Who Are the People?
Why Ethnic Politics Matters

Tristan James Mabry

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the idea of mass mobilization in order to redirect government is axiomatic. If the environment is degraded, then the solution is to educate and organize concerned citizens. The same can be said of gender inequality, racial prejudice, or, in the form of labor movements, class disparity. Yet of all the challenges a society may launch at its state, the most serious are not those that challenge a particular policy or seek redress of a single social issue, but those that challenge the legitimacy of the state itself. This begs the question: what makes a state legitimate or illegitimate? The short answer is whether or not the state represents the will of the people. But the long answer demands an answer to another question: who are the people? In the global arena, it is implicit that different peoples are different nations, and that different nations have different states. If there is disagreement over the composition of a particular nation, there is by extension disagreement over the composition of the state. If the *raison d'etre* of the state itself is contentious, this can upset the stability of said state, and, by extension, may threaten the equilibrium of international relations.

Ethnic politics matter because ethnicity is what makes a nation, and a nation is what makes a state. In the three sections that follow, this essay outlines the underlying principles of the nation-state, identifies the shortcomings of contemporary

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political science in addressing the question of ethnic politics, and considers contemporary cases of ethnic mobilization in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In regard to what academics and policymakers concerned with international order can do, the essay concludes that U.S. citizens need to spend more time overseas to understand the subjective perspectives of the politically dispossessed or to at least listen carefully when area experts and diplomats report the problems of a particular people. However, even the best advice is worthless if ignored, as when a foreign policy is predetermined by domestic politics.

First Define the People, Then Define the State.

While settler states such as Canada, Australia, and the United States make a best effort to define citizenship according to patriotism and allegiance to a civic ideal—and thus an explicitly non-ethnic identity—most of the world remains comprised of self-described nation-states like Italy or Vietnam. Each justifies its existence according to the doctrine of national self-determination: a state for every nation and a nation for every state. Of course, national homogeneity is make-believe. Few countries may even pretend to claim that every citizen is the same as everyone else. Aside from voluntary immigrant communities, such as Turks in Germany, there are also groups who find themselves in a situation crafted by the caprice of history, including indigenous peoples like the Sami in Norway and Sweden or the Ainu in Japan; nations divided such as the Hungarians in Romania or Malay in the deep south of Thailand; and nations trapped, such as the Uighurs in China or Chechens in Russia. Yet most nation-states are stable and most minorities are uninterested, unwilling, or unable to challenge the legitimacy of their country. Their state may be benign and liberal—welcoming integration and political representation—or malign but formidable—controlling dissent and suppressing alternate identities. In either case, ethnic heterogeneity is in no way a sufficient condition for communal conflict.

Crises emerge when a subordinate group has the motive, means, and opportunity to strike against the dominant nationality and their institutions, viz. the government of their nation-state. A group may claim its own right to self-determination by repairing the state's institutions, often by ratifying a rewritten constitution, or by redefining the state itself to represent a different nation, as in the case of Blacks in South Africa. If neither remedy is possible than the group may simply remove itself from the state by redrawing its borders. Yet to explain, anticipate, or manage any one of these crises, it is essential to understand who is who: who is dominant or subordinate? Who lives where, speaks what, worships whom? What, for any aggrieved or agitated group, defines membership or exclusion? The immediate and obvious answer is ethnicity: Kurds challenge Turks, Basques challenge Castilian Spaniards, Tibetans challenge Han Chinese, and so on.

What is alarming, however, is how often the ethnic component of politics is ignored or eclipsed, even among international affairs experts. It is often ignored because the people and places in question are unfamiliar or unknown: how many academics or analysts really had any idea what was happening to Albanians in Macedonia before the collapse of Yugoslavia, or know now what

the problem is between Madurese and Dayaks in Borneo?[1] Yet even when antagonists are not unfamiliar to informed observers, the importance of ethnic identity is often eclipsed by a big, bad idea.

Academic Indifference about Ethnicity.

In contemporary American political science, it is fashionable to suggest that "ethnic conflict" is a layman's term, applied only by amateurs who fail to appreciate the real importance of economic and political institutions.[2] Academics and analysts who sideline ethnic politics do so to no good end. Even as ethnic violence slashes across Kenya, indigenous mobilizations destabilize Bolivia, multi-national tensions strain Malaysia, and bi-national politics threaten the very existence of Belgium, players in the arena of international affairs remain too often unprepared, or troublingly ill-advised, to respond intelligently.

Like a meteor smashing into the Earth, the sudden and surprising collapse of the USSR was a mass extinction event for a certain species of academic Central Asian "Stans."[4] This was a positive development and applied to research on many regions. The bi-polar politics of the Cold War was apparently replaced by a collision of cultures or "civilizations," and so new questions were asked—and answered—about the sources of, and solutions to, deep social divides. The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the genocide in Rwanda, for example, demonstrated it was a good idea to know who lived where within different countries—whether Slovenian, Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian or Albanian in the former, or Hutu or Tutsi in the latter.

Nonetheless, ethnic politics as a subject lost favor at the start of this century. In 2000, Ted Gurr argued that ethnic conflict was waning because more groups were willing to try negotiation instead of bloodshed.[5] But a more serious downsizing followed research suggesting that "ethnic conflict" was a kind of bogeyman, a term used by journalists to scare readers and by academics or policy experts who just did not know any better.

Consider an Op-Ed in the *Washington Post* by a pair of political scientists: Steven Fish and Matthew

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called "Sovietologist."[3] Just as mammals supplanted reptiles, this afforded a growth opportunity for a range of new species—area specialists trained in the languages and political scenarios of diverse peoples in the Baltics, the Balkans, the Caucasus, or the five Kroenig. Their explanation of group violence in Kenya, which erupted following a contested December 2007 presidential election between candidates from different ethnic groups, begins with the proviso that the cause of Kenya's crisis is "not ethnic." While they allow that the

conflict "does indeed run along ethnic lines, ethnic diversity is not to blame for the disaster," and that the "key culprit" is a weak system of governance.[6] In other words, it is not a question of clashing ethnic identities, but a question of faulty institutions. Thus, the best plan to repair the politics of Kenya is to rebuild and reinforce the legislature.

In the long term, this is fair enough; the institutions are weak. Yet it is safe to suggest that this is of little comfort to members of the various communities—Kikuyus, Kalenjin, Luos, Kisii, and others—who flee for their lives.[7] According to Jendayi Frazer, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Kenya is wracked by nothing less than ethnic cleansing.[8] Kenyan writer and filmmaker Simiyu Barasa laments that Nairobi has been "Balkanized, with whole neighborhoods turned into exclusive reserves of certain tribes." Because membership in a particular tribe can mean "the difference between not being dead or being seriously dead," there is no point in waiting for stronger institutions. One short-term solution, writes Barasa, is to strengthen your tribal *bona fides* with "crash courses" in the tongue of the tribe that is stamped on your ID card—even if it is a dialect that you may not know well, especially if you moved away from home to study or work in a polyglot city such as Nairobi or Mombassa where Kikuyu (the mother tongue of the dominant minority) or either of the official languages (English and Swahili) are the norm.[9]

Fish and Kroenig accept that the effect of institutional weakness in Kenya is, in fact, the exacerbation of ethnic divisions, yet insist such divisions are not to blame. The clear implication is that the characteristics and perceptions of distinct eth-

nic groups are not all that important. In this now prominent view, Kenya's diversity is no more or less important than the diversity of many other heterogeneous states because "political scientists have found that there is no statistical correlation between ethnic diversity and civil war."[10] This claim is valid, and Stanford University's James Fearon and David Laitin are the political scientists most often credited with demonstrating this point. They are the co-authors of "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," a statistical analysis of 127 conflicts between 1945 and 1999, that challenges the conventional wisdom of "journalists, policymakers, and academics, which holds 'plural' societies to be especially conflict-prone due to ethnic or religious tensions and antagonisms."[11] Instead, civil violence is statistically linked to conditions that favor insurgency, a military mobilization that enables small numbers of fighters to challenge the inevitably larger forces of an entire state. In other words, civil violence erupts where conditions are favorable for guerrilla warfare, such as a weak state, a large population, and notably "rough terrain."[12] Laitin distilled these points in a later work by ascribing predictive power to "country-level factors that have little to do with ethnicity or nationalism."[13]

When considering civil war, their analysis makes a lot of sense, especially in regard to topography. It is far easier to sustain a revolt when you can safely retreat into dense jungles or forbidding mountains. But it is the iconoclastic claim that ethno-national politics are relatively unimportant that seized the attention of the discipline. The influence of the Fearon and Laitin findings cannot be emphasized enough. Their co-authored work is the single most down-

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loaded article from the website of the discipline's highest-ranked journal, the *American Political Science Review.*[14]

The troubling legacy of "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," however, is its tendency to support straw man arguments that sweep ethnicity in general to the sidelines. It is sensible that insurgencies do not erupt in small, flat countries with strong governments, but this is an observation that applies to questions about civil wars. Does this also mean that a small, flat country with a strong government is immune to ethno-national crises of legitimacy?

The Abundance of Ethnic Politics.

Recent events in Belgium, of all places, do not bear this out. Home to NATO and the EU, Belgium, if nothing else, is a small, flat, country with a strong government. It is also bi-national: the French-speaking Walloons and the Dutch-speaking Flemish united as Catholics to secede from the Protestant Netherlands in 1830 and have shared power in one form or another ever since. Yet the country is beset with chronic communal tension, a "bad marriage writ large" between a pair of ethnolinguistic communities "that cannot stand each other."[15] According to Filip Dewinter, the leader of the separatist party *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Bloc), Belgium is a container for "different nations, an artificial state created as a buffer between big powers, and we have nothing in common except a king, chocolate and beer… it's 'bye-bye, Belgium' time."[16]

Nobody is suggesting fighting is about to erupt in Antwerp or Bruges, but any analysis of Belgian politics that addresses institutional schematics at the expense of ethnic patterns is a waste of time. There may never be a Flemish firefight with a band of rogue Walloons, but in what political universe could this topic be considered unimportant, uninteresting, or unworthy of our professional attention? What is important, interesting, and a worthy avenue of research is how and why antagonists in Belgium may come to believe that their government is no longer legitimate, that the state no longer represents the will of "the people". Even if shots are not fired, "legitimacy cannot be inferred from a peaceful situation," and legitimacy depends on how people define themselves.[17]

This process is now evident and accelerating in Bolivia. In 2006, that country elected its first indigenous president. Evo Morales, an ethnic Aymara Indian, campaigned on a promise—since delivered—to rewrite the constitution and explicitly include the majority Indians (*los indios*). The Minister of Education and Culture, Felix Patzi, directed all government employees to learn Aymara or another of the major indigenous languages, Quechua or Guaraní. All of this deeply troubled the formerly dominant minority comprised of the whites (*las blancas*, descended from Europeans) and the mestizos. The four regions where they are clearly the majority have unilaterally declared autonomy. It is the opinion of Bolivian Vice President Álvaro García Linera that there are now "two different" Bolivias and that the country is "really split."[18]

Even in multi-national states with carefully crafted institutions, socioeconomic inequalities can destabilize the country if inequality overlaps a specific ethnicity. In Malaysia, for example, ethnic Malay, Chinese, and Indians officially share government power, but that has not engendered relative economic power or social status. Malaysia's Indian popu-

lation accounts for just ten percent of the country; it is now quite clear this group has "lost out in the long battle of all three ethnic groups over power, privilege, and religion."[19] In November 2007, more than twenty thousand Indians staged an anti-government protest that was dispersed with water cannons and teargas. Ethnic Chinese account for about one quarter of the population and are economically more secure, but chafe at affirmative action programs that admit more Malays to university and grant more government contracts to Malay-owned companies at the expense of Chinese applicants.

Belgium, Bolivia, and Malaysia appear to have little in common, but they all can be categorized as democracies, and it is easy to claim that a democratic government is legitimate. But a necessary condition for a democracy is a *demos*: there is little point holding elections if there is disagreement over who gets to vote. Nationalism may not be liberal—it is hard to protect everybody's liberty when the whole state hinges on a claim to represent a nation—but it is politically expedient:

such minorities may find it difficult to accept the legitimacy of some other nation's state.

Violence is more likely, however, if a dominant minority loses control of a subordinate majority, just as the Sunni Arab minority in Iraq has lost control of the majority Shia.[20] A most horrific case of this dynamic was the slaughter of a once-dominant Tutsi minority by the Hutu majority in Rwanda. But if any lessons were learned following that tragedy, they are already forgotten in Kenya. The Kikuyu are the largest ethnic group in the country, but account only for 22 percent of Kenya's 37 million people. Yet they are the long-time economic and social elite, and are often resented by the majority who see the Kikuyu "disproportionately represented in the civil service, the professional classes, and the business community."[21] After refusing to relinquish control of the government, the Kikuyu are challenged en masse by groups that are comparatively disadvantaged, both socio-economically and politically.

This pattern is not unknown to polit-

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the electorate is the nation. Does this necessarily mean that minorities—and there are always minorities—who are either unwilling or unwelcome to assimilate or integrate into the official nation will necessarily take arms and launch an insurgency? No, it does not. This is a separate question. But it does mean that

ical science. In 2003, Barbara Huff demonstrated statistically that states with a dominant minority, even when controlling for other variables, were 2.6 times more likely to experience genocidal violence or politically-motivated mass murder.[22] Why this finding was eclipsed by Fearon and Laitin's claim that ethnic

diversity does not correlate with civil war, however, is odd. The lead essay in a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs* by historian Jerry Muller offers one explanation, namely parochialism: "Projecting their own experience onto the rest of the world, Americans generally belittle the role of ethnic nationalism in politics."[23] To this I would add that such a confirmation of the American *Weltanschauung* makes it easier to ignore the inconvenient facts of intractable ethnic inequalities in the United States. Muller's unflinching assessment also helps explain why so few American authors participate in scholarship on nationalism.

Again, this is not to say that ethnic mobilization is necessarily bloody. It is not. Czechoslovakia, for example, split along ethnolinguistic lines into the Czech and Slovak republics, but this ethnic diversity was not a sufficient condition for group violence. It was, however, a sufficient condition for destabilizing ethnonational politics: one state died, but two were born, and ethnic nationalism bore witness to both.

What is to be Done?

Despite rising economic globalization and regional integration, membership in intergovernmental organizations such as the UN, the EU, ASEAN, the WTO, or even the Organization of the Islamic Conference, is allocated to states alone. If we accept the principle of popular sovereignty as a necessary condition for legitimate government, then the sole source of political legitimacy is "the people." By extension, in the international arena, "the people" are consolidated as separate nations, and it is the right to national self-determination that justifies the existence of a state, i.e. a nation-state. Hence, dissenting definitions of "the people" present a very

real danger. But if we are increasingly deaf to ethnic voices inside states we are limited to essentially *ex post facto* interpretations of why this group challenged that state. What is to be done?

It would not be a bad idea to consider the opinion of Robert Bates on this question. A chaired professor in the Department of Government at Harvard, Bates is widely recognized as one of the most influential political scientists of his generation. After four decades of scholarship, he is particularly critical of research crafted in the comfortable enclosures of academe. It is easy and therefore common to opine at length about people and places of interest without ever having met those people or seen those places. Hence, those opinions are often far removed—figuratively and literally—from the people and places in question. Moreover, the academic or policymaker may never know whether their conclusions are accurate or imaginary. How can this be amended? For academics, the polite but oblique answer is to research other countries by actually visiting them, or to at least take seriously the the findings of researchers, from whatever discipline, who collect primary sources abroad, including quantitative survey data or qualitative interviews with political actors. In either case, the relevance of overseas research is made plain by Bates: "the cure for bullshit is fieldwork."[24]

For policymakers, the best first step is to weigh far more heavily the opinions of diplomats and intelligence agents working abroad, rather than to blithely accept the advice of domestic agencies or nominal experts who may treat countries like so many pieces on a board game. The obvious sources for this kind of information are the Department of State and the CIA, though this raises the thorny ques-

tion of political selectivity: it is easier to accept opinions that support an existing policy than it is to accept inconvenient facts. This was the lesson illustrated by the so-called Downing Street Memo of 2002; following a visit to Washington, Sir Richard Dearlove, then head of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, reported that the decision to invade Iraq was made *a priori* since "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy."[25] In short, and for good or for ill, it is easy for a domestic agenda to predetermine foreign policy.

Nonetheless, it is fortunate that the State Department is working to enhance the U.S. government's understanding of regional conditions—and the highly subjective perspectives of distinct groups—by hiring more than a thousand new diplomats.[26] At the very top of their recruitment lists are candidates with overseas experience, language skills, and area expertise. I would expect that these candidates could recognize conditions where institutional characteristics alone cannot explain why things are falling apart. This is especially critical in countries like Iraq or Serbia that suddenly find that some of their citizens, such as Kurds or Albanians, no longer identify with their state, but rather with their own people. Determining how a people defines itself—in other words, figuring out who is who—is a difficult and uneven exercise, but it is essential to understanding the most destabilizing form of dissent: ethnic nationalism.

NOTES

1 In Indonesia, hundreds have died and thousands have been displaced since the 1990s by communal violence in the West Kalimantan region of Borneo; the feud is between the indigenous Dayaks and the immigrant Madurese who relocated as part of Suharto's development-through-resettlement policy called *transmigrasi* (transmigration).

2 The qualifier "American" is necessary because ethno-nationalism is considered critical elsewhere. The most influential general theories of nationalism were developed at the London School of Economics by Ernest Gellner, Elie Kedourie, and Anthony Smith. Superior work exploring normative concerns is often Canadian (e.g. Charles Taylor, Will Kymlicka, and Margaret Moore). In the United States, Benedict Anderson is a central figure, but he was raised overseas and his work is often considered social anthropology rather than political science.

3 The ranks of former Sovietologists include the current Secretary of State. See, for example, Condoleezza Rice, "The Party, the Military, and Decision Authority in the Soviet Union," *World Politics* 40, no. 1 (1987): 55-81.

4 The five countries are: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

5 Ted Robert Gurr, "Ethnic Warfare on the Wane," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 3 (2000): 52-64.

6 M. Steven Fish and Matthew Kroenig, "Kenya's Real Problem (It's Not Ethnic)" the *Washington Post*, 9 January 2008, A(15).

7 Jeffrey Gettleman "Kenya Kikuyus, Long Dominant, Are Routed From Rivals' Land," the *New York Times*, 7 January 2008, p. 1.

8 "U.S. Envoy Sees 'Ethnic Cleansing' in Kenya, the *International Herald Tribune*, 31 January, p. 8. Gurr.

9 Simiyu Barasa, "Kenya's War of Words," the *New York Times*, 12 February 2008, p. 21.

10 Fish and Kroenig.

11 James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War" *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75-90, 75.

12 Fearon and Laitin.

13 David D. Laitin, *Nations, States, and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14.

14 According to the American Political Science Association, the *American Political Science Review*'s publisher, Cambridge University Press, reports that "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War" has been downloaded 6,990 times since its publication in 2003—more than any other article published in the one-hundred year history of the journal. "Top 50 Articles from the *American Political Science Review,*" Internet, www.apsanet.org/content_30489.cfm.

15 Elaine Sciolino, "Calls for a Split Grow Louder in Belgium," the *International Herald Tribune*, 21 September 2007, p. 1.

16 Sciolino, "Calls."

17 Walker Connor, "Nationalism and Political Illegitimacy," in *Ethnonationalism in the Contemporary World: Walker Connor and the Study of Nationalism*, ed. D. Conversi (New York: Routledge, 2002), 38.

18 Julie McCarthy, "Bolivian Leader's Successes Expose Divisions" *National Public Radio: Morning Edition*, 5 February 2008.

19 Thomas Fuller, "Indian Discontent Fuels Malaysia's Rising Tensions," the *New York Times*, 10 February 2008.

20 In the twentieth century, this scenario also unraveled in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). Following independence from British rule in 1948, the previously dominant Tamil minority was democratically ousted in the 1950s by a newly independent Sinhalese majority. Civil war followed in the 1970s and continues to this day.

21 Joel D. Barkan, "Kenya's Great Rift," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (2008), Internet, http://www.for-eignaffairs.org/20080109faupdate87176/joel-d-barkan/kenya-s-great-rift.html.

22 Barbara Harff, "No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder Since 1955," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 57-73, 66. Weirdly, Harff's argument appeared in the same issue of the *American Political Science Review* as the Fearon and Laitin article that dismissed a link between a state's ethnic composition and civil war.

23 Jerry Z. Muller, "Us and Them: The Enduring Power of Ethnic Nationalism," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 2 (2008): 18-35.

24 Gerardo L. Munck and Richard Snyder, *Passion, craft, and method in comparative politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 511.

25 Don Van Natta Jr., "Bush Was Set on Path to War, British Memo Says," the *New York Times*, 27 March 2006.

26 Reuters, "U.S. Hopes to Add More Than 1,000 Diplomats," 4 February 2008.