

# Lecture 7

## Primordialism

Part I: Primordialism

Part II: Minimal Group Studies

# Primordialism

- Ethnic identities are *more fundamental* than other types of identity. Ethnicity is not subject to rational cost/benefit calculations. It belongs to the realm of emotion.
- Ethnicity is immutable, unchangeable, fixed.

# Primordialism

- Ethnic mobilizations are motivated by *expressive* not instrumental needs.
- Conflict based on ethnicity is *inevitable*, persistence is a given.

# Idols of the Tribe

- Harold Isaacs argues that ethnicity is a “basic group identity”
- It “consists of the ready-made set of endowments and identifications that every individual shares with others from the moment of birth by the chance of family into which born at a given time and place.”
- “primordial attachments”; “assumed givens”

# A Person's Group Identity

- Physical body
- Name
- History and origins of birth group
- Nationality and other affiliations
- Language
- Religion
- Culture
- Geography

# Ethnicity: Basic, Enduring, Natural

- Isaacs perspective (and others), assumed that ethnicity was deep rooted in human culture, and it is difficult to escape once we are in them
- Ethnicity is something that sticks to human groups and thus we can use ethnicity to generalize how people identify themselves, and sometimes how they even behave.

# Attribution of Behaviors to Ethnic Group

- Attitudes and behaviors thought to be acquired at birth or inevitably produced by membership to that group.
- “Hot tempered Mexican”
- “See the temper, that is the Irish in him”
- “He is a shrewd businessman because he is Jewish”

# The Weakness of Primordialism

- There are two main problems with Primordialism:
  - 1.) People have multiple and complex identities
  - 2.) Ethnic identities change

# Multiple Identities

- People have multiple identities: gender, occupation, national, regional, etc.
- Inter-ethnic marriage is very common today and people have parents of mixed ancestry
- Very common to hear complex reports of identity to reflect the complexity of a person's history

Table 1.

## Population by Race and Hispanic Origin for the United States: 2000

Race and Hispanic or Latino	Number	Percent of total population
<b>RACE</b>		
<b>Total population</b> .....	<b>281,421,906</b>	<b>100.0</b>
One race .....	274,595,678	97.6
White .....	211,460,626	75.1
Black or African American .....	34,658,190	12.3
American Indian and Alaska Native .....	2,475,956	0.9
Asian.....	10,242,998	3.6
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander .....	398,835	0.1
Some other race.....	15,359,073	5.5
Two or more races.....	6,826,228	2.4
<b>HISPANIC OR LATINO</b>		
<b>Total population</b> .....	<b>281,421,906</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Hispanic or Latino .....	35,305,818	12.5
Not Hispanic or Latino.....	246,116,088	87.5

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Redistricting (Public Law 94-171) Summary File, Tables PL1 and PL2.

# Ethnic Identities Change

- Basic group identity suggests the permanence of ethnic ties. **Primordial “givens” are not supposed to change.**
- Is man a leopard who cannot change his spots?
- Is this always true? What examples can we think of?

# Pathans and Baluch

- Fredrik Barth's studies of group identities in the Afghanistan region revealed that group boundedness was subject to remarkable dynamics.
- Rather than identify themselves by a large aggregation of beliefs and practices, members selected "only certain cultural traits" and made those the "unambiguous criteria for ascription" to the group



# Yorubas of Nigeria

- Yorubas have strong West African identity today, and part of the identity of African diaspora in the Americas
- Yet there were no Yoruba before the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- European missionaries constructed the term based on several groups that shared similar languages.



# Hitler's Aryan master race

## Source 1:

“The Aryan race is tall, long legged, slim. The race is narrow-faced, with a narrow forehead, a narrow high-built nose and a lower jaw and prominent chin, the skin is rosy bright and the blood shines through .... the hair is smooth, straight or wavy - possibly curly in childhood. The colour is blond.”

*Description of a 'pure' Aryan. From a leaflet 'The Nazi Race', 1929.*

## Source 2:



*A boy and a girl used in a Nazi poster.*

# The Power of Primordial Ties

- Although it is questionable that primordial ties cause strong bonds in all situations, it is clear that people do have “strong feelings to belong”
- Could Yugoslavian ethnic cleansing, the Rwanda genocide, and other extreme patterns of behavior happen with strong “ingroup” feelings?

# Ethnicity and Powerful Emotion

- Ethnic conflicts exemplify how social identities can fuel “homicidal furies”
- Ethnic groups sometimes hang on to ethnic identities even at large social and economic costs
- Primordialism helps explain such forces.

# Shils and Geertz

- Assimilationists assumed that ethnicity would disappear due to universal values and utilitarian interests.
- Shils and Geertz believed that humans need communities of interaction and meaning that is based on something other than rationality.
- Borrowed concepts of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft

Ferdinand Toennies:  
Theory of *Gemeinschaft* (Community)

- The theory of *Gemeinschaft* assumes that all human wills are united and that this is their natural condition. These wills are related either by blood or by marriage, through three strong types of relationships: man-wife, mother-child, and between children of the same mother.

Ferdinand Toennies:  
*Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*

*Gemeinschaft*

Community

Folk

Natural Will

(Authority and Common Will)

Homogeneity

*Gesellschaft*

Society

Urban

Rational Choice

Heterogeneity

# Why Do Men Fight in Wars?

- Patriotism? Politics?  
Material interests?
- Yes, but the real force that holds them together in battle is the strong interpersonal attachments.



# Primordialism and Ethnicity

- Criticism of primordialism: ethnicity cannot be fixed, unchanging, and beyond analysis.
- But Shils and Geertz really were not saying that primordialism was in ethnicity and race itself, but in the significance attributed to them.
- Those who share primordial ties are linked to each other **“in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the tie itself”**.

## Part II: Innate sense for ingroups, yet ingroups dynamic

- In this section, I want to highlight that social psychologists have shown that people do have a proclivity to form ingroups
- Of course, cultural and cognitive processes affect what these ingroups will be, and how powerful these will become

# Social Identity Theory (SIT)



Social identities made stronger by *in-group* and *out-group* distinctions.

**In-group:** “Us”- a group of people who share a sense of belonging, a feeling of common identity

**Out-group:** “Them”- a group that people perceives as distinctively different from or apart from their in-group.

## (SIT): Minimal Group Paradigm

- Group identification sufficient to instigate intergroup conflict
- Competition for scarce resources not necessary

# Minimal Group Paradigm

- People assigned to groups
- Groups have no history, norms, or values
- Members have no contact
- **Membership based on trivial criteria**
- **Task have minimal outcomes with respect to competition for real resources.**

Goal:

Evaluate if group membership ALONE produces in-group bias

# Experiment

- Tajfel (1973)
  - High school boys in England
  - Study on “visual perception”
    - Estimate “dots”
    - **Random assignment** Individuals told that they are either in Over- or Underestimator group.
- Divided into two ‘minimal’ groups (no history, no interaction) based on over or underestimators.

# Choices Concerning Money

- Boys were shown tables of numbers representing how much money (pennies) they could allocate to either in-group members or outgroup members.
- They could not allocate money to themselves, and they did not know the individual identity of the boy who would receive the money—only the group that they were from.

# Experiment

- The results demonstrated that when the boys had the choice between maximising the profit for all and maximising the profit for their own group, they chose the latter. Even more interestingly though, the boys were found to be more concerned with creating as large a difference as possible between the amounts allocated to each group (in favor of their own group), then in gaining a greater amount for everybody, across the two groups.

# Minimal Group Paradigm

## Major Finding:

In-group bias occurred in absence  
of competition over scarce  
resources

**Group identity was sufficient to  
create in-group bias**

