evidence rejecting the primordialist theses that ethnic identities are socially or genetically fixed and unchanging, and that ethnic violence results from received, immutable cultural differences. Second, the evidence for the proposition that discourses of ethnicity construct identities in ways that dispose individuals to violent conflict is at best ambiguous here, although the texts under review provide some grounds for such a reading. Third, the cases contain considerable evidence suggesting that political elites use violence to construct antagonistic ethnic identities, which in turn favor more violence, with interesting suggestions about why masses would follow. Fourth, there is evidence that the construction of everyday primordialism from on-the-ground interactions can lead to intra- and intergroup violence.

### *Against Primordialism*

There is no evidence in these books of either genetically fixed or unchanging cultural values, as primordialists would expect. To varying degrees, all the authors are con-

37. Laitin 1995.

38. For similar examples, see Ganguly 1997, 75. Ganguly suggests that Sikh revivalism in India grew out of conservative Sikhs’ fears that “young, wealthy, urbanized Sikhs had sought to shear off the trappings of their faith,” reinvigorating concern that “they could well become absorbed within the Hindu fold.” He makes a parallel argument regarding economic modernization and the spread of Muslim fundamentalism in Kashmir.

39. Chauncey, for example, explains violent attacks against homosexuals in the first half of this century in just these terms: Newly confined to indoor, office jobs and under the thumb of giant corporations, middle-class men’s sense of masculinity was in question (boundary uncertainty). They responded, according to Chauncey, by shifting the conceptual scheme from a division based on masculine versus feminine behavior to one based on preference in sex partners (homosexual/heterosexual) and condoning attacks on those on the other side of the new boundary. Chauncey 1994, 116.

structivists. Prunier makes the most insistent case for a constructivist position. He shows that the labels “Tutsi” and “Hutu” in Rwanda had primarily a class rather than an ethnic meaning in precolonial times, and notes research suggesting a porous boundary separating them. Furthermore, he shows that these ethnic labels are in the present political sense (that is, the notion of a foreign conquering master race over an oppressed peasant society) a historical fiction invented by racist Europeans and taken over by local political entrepreneurs seeking jobs and power, and especially by Tutsi politicians who used the colonial ideology as a means of material and psychological aggrandizement. The rigid dichotomy between Hutu and Tutsi was constructed by colonial authorities in collaboration with Rwandan elites and hardened as a result of political conflict.

Similarly, Woodward insists that the highly politicized contents behind “Muslim,” “Serb,” and “Croat” in the Balkans in the 1990s are a result of the economic collapse and the breakdown of the Yugoslav state rather than the other way around. John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary give no stock to arguments about violence in Northern Ireland that are built upon inherited cultural difference. They point out that the social content of the categories “Protestant” and “Catholic” in Northern Ireland has changed so vastly over the centuries that it would be hard to find a set of long-standing cultural differences that separate the two populations.<sup>40</sup> While the content of national identities is in flux, McGarry and O’Leary show that the boundaries (that is, the criteria defining membership) of the groups are long-standing and unquestioned. Deng equivocates some on this issue. He insists that certain categories are objective and natural. Despite the social construction of a northern Sudanese “Arab” identity, these people are *really* Africans who assimilated into Arab culture. Their constructed Arab identity serves to block a north-south national integration in Sudan that could resolve the bloody conflict. Despite his insistence on objective criteria for Arabness and Africanness, Deng gives considerable attention to boundary areas where northern and southern identities are in competition, showing how both the meaning and boundaries of identities are subject to change. Kapferer, for all his postmodern pretensions, and to the chagrin of many of his critics, finds himself reifying a trans-historical Sinhalese identity. Yet Kapferer’s book suggests that under conditions of postcolonialism, compounded by economic difficulties, ethnic identities take on a stronger and more exclusivist strain. Therefore, whereas the ethnic labels are largely given by descent (part of the common understanding of the meaning of “ethnic group”), their content and grip on individuals’ imaginations are a function of social and historical conditions.

Furthermore, to the extent that a strong primordialist position turns on the incompatibility of cultures as the source for violence, there is no evidence for such a position in the books under review. Four of the studies (those by Brass, Woodward, Prunier, and Kapferer) do not even address the issue of the violent potential of cultural difference. Deng is explicit in rejecting the claim that objective measures of cultural distance matter. He opens his discussion with the claim that “the source of conflict lays not so much in the mere fact of differences as in the degree to which the

40. McGarry and O’Leary 1995, 250.

interacting identities and their overriding goals are mutually accommodating or incompatible. In the context of the nation-state, conflict of identities occurs when groups . . . rebel against what they see as intolerable oppression by the dominant group.”<sup>41</sup> Much of his book shows that objectively (and despite northern imaginings) the cultures of north and south are closer than elite characterizations of those cultures. To be sure, Deng, in suggesting an ameliorating policy, writes: “If Northerners value the unity of their nation above their self-delusion that they are Arabs,” peace in the context of a united Sudan could be attained. The cultural belief that they are Arabs, and thereby masters of Africans, Deng maintains, sustains the civil war. Here, cultural beliefs are constructed in antagonistic ways though they need not be, giving no support to the view that objective cultural differences imply violence.<sup>42</sup>

McGarry and O’Leary attack the cultural distance argument head on. They consider the possibility that the “warring gods” of Catholics and Protestants play a role in leading their adherents into communal warfare. Indeed, as the authors point out, Northern Ireland is more “religious” in terms of church attendance than most other European societies, and there is a high correlation between religious affiliation and voting. Many of the extremists (for instance, Ian Paisley) are religious zealots. From these points numerous observers interpret the Northern Ireland conflict as a war between incompatible religions.

McGarry and O’Leary, however, demolish the claim that religious differences cause the communal violence. They show that

1. violence did not recede as the society slowly but monotonically became more secular;
2. cross-sectionally, there was more violence in cities where religiosity is lower than in villages where it is higher;
3. since 1969 there had been a fair amount of interchurch cooperation as violence expanded;
4. all of the major parties or paramilitaries named themselves in terms of secular criteria (nationalism, unionism), not religious criteria, and, in fact, “the political language of both protagonists appeals to the discourses of nationalism, the principles of self-determination and democratic majoritarianism, ideas which are, in principle, and in practice, detached from religious world-views”;
5. violence was not (at least, at the time the book was written) directed against religious icons. Loyalists had not touched Catholic churches, and no Catholic priests had been killed by a loyalist gunman, even though priests walk the streets and provide easy targets;
6. respondents in Northern Ireland attributed the causes of the conflict to political/constitutional sources far more than they did to religious differences. “Even loyalist paramilitaries,” McGarry and O’Leary report, “say they are happy to accommodate Catholics if and when they accept the Union”;

41. Deng 1995, 1.

42. *Ibid.*, 22.

7. endogamy is more the result of neighborhood segregation than the policies of religious organizations.

While primordialists might want to claim that religion is not exhaustive of cultural difference in the case of Northern Ireland, McGarry and O'Leary certainly show that the cultural difference that defines the content of the ethnic divide cannot be directly linked to the communal violence.<sup>43</sup>

The absence of any mention of cultural distance in four of the studies, a sharp refutation of the thesis in the fifth, and a full exegesis on why cultural distance is not driving violence in the sixth lead us to reject this variable as a powerful factor explaining violent ethnic conflict. In fact, the lesson of these books, consistent with constructivist theory, is that we cannot assume that any of the countries examined contained, prior to the violent conflict, "deeply riven" groups with fundamentally "incompatible values." These studies contain little to support the view that the cultural content of ethnic differences by itself fosters ethnic violence.

### *Discourse and Violence*

Discourse approaches, a favored methodological tool of constructivists, are potentially in tension with a principal claim of constructivist theory, that people are not born imprisoned by their cultures. In fact, only Kapferer among the authors whose work is under review sustains an argument in favor of a cultural discourse as a powerful and unchanging social force. "The fury of the [anti-Tamil] riots was demonic" he tells his reader, leading Kapferer to examine the riots from the point of view of Sinhala sorcery demons. Among the Sinhala, myths of Vijaya (the founding and unruly prince of the Sinhala people, the offspring of a lion and an Indian princess, yet he became a righteous king) and of Dutugemunu (who reestablished Sinhala mastery, overpowering the Tamil king, Elara) are, Kapferer explains, treated as historical fact, reproduced in school texts, and recur as images in contemporary ethnic warfare.<sup>44</sup> In public pamphlets inciting or analyzing the violence, the "events" of these mythological figures' careers are enumerated as part of the explanation. Even leading scholars, living abroad, are admonished locally for lack of correspondence between their claims and Sinhala myths. Government officials infuse their rhetoric with these legends, and "their audience is culturally prepared for these references."<sup>45</sup> Government ministers wax about these legends in the period of heightened religious activity on the annual calendar, known as Asala. The worst riots of 1977, 1981, and 1983 coincided with this period.

Popular exorcism rites are part of this mythical universe. In the exorcism, the "patient" regains health in a cosmic regeneration that parallels the "process of hierarchical regeneration" found in the myths of the state. In "the Suniyama, the person is reborn, reconstituted, from the womb of the state [quite literally, as the person is put into an actual model of a state structure], a state rebuilt as an ordered hierarchy."

43. McGarry and O'Leary 1995, 189–213.

44. Kapferer 1988, 34–35.

45. *Ibid.*, 38–39.



Kapferer points to parallels here in the legends of Vijaya and Dutugemunu. "Their violence, as the violent metaphors and acts of the Suniyama rite, is an ordering violence engaged to the formation or reformation of the wholeness and health of the state. . . . Violence is appropriate in the expunging of evil, an evil which by definition defies the unified order of the Buddhist state."<sup>46</sup>

Kapferer insists that politicians are not manipulating the masses, but share an ontological ground with them. Thus, President Jayawardene on becoming president (as opposed to a prime minister, as in the older constitution) exclaimed: "We have had an unbroken line of monarchs from Vijaya to Elizabeth II for over 2,500 years . . . and now myself, the 306th head of state from Vijaya in unbroken line."<sup>47</sup> In that same speech, he referred to the "wicked and corrupt" king, a Hindu, whose reign ended in rebellion by Sinhalese lords. This speech and many others rely on images from myths to portray Tamils as foreign, as evil, and as natural subjects for violence.

Further, in public pronouncements of the commander of the Sri Lankan army and in admonitions of a leading priest (that he "would deal with all enemy forces in the country with the blessings of the Triple Gem and all the protective deities of Sri Lanka") the myths of state are naturalized into advocacy for present policy. In popular cartoons Jayawardene was depicted as requiring exorcism so that he might "restore the encompassing equanimity of an ordered hierarchy." This sharing of myths between elites and masses presents the "dreadful and violent possibility" that leaders and masses will follow the "inner logic" of their "prereflective" ontology. Given this ontology, Sinhalese will take any opposition to the state as threatening them personally. "Here is a reason, extraordinary as it may seem, for the sudden, almost inexplicable, transformation of a normally peaceful people into violent and murderously rampaging mobs. . . . The rioting . . . may be likened to a gigantic exorcism. Tamils, the agents of evil, set to break the overarching unity of the Sinhalese state, are rooted out. . . . By so doing [the Sinhalese] resubordinate and reincorporate the Tamil demon in hierarchy."<sup>48</sup>

What do we make of this argument? Stanley Tambiah, among a number of scholars who smelled primordialism in it, took exception. Kapferer, he argues, is ahistorical as he "makes a leap from a cosmology inferred from a sixth-century mytho-historical text . . . to another cosmology he infers from present-day demon rituals. Does a possible homology between the two cosmologies mean a continuity in historical consciousness from the sixth to the twentieth century?" Little effort is made, Tambiah emphasizes, to analyze the changing Mahavamsa corpus, which was rewritten several times over the centuries, to see if this continuity is being transmitted over time. As we suggested earlier, arguments that rely upon discursive formations that have their own logic and agency tend to portray culture in a way that borders on primordialism, in that people are continually made and remade by discourses that are essential properties of ethnic groups.<sup>49</sup>

46. *Ibid.*, 78–79.

47. *Ibid.*, 85–87.

48. *Ibid.*, 100–101.

49. Tambiah 1992, 171.

Does Kapferer need to treat Sinhalese discourse on ethnic identity as an unchanging monolith that automatically determines popular perceptions and responses when danger is alleged? Could he instead argue that for whatever reasons, in the early 1980s this simply *was* a powerful discourse that shaped Sinhalese self-understanding and conditioned the actions of both leaders and followers in the direction of violence? He had the opportunity to proffer such an argument, since half the book concerns state ideology in Australia where the myths of state do not impel white Australians to massacre the aboriginal population. But the book merely juxtaposes these cases rather than comparing them to account for the different outcomes. As a result, Kapferer does not investigate how violent discourses are sustained or identify the conditions under which state discourses turn populations violently against the ethnic other.

Prunier does seek such an explanation. For the most part he avoids the implicit primordialism of Kapferer, attending more carefully to the creation of the discourse in the colonial period and its evolution with changing circumstances. Prunier puts great stress on the discourse of Tutsi racial superiority that developed in Rwanda's colonial years. This portrayed the Tutsi as a distinct race of aristocratic conquerors who had come originally from far away (perhaps even Tibet!) and were natural rulers over the good-natured but inferior Hutus. In a subtle analysis, he shows how the Hutu "democratic revolution" of 1959 did not fundamentally reject this ideology, but "merely inverted its sign. Tutsi were still 'foreign invaders' who had come from afar, but now this meant that they could not really be considered as citizens." The Hutu were "the only legitimate inhabitants of the country," and "a Hutu-controlled government was now not only automatically legitimate but also ontologically democratic."<sup>50</sup> Prunier means that the authoritarian state in Rwanda rationalized itself as "democratic" on the argument that democracy equals rule by Hutus (the demographic majority), which equals exclusion of Tutsis from political power. Thus not only did the colonial discourse create "an aggressively resentful inferiority complex" among the Hutu but in this "inverted" form its system of thought painted Tutsis as evil foreigners who might at any time seek to reimpose their tyrannical, "feudalist" rule.<sup>51</sup> This, Prunier suggests, was an invaluable resource for the Hutu elites controlling the state. Faced with an invasion led by the army representing the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the predominantly Tutsi party mobilized in exile, Hutu elites could use widespread acceptance of the "democratic ideology" to publicly rationalize what was in fact a coup to avoid sharing power (mainly with Hutus from another region).<sup>52</sup> In addition, he argues that the ideology and its effects are the most important factors explaining Hutu peasants' participation in the genocide. Although Prunier cites many factors—desire for land and cattle, a strong hierarchical command structure in which nonparticipation could mean death, and simple peasant igno-

50. Prunier 1995, 80.

51. *Ibid.*, 9.

52. In contrast to Kapferer, Prunier consistently explains the action of political elites in terms of material and power-seeking motivations, not ideology—for example, Prunier, 141. The only exception would be "extremist ideologues," who Prunier occasionally suggests are just wrapped up in the Rwandan historical mythology.

rance and credulity of government pronouncements—in the end he says that “greed was not the main motivation. It was belief and obedience—belief in a deeply imbibed ideology.”<sup>53</sup>

Whereas in Kapferer’s view discourse “prereflectively” scripts the actions of both elites and followers, in Prunier’s view a discourse is invoked as a resource for power- and wealth-seeking politicians to justify courses of action in a way plausible to followers, and a source of long-standing, general psychological dispositions (such as resentment, arrogance, and suspicion) with regard to ethnic others. With no theoretical axe to grind, Prunier’s narrative seamlessly weaves together rationalist individual-based analysis and a more discursive constructivist approach that stresses this ideological construct. The result is compelling, although we remain puzzled by two problems regarding how the discursive system figures in the explanation. These general puzzles apply equally well to Kapferer’s book.

First, discursive or cultural systems at best create a disposition for large-scale violence, since they are relatively enduring structures while violence is episodic. Thus, testing the hypothesis that some cultural discourses favor ethnic violence requires that we can code discourses as more or less inherently violence-prone *across cases*. Kapferer and Prunier must believe this is possible. They argue that the Sinhalese and Rwandan discursive systems contain intrinsic features that dispose those bound up in them to violence in particular circumstances. But there are both empirical and theoretical questions about whether such a cross-sectional project could succeed. Empirically, we notice that in none of the other four books under review does the author put any stress on a specific cultural discourse creating a disposition toward ethnic violence. At best, Deng, McGarry and Leary, Woodward, and Brass reference the effects of the very general modern discourse on ethnicity and nationalism. As we have noted, this discourse is too widespread to explain variation in levels of violence across cases. Granted, this sample is small and perhaps different authors would place greater emphasis on discursive systems in these cases. But the evidence we have does not augur well for a project that would systematically code for presence or absence of a violence-prone discourse in both high *and* low violence cases.<sup>54</sup>

Second, and more fundamentally, it is hard to see how a structure as complicated, rich, and multivalent as Sinhalese mythology or even Rwandan political ideology can be reliably deemed to be inherently prone to violence. This observation poses a theoretical problem for the cross-sectional empirical project just noted, but it also raises a difficult question about the mechanism by which discursive systems bring about actions. If discourses are typically complex enough to justify many courses of action, then how can they determine the actions of those who are held in their grip? If the Rwandan political mythology could be used to justify a range of actions from genocide to the peaceful political exclusion but economic inclusion of Tutsis in the 1970s and 1980s to limited political incorporation (the Hutu moderates’ view in the

53. Prunier 1995, 248.

54. Note that Prunier’s single-case design cannot establish that the discourse he focuses on matters in general for producing ethnic violence because he does not sample low violence cases to ask if similar discourses are typically absent. Kapferer does with Australia, but as mentioned, he does not take advantage of his design to test his discourse approach.

early 1990s), then should we not be asking about the motivations and incentives of those most responsible for the framing? If this mythology merely made mass violence a thinkable “possibility” on the part of Hutus, can we identify discourses of ethnicity in other cases that unambiguously contain no such possibilities?

In contrast to Kapferer and Prunier, Brass identifies a diverse set of competing discourses. But there is little analysis of the cultural content of these discourses. Nor does he see them as independent forces determining the actions that produce collective violence in India. Instead, for Brass, a discourse is a set of arguments employed by some actors in justifying their actions or a policy that is pursued for other reasons. Lurking behind such discourses as “criminal law and order,” “caste and community,” “faith and sentiment,” “profit,” and “Hindu-Muslim communalism” is a nexus of power and interest that fools both villagers and outside analysts. Consistent with this Foucauldian theme, Brass insists that the discourse of Hindu-Muslim communalism (to choose but one) “operate[s] pervasively in north India as a cover for the political ambitions of elites and as a smokescreen to draw attention away from the consequences for its people of the policies of the modern Indian state and its leaders.”<sup>55</sup> He later asks us to “consider . . . the discourse of faith and sentiment and the interests served by those who proclaim its reality.” It benefits, Brass argues, local politicians who want to supplant the dominant state discourse of secularism. The villagers buy into it for short-term advantage, but ultimately they lose out, as they get beaten by the police and exploited by the local politicians.<sup>56</sup> Those in authority benefit from the discourses they perpetuate (implicating as well scholars who reify them) in that the favored discourses “substitute . . . popular values, which are said to be deplorable but entrenched in the lives of the people, for individual responsibility and culpability in acts of wrongdoing. It diverts blame from the politicians for instigating violence between communities or between the police and villagers.”<sup>57</sup> Used in this way, discourses are more strategies than supra-individual forces with their own internal logics that determine actions and events.

### *Elites, Violence, and Social Construction*

In three of the six books under review, the authors explain the onset of large-scale ethnic violence as a direct result of elite efforts to retain or grab political power (Prunier, Deng, Woodward).<sup>58</sup> In a fourth, Brass puts the opportunism of elite politicians at the center of his explanation for the maintenance of communal “riot systems” in India. What occasions such elite actions, and what if anything does the social construction of ethnicity have to do with them?

In the three clearest cases, the leader’s motivation to “play the ethnic card” emerges out of political fighting *within* the leader’s ethnic group between ethnic extremists

55. Brass 1997, 96.

56. *Ibid.*, 267.

57. *Ibid.*, 93.

58. Kapferer makes this argument in less specific terms, suggesting that wealthy Sinhalese elites have fomented conflict and violence with the Tamils as a diversionary tactic to dampen class conflict with poorer Sinhalese. Kapferer 1988, 102.

and moderates. Extremist groups or leaders may use violence as a strategy to force or induce moderates to increase their support for extremism (as in Yugoslavia and Rwanda). Or threats to a moderate leader's power base within his own group may lead him to provoke violence in order to gain the support of extremists or the broader public (as in Sudan, Yugoslavia to an extent, and some of Brass's cases in India).

The construction of ethnicity can be involved in these processes in at least two ways. Most simply, the provocation of violence by elites can construct groups in a more antagonistic manner—that is, alter the social content associated with being a member of each category—and in turn set in motion a spiral of vengeance. Second, extremists who provoke violence or push more moderate leaders to do so often wish to “purify” their culture, to sharply delineate identity boundaries that everyday interaction and moderates' political agendas threaten to blur. This perspective aligns with the constructivist focus on the plasticity of group boundaries, which as we have argued suggests paths to violence through intragroup struggles to define and police boundaries.

In Rwanda, Prunier insists that interethnic murder prior to the genocide was only a tool for the ruling faction of the Hutu elite to avoid international pressures for democratization and to justify in the eyes of the peasants why extremists rather than moderates should speak for Hutu interests.<sup>59</sup> Much of the politics he analyzes involve the jockeying for power among regionally based Hutu elites that is expressed as a conflict between extremists and moderates on the Tutsi question. Extremists try to cast the Tutsis as purely evil and the Hutu moderates as their stooges. In 1992, two years before the genocide, moderate Hutus gained some control over the tense situation and negotiated a cease-fire with the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF, a guerrilla movement that despite seeking a multiethnic constituency, represented Tutsi interests) at Arusha.<sup>60</sup> But Hutu extremists led by the president's wife, Agathe Habyarimana, began taking to the streets against the ensuing peace process. She and her three brothers helped form the “Zero Network” death squads, the institutional precursors of the genocide. After a formal power-sharing deal was signed in January 1993, and the day the International Commission on Human Rights mission left, the extremist Hutus sent their squads to the northwest region where they were strong, and three hundred Tutsis were killed in six days of violence. The in-exile Tutsi-led army then broke the cease-fire and marched across the Ugandan border toward the Rwanda capital, with many of the soldiers defying their own moderate leadership. These wildcats engaged in counterviolence, scaring many Hutus who escaped to Zaire.

The effects of these events on the Hutu moderates and Hutu peasants' beliefs closely parallel de Figueiredo and Weingast's explanation for “why publics follow.” As Prunier writes, “the exact circumstances of the RPF attack were not clear” and “doubt about the RPF's motives had a tremendous effect on the Hutu opposition,” effectively splitting it.<sup>61</sup> Unable to assign blame for the failure of the cease-fire with

59. Prunier 1995, 141. Relatedly, a motivation for the genocide itself was to implicate Hutu peasants in crimes that would effectively make them “extremists,” to “reinforce group solidarity through shared guilt.” *Ibid.*, 143.

60. On the RPF, see Prunier 1998.

61. Prunier 1995, 180.

certainty, Hutu moderates increased their estimate that the RPF could not be trusted in political negotiations, exactly what the extremists had sought in their violent attacks.

The story gets much gorier. Anticipating the intra-Hutu coup that would result, President Habyarimana kept postponing the transition to the Arusha-approved government in early 1994, despite great international pressure. Meanwhile Hutu extremists were warning of the consequences of giving up power and stressed the need for “vigilance” (a euphemism for murder) on their radio station. At a meeting on 6 April in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Habyarimana was pressed by his east African colleagues to implement the accords. On his return, with President Ntaryamira of Burundi, the plane was shot down as it approached Kigali, Rwanda’s capital. Who did it is not known, but the author reasonably suspects that Hutu extremists had planned the genocide if the Arusha accords were actually implemented. Getting rid of the president was a way to rationalize their power grab and put into action their final solution.<sup>62</sup>

During the genocide itself, in addition to the Tutsi deaths, some 10,000–30,000 Hutus (many of them intellectuals with moderate leanings) were killed by other Hutus.<sup>63</sup> The war between extremist and moderate Hutus continued in the refugee camps of Zaire even after the genocide. “The former leaders [of the genocide],” Prunier recounts, “kept almost total control of their subjects. Whoever disagreed with them was quickly murdered, a quick way to stop returns to Rwanda.” It is thus hard to imagine a coherent account of the genocide and the fragility of all peace accords that does not analyze how the divide between moderate and extremist ethnic leaders drove both into violent actions against the ethnic other.

In Sri Lanka, when President Jayawardene began negotiating with the Tamils, Colombo street talk was rife with rumors that he was really a Muslim, or even a Tamil. According to Kapferer, this is because in the eyes of the extremists his regime was not killing enough Tamils.<sup>64</sup> In order to establish his *bona fides* among Sinhalese under such circumstances, he allowed his own ministers to organize pogroms against innocent Tamils. Fear of Sinhalese extremists rather than Tamils motivated Jayawardene.

In Sudan, intra-northerner conflict explains why President Nimeiri, after he settled the war against the southern rebels, unilaterally abrogated the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, which had set a framework for eleven years of peace. In 1983 he imposed *shari’a* on the country by presidential decree; he also divided the south into three regions to weaken it. This led to a resumption of hostilities. Nimeiri, Deng argues, had decimated the Communist party after its abortive coup in 1971. Ironically, this meant that radical Muslims were the only attractive anti-government force for young northern university students. These radical Muslims formed the Muslim

62. Gourevitch confirms Prunier’s suspicions. Gourevitch 1995. However, the *Toronto National Post* reported on an alleged UN document in which Tutsi informants revealed that RPF leader Paul Kagame had ordered the attack. Steven Edwards, “Explosive” Leak on Rwanda Genocide, *Toronto National Post*, 1 March 2000. The allegation in the UN document is highly implausible. Hutu paramilitary units mobilized and attacked immediately in the aftermath of the assassination, which could have occurred only if their extremist leaders knew of it beforehand. Whatever the truth, there can be no doubt that Hutu extremists took quick advantage of the assassination to discredit Hutu moderates and to justify the mass murders.

63. Prunier 1995, 265.

64. Kapferer 1988, 100.

Brotherhood and became the principal threat to Nimeiri's rule. Deng's interviews among northerners show that Nimeiri's moderate policy in regard to the south was consonant with public opinion.<sup>65</sup> Yet he abandoned the moderate position. To some extent, as Nimeiri felt secure that he could break any southern resistance, he was able to disregard the Addis Ababa Agreement and centralize his rule. But more important, as the Muslim Brotherhood gained strength in the north, especially with an extremely lucrative position in the Faisal Islamic Bank given by the Saudis to the Muslim Brotherhood, Nimeiri was compelled to negotiate on his right flank, and to show his Islamic colors. He began to dress in Arab garb, and pressed for the *shari'a*. Those who protested (such as the long-time leader of the moderate Muslim Republican Brothers) were executed. Fear of his own radicals rather than desire to Islamize the south drove Nimeiri to intimidate the south, driving Sudan into its second civil war.

In Yugoslavia, the political dynamics between moderates and extremists are an important part of Woodward's story. In 1987, she reports, Serbia's then new president Slobodan Milošević, in breaking with his former patron Ivan Stambolic, made protection of Serbs in Kosovo a key issue. Like Milan Kučan, the Slovene party leader, Milošević was preempting the anticommunist nationalists, who were already organizing among Serbs in other republics. As with the Slovene and Croat leaders for their nations, Milošević claimed historic injustice for Serbs, emphasizing the partition of Serbia in the federation and economic policies that favored Slovenia and Croatia. Once the war with Croatia began, he helped circulate a rhetoric of Serbian victimization, an old theme of Serbian nationalists. While this theme is quite implausible, inasmuch as the capital of Yugoslavia was in Serbia, it was consistent with a popular cultural discourse about victimization by the Ottoman state and by the Titoist system. The conflict between Serbian moderates and extremists was more ghastly in Croatia's *krajina*. With conditions worsening, voices for conciliation disappeared, in part because Milan Babič's radicals "revived their power through selected assassinations of moderate leaders."<sup>66</sup>

Overall, Woodward sees much of the Balkan violence as induced by extremists to justify their extremism both at home and abroad. For example, the Croatian government provoked the "siege" of Dubrovnik; and the Croatian and Bosnian governments set up their mortar batteries in hospitals, inducing fire from the Yugoslav People's Army. Both examples illustrate that in order to gain international sympathy as well as foment outrage among their own moderates, ethnic leaders will provoke interethnic violence.<sup>67</sup>

McGarry and O'Leary tend to emphasize the empathy that moderate Catholics in Northern Ireland feel for the militants, sharing their aspirations.<sup>68</sup> The authors downplay the divide between radicals and moderates, at least in this book. Yet in Northern

65. Deng 1995, chap. 11.

66. Woodward 1995, 221.

67. However, Woodward does not see all the action in extremists pushing moderate leaders into atrocities. She analyzes as well the role of the leaders who encouraged the emergence of ultranationalists, in order to portray themselves to the rest of the world as "moderates" holding back the ultras. *Ibid.*, 355. But here as well the intranational jockeying for position between intranational radicals and moderates played a role in driving inter-nationality violence.

68. McGarry and O'Leary 1995, chap. 7.

Ireland from 1983 to 1994, in elections in which the radical Sinn Fein party decided to participate, its vote hovered around 17 percent of the electorate, with the more moderate nationalistic Social Democratic and Labour party (SDLP) getting around 23 percent.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, there was a significant amount of intragroup killing.<sup>70</sup> For example, 22 percent of the Loyalist killings were against Protestants, either in feuds or because they were informers. Among the Republican forces, in the period from 1969 to 1993, sixty-five deaths were attributed to Catholic activists killing Catholic informers.<sup>71</sup> A study of the violent conflict in Northern Ireland by Caroline Kennedy-Pipe is rife with incidents in which radical Catholics in the provisional IRA provoked British forces with the goal of garnering support from moderate and uncommitted Catholics and of extremist intimidation of moderates in order to undermine peace efforts.<sup>72</sup> A study by Begoana Aretxaga of the “dirty protest,” in which Catholic prisoners spread on their bodies their own feces and menstrual blood, suggests strongly a dynamic of radicals seeking to demonstrate their oppression and resolve to Catholic moderates.<sup>73</sup> And in other writings, McGarry and O’Leary point out how intrabloc cleavages work to constrain moderates.<sup>74</sup>

**Why do publics follow?** There is considerable evidence in these case studies that intra-elite fights occasion elite-led provocation of ethnic violence as a strategy for grabbing or keeping power or to defend threatened boundaries. Nonetheless, these accounts that focus on elites to some degree beg the question of why the masses follow. Why do they pay extravagant costs to fulfill elite power interests?

As we discussed earlier, one possible constructivist answer is that some ethnic groups sustain (and are defined by) discourses that prepare and dispose them to act violently toward ethnic others, while other discourses do not. In our discussion of Kapferer and Prunier we outlined the difficulties of testing such a hypothesis. A second class of answers noted earlier puts the focus on asymmetries of information between leaders and followers, or psychological biases on the part of followers. The cases just reviewed contain some support for such arguments, especially the manipulation of reasonable fears, as we saw in the Rwandan case. A final possibility, also sketched in the theoretical section, draws on Brass’s suggestion that perhaps the “followers” are not really following at all, or at least not in the way typically presumed. We take up the case evidence for this suggestion next.

**Do they follow? The construction of ethnic violence.** Brass focuses not so much on the impact of identity construction on ethnic violence as on the political construction of “ethnic violence.” He argues that whether a dispute is in fact ethnic violence depends on the motives of the participants, which are typically complex and often

69. *Ibid.*, 402.

70. Kennedy-Pipe 1997, 108.

71. *Ibid.*, 160; see also data from Sutton 1994.

72. Kennedy-Pipe 1997, 53, 63.

73. Aretxaga 1995.

74. See, for example, O’Leary and McGarry 1993, 304.



obscure or unknowable.<sup>75</sup> His careful investigations into the circumstances of various local disputes (a rape, a theft of a religious icon, a case of police brutality, all alleged) reveal more questions than answers as to exactly what happened and why. Much clearer, he argues, is that such ambiguous disputes sometimes fit the political needs of local or national politicians, who are then responsible for publicly coding them as “communal violence.” Brass suggests that this coding itself has incendiary implications and serves to perpetuate or foster cases of larger scale communal violence, such as riots.

In the end, Brass’s argument is an elite theory of ethnic violence with a twist. He suggests at once that (1) much of what is referred to as “communal violence” is at best ambiguously so—that is, “communal violence” sometimes but not always consists of disputes on the ground that have nothing to do with communal motivations; and (2) the violence is perpetuated by the actions of opportunistic politicians. Following Brass, a constructivist might argue that what is significant is not that ethnic identities are constructed, but that violence is socially constructed as “ethnic” (or “communal,” in Indian terms). One might ask, for example, if there has been a great upsurge in ethnic war since the end of the Cold War, or whether more insurgencies are now labeled “ethnic” due to opportunistic re-descriptions and salesmanship by rebel leaders seeking support from great power patrons newly disposed to see ethnic rather than Left–Right conflict.

Brass’s thesis that the motivations of those implicated in “ethnic violence” may be more complex than simple hatred for an out-group receives substantial support in the extended case studies under review. Several of these accounts convey the sense that on the ground, what is described as ethnic violence looks very much like gang violence with no necessary ethnic dimension. Indeed, based on these studies, one might conjecture that a necessary condition for sustained “ethnic violence” is the availability of thugs (in most cases young men who are ill-educated, unemployed or underemployed, and from small towns) who can be mobilized by nationalist ideologues, who themselves, university educated, would shy away from killing their neighbors with machetes. These case studies do not examine in minute detail the recruitment patterns of nationalist organizations, and there is no literature comparing similar ethnic situations with differential availability of young warriors.<sup>76</sup> Yet the theme of young men who can be seduced by the “high” that accompanies crime and given honor for engaging in murder performed for lofty goals is related in *sotto voce* in all the books under review.<sup>77</sup>

75. If the standard is ordinary language usage, then we think Brass is mistaken to suggest that an event is “ethnic violence” if and only if the participants are motivated by a desire to hurt ethnic others. Instead, we ordinarily consider calling violence “ethnic” if either (1) we think the participants are motivated by a generalized animosity to the ethnic other; (2) actors directing or leading the violence justify it by saying that it is on behalf of an ethnic group; or (3) attackers are essentially indifferent about the identity of their victims apart from their ethnicity. In (2) and (3), no speculation about motivations is necessary. Therefore, it would be incorrect to say that because we can never fully understand people’s motives we can never know if something is “ethnic violence.”

76. But, for some evidence, see Petersen 1989; and Laitin 1995.

77. On this point, see Katz 1988; and Buford 1993.

Deng's portrayal of the violence at first blush has little to do with recruitment and more to do with armies employed to dominate the south in the name of Arabization. He reports that after elite political turmoil in Khartoum in 1964, Muhammad Ahmed Mahjoub became prime minister and decided to focus his attention on the low-grade insurgency in the south. He gave the southern leadership an ultimatum to surrender or else, and shortly thereafter ordered the army to engage in massacres of southern populations. "During the night of July 8 in Juba, some 3,000 grass-thatched houses were burned down and more than a thousand people killed by government forces." A few days later the army attacked an elite wedding party in Wau, killing 76 southern elites. In August 1965 in Shilluk, the army killed 187 people, allegedly to "prevent them joining the rebels." All this drove southerners into the bush or exile, fearing extermination. The rules of engagement were to treat all villagers as guilty if there were a rebel attack from within a village.<sup>78</sup> The Sudanese army engaged in systematic attacks on villages, murdering any elites who showed a southern orientation, all in the name of bringing cultural unity to the country.

Yet the violence was not simply the result of army oppression. Traditional social values in the south, Deng reveals, sustained the age-set system that gave separate social roles for young men. While elders are expected to negotiate diplomatically in affairs of state, "youth warrior age-sets found their status and dignity in warfare and other activities associated with physical vitality, courage, and resilience."<sup>79</sup> In fact, the violent southern resistance was made possible by the availability of young men who found a route to honor and status by engaging in guerrilla warfare against northern forces. Fighting was not limited to the state military forces. In the border zone of the Ngok Dinka, when the state effectively reduced the prestige of Abyei (their administrative center), young Dinka warriors, led by ex-Anya Nya (the southern army) soldiers, went into the bush and began terrorist operations against Dinka informers to northern security forces, killing many Arabs (living on the borderlands) as well. These skirmishes between the Dinka, the Nuer, and borderland Arab groups depended upon the easy availability of young men who could be mobilized for violent conflict.

In Rwanda, as in Sudan, the burden of the violence fell to young men in the general population. From the very beginning of Rwanda's violent contemporary history, irregular youths have played a key role. For example, the spark of the 1959 riots was the assault on a Hutu subchief, who was active in a Hutu party, by youths of the Rwandan National Union (UNAR, the party of the Tutsi aristocrats), and rumors that he was killed. Hutu bands of young men responded quickly, and killed and burned Tutsi homes of all social classes. The violence claimed 300 lives. On the eve of the genocide, when the forces representing the RPF had invaded the country, the minister of defense went on the radio and asked the population to "track down and arrest the infiltrators." This license to kill had immediate effects in the Mutara region where

78. Deng 1995, 142–44. Fearon and Laitin view this strategy as part of a "spiral equilibrium," a consequence of the government having poor information about who is doing what on the insurgent side. Fearon and Laitin 1996.

79. Deng 1995, 17.

348 Tutsi civilians were massacred. None of the victims was in the RPF. Even the predations of the RPF in 1994, in Prunier's analysis, were performed by the disaffected youth who acted in contravention to the orders of RPF leader and later prime minister of Rwanda, Paul Kagame.<sup>80</sup>

Woodward's reports on who sustained the violence in Bosnia, as part of the everyday reality, focus upon irregulars. She notes that "the actual characteristics of the fighting on the ground . . . reflected the socioeconomic basis of these politics far more than the ethnic coloration and historical revenge that characterized politicians' rhetoric. For many, war became a rare opportunity for enrichment, through theft or smuggling, in a period of serious economic decline." She describes the "weekend warriors," a lost generation, who rampaged across the border on the weekends with their Kalashnikov rifles, and went back to their poor-paying jobs in Serbia on Monday. In September 1991, after the Belgrade Initiative announcing the new Yugoslavia (Serbia plus Montenegro), Yugoslav People's Army reservists from Serbia went on a shooting spree in Tuzla, a multiethnic city in northern Bosnia. These cross-border raids became constant. AUN arms embargo on Yugoslavia only served to activate the Serbian diaspora to buy arms for friends and family who formed local militias. In this context, many of the fighters were irregulars, with almost no chain of command. Criminals released from jails, who signed up with these militias, were most likely to engage in plunder and rape.<sup>81</sup> If criminals become nationalist warriors, the reverse process is also possible. McGarry and O'Leary point out that data collected subsequent to politically organized cease-fires in Northern Ireland show a rise in nonpolitical crime. Newly constrained in their nationalist violence, the thugs may have turned to criminal violence.

In the Sri Lanka case, although Kapferer does not take us down to the level of the street, he does mention that "Sinhalese gangs made up largely of impoverished and unemployed youth attacked Tamils in their houses and shops, settling old scores and looting."<sup>82</sup> On the ground, the ethnic war at its early stages was fought on the Sinhalese side by gang members and criminals, probably more interested in booty and violence for its own sake than in achieving group goals.

This scenario may help explain the puzzle of why publics often appear to follow the ultimately very costly paths of ethnic extremism sometimes chosen by their leaders. Perhaps publics often do not follow, at least not at first. Instead, if elites "let the thugs go," who have motivations besides or in addition to ethnic hatred, processes begin that leave the moderates in the group little choice but to follow a similar path. By initiating violent tit-for-tat sequences, thugs bring about the construction of more antagonistic group identities, making it rational to fear the other group and see its members as dangerous threats. In addition, thugs violently police dissent from the ethnic extremist agenda within their own groups, since dissent questions their legiti-

80. Prunier 1995, 48.

81. Woodward 1995, 248–65. Criminals let out of jail and careerist thugs also staffed the Serb paramilitaries in Kosovo; see James M. Dorsey, From Serb Paramilitaries, Tales of Killing and Cash, *Wall Street Journal*, 1 September 1999, A18.

82. Kapferer 1988, 101.

macy.<sup>83</sup> Thus, only after a guerilla war has begun are everyday primordialist sentiments transformed into ethnic antipathies that can motivate and sustain widespread, ongoing violence. Even then, the extent of ethnic antipathies is probably overstated.

*Identity Construction Through Strategic Action “on the Ground”*

The strategic interpretation of identity construction need not focus on Mt. Olympus and the initiatives of elites, as argued earlier. It might also be developed by focusing on strategic action at ground level by ordinary folk. There is revealing evidence in the case studies on how ethnic violence can spiral because of political contestation over group boundaries that are not the result of elite manipulation.

Several of the authors of the books under review accept to different degrees the notion that identity groups are constructed and therefore are fluid geographically and culturally. Yet they are largely silent about the implications of this aspect of identity construction for violence. Deng, in his treatment of the Sudanese civil war, provides material in support of theories linking ambiguous boundaries to violence. Territorial anomalies, Deng’s book nicely illustrates, may invite violent conflict. The territorial divide between the “north” and “south” in the Sudan is not a clean one, as illustrated by the history and geography of the Ngok Dinka. Many Ngok became Muslim and were bilingual in Dinka and Arabic, but according to Deng, “the Ngok have remained distinctly Dinka and in some respects more so than their brethren farther South.”<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless, their home area is in the southern point of the northern province of Kordofan, as the Ngok in earlier times affiliated with Kordofan to seek protection against Arab slave traders. In the era of nationalism, young Ngok sought to be incorporated in the south, and this desire became an issue that intensified the north-south conflict. After the Addis Ababa Agreement that ended the first civil war, numerous Ngok were co-opted into the northern camp, but once they experienced the low-status positions in which they were continually put, they returned to the Dinka camp, many to the southern army. In fact, several of the songs demanding southern freedom were written in Arabic by Dinkas who had converted to Islam. Ngok failure to get a fair deal identifying themselves as northerners drove them wholeheartedly and resentfully into the southern camp.

Territorial and cultural boundaries, if they are to be maintained cleanly, require coordination. If all Ngok Dinkas see themselves as unambiguously southerners, on the one hand, it will be extremely difficult for any one Ngok to identify himself as a northerner. On the other hand, if the Ngoks are divided among themselves, any one Ngok has a broader slate for identity. Under conditions where groups have not coordinated on an identity, with the possibility of a tip in one direction or the other, in-groups (here Ngoks, whose identifiers may fear group extinction if the tip is in favor of a wider identity) and out-groups (here Arabized northerners, whose members, especially the marginal ones, might see Ngok assimilation as a threat to their

83. For this argument applied to violence in Yugoslavia, see Mueller 1997. Kaufmann has argued that ethnic war almost irreversibly “hardens” ethnic identities so that the primordialist vision of ethnicity can become “true” in the course of a conflict. Kaufmann 1996.

84. Deng 1995, 244.

privilege or alleged purity) can be driven into direct action. They seek to create a cultural equilibrium, in which an individual's beliefs that he is really a southerner is also perceived as his optimal identity choice, confirmed by the corollary choices of other Ngoks. Through this mechanism of interdependent identity choice, everyday primordialism can be seen as part of a cultural equilibrium. In the Ngok case, the process leading to the construction of everyday primordialism can induce individuals to engage in intragroup and intergroup violence.

Ambiguous cultural boundaries are as inflammatory as territorial ones. Northern militancy, in Deng's view, is propelled by a fear among northerners that accommodation would expose them as "Africans." The fact of great physiognomic similarity with southerners, Deng feels, makes northerners even more concerned with upholding social boundaries against the south.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, some two million southerners now live in the north. Some are adapting to northern culture, and their children are going to Arabic-language schools. Yet some have joined the southern autonomy movement and thus represent a southern influence within the north itself. To counteract this possibility, Deng reasons, the Northern Islamic Front carries the banner of a "northern nationalism" even more assiduously. As cultural boundaries blur in the real world, radical nationalists become more militant to protect the historically constructed boundaries.<sup>86</sup>

This phenomenon is especially true for northerners of the most questionable Arab descent. For example, in the constitutional debates of 1951, the proposal to give special status and protection to the south was defeated, and received strongly negative responses by descendants of former slaves living in the north. Deng quotes Mansour Khalid's analysis: "Abd al-Tam . . . can be deemed, like so many other Sudanese of markedly Negroid origin, to have been compelled to take positions like that in order to out-Herod Herod." Another northern group of questionable status as Arabs, the Baggara, who have no traditions linking them to the Prophet, are among the strongest Arab chauvinists, especially in their provocations of the southern Dinka.<sup>87</sup>

## Summary

We have argued that there are two main ways to develop the insight that ethnic identities are socially constructed in the direction of explanations for ethnic violence.<sup>88</sup> One route views identity construction from the perspective of individuals'

85. *Ibid.*, 64.

86. *Ibid.*, 181–82.

87. *Ibid.*, 130–31. An interesting example of blurred boundaries and their implications for violence is suggested by Jeganathan. Jeganathan 1997. On the outskirts of Colombo, Sri Lanka, Tamils live in expectation of ethnic violence, given the past record of periodic pogroms. Some Tamil parents therefore give their children Sinhalese names and engage in Sinhalese cultural practices so that they will not be identified as Tamils should riots break out. Yet this form of strategic manipulation blurs the boundaries between groups and enrages Sinhalese nationalists, who point to such practices as evidence of Tamil perfidy.

88. We discounted a third, namely, that broad, secular social and economic processes can be seen as causes for ethnic violence, except possibly as necessary conditions.

actions—either the elites who construct antagonistic ethnic identities in order to maintain or increase their political power, or the mass publics whose individual actions produce, reproduce, and contest the content and boundaries of ethnic categories. In the second route, supra-individual discourses of ethnicity contain internal, ideational logics that construct actors and motivate or define their possibilities for action.

The narratives under review give details on how ethnic boundaries and antagonisms follow from the political strategies of elites seeking to gain power or undermine challengers. Several mechanisms were posited by which elites induce the masses, who pay an enormous cost for the violence, to follow. However, some evidence suggests that the masses are not duped at all. Rather “ethnic violence” can be a cover for other motivations such as looting, land grabs, and personal revenge; and the activities of thugs set loose by the politicians can “tie the hands” of publics who are compelled to seek protection from the leaders who have endangered them. An alternate story developing the constructivist point about permeable group boundaries has non-elites provoking violence to prevent boundary “crossing” or to raise their in-group status. In both of these cases the construction of ethnic antagonisms is the result of individual strategic action.

The thesis that discursive logics explain behavior should not be discarded, despite the apparent primordialism in the presentation of these logics in some cases, and despite obstacles to testing such arguments empirically across cases. The Sinhala logic of exorcism and the Hutu reconstruction of the colonial myth of Tutsi foreignness create scripts of proper or heroic action that invite young men to reenact them. Stories people tell about themselves, as with Tishkov’s example from Kirgizia, even when couched deeply in metaphor, as with Geertz’s cockfight, become available models for specific behaviors. As we have noted in our discussion of *seny* and *raxha* in the context of Catalan politics, making the internal logic of complex, multifaceted discourses explanatory is a difficult business. Still, if the supply of culturally approved scripts is limited, then in times of social stress or conflict an “availability heuristic” might well be in force, making societies with scripts, such as the Sinhala or the Kirgiz, more prone to intergroup violence.<sup>89</sup>

Implicit in our presentation is an assumption that the rigid divide in methodological debates between culturalist and rationalist accounts can be bridged. The strategic theories linking individuals (whether elites or masses) to ethnic violence and the discursive theories linking discourses to violent behaviors are all constructivist in the sense that they posit the content and boundaries of ethnic groups as produced and reproduced by specific social processes. The specification of what these processes are, the delineation of the precise mechanisms by which they lead to ethnically based violence, and the testing of these specifications with a sample of cases exhibiting both high and low violence remain challenges to rationalist and culturalist constructivists alike.

89. Tversky and Kahneman 1982, 13.

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