

WHAT IS ETHNIC IDENTITY AND DOES IT MATTER?

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■ **Abstract** Since the publication of Horowitz's *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, comparative political scientists have increasingly converged on their classification of ethnic identities. But there is no agreement on the definition that justifies this classification—and the definitions that individual scholars propose do not match their classifications. I propose a definition that captures the conventional classification of ethnic identities in comparative political science to a greater degree than the alternatives. According to this definition, ethnic identities are a subset of identity categories in which membership is determined by attributes associated with, or believed to be associated with, descent (described here simply as descent-based attributes). I argue, on the basis of this definition, that ethnicity either does not matter or has not been shown to matter in explaining most outcomes to which it has been causally linked by comparative political scientists. These outcomes include violence, democratic stability, and patronage.

INTRODUCTION

What is ethnic identity? Since the publication of Horowitz's (1985) *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, there has been a convergence among comparative political scientists on which identities we classify as ethnic. For Horowitz, ethnicity is an umbrella concept that "easily embraces groups differentiated by color, language, and religion; it covers 'tribes,' 'races,' 'nationalities,' and castes" (Horowitz 1985, p. 53). Much of the recent theoretical literature on ethnic politics explicitly follows this umbrella classification (e.g., Varshney 2002, Chandra 2004, Htun 2004, Wilkinson 2004, Posner 2005). Even more importantly, the four principal datasets on ethnic groups that constitute the foundation for cross-national empirical studies of the effect of ethnic identity in comparative politics—the Atlas Narodov Mira (Bruk & Apenchenko 1964), Alesina et al.'s (2003) dataset on ethnic groups in 190 countries, a comparable count of ethnic groups in 160 countries (Fearon 2003), and the Minorities at Risk project (<http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/mar/>)—also generally employ this umbrella classification. Only some quibbles remain on the margin about whether castes should be excluded (e.g., Fearon 2003) or retained (e.g., Bruk & Apenchenko 1964, Varshney 2002, Chandra 2004, Htun

2004, Wilkinson 2004, Posner 2005) and whether region and clan should be included.

But we do not have a definition of ethnic identity that matches this classification. Many comparative political scientists do not define the term before using it, and those who do often classify an identity as ethnic even when it does not correspond to their own definitions. Horowitz (1985), for instance, counts Hindus and Muslims in India, Christians and Muslims in Lebanon, and Creoles and Indians in Guyana and Trinidad as ethnic categories, even though these groups do not possess his primary defining characteristic, namely a myth of common ancestry. Fearon (2003) counts Hindi-speakers as an ethnic group, even though individuals who either speak Hindi or have Hindi as their mother tongue do not meet his definitional criterion of having a distinct history as a group or a shared culture valued by the majority of members. And Chandra (2004, 2005) often counts categories based on region as ethnic, even though it is not clear whether these groups meet her definition of ethnic groups as “ascriptive” groups.

Why is a definition necessary if comparative political scientists are approaching a consensus on classification? Because a definition tells us how to evaluate and build theories about ethnic identity—and concepts based on ethnic identity, such as ethnic diversity, ethnic riots, ethnic parties, ethnic voting, and so on—as an independent variable. A large body of work in comparative political science argues that ethnicity matters—for violence, democratic stability, institutional design, economic growth, individual well-being, and so on—and makes general, cross-country predictions about its effects (e.g., Dahl 1971; Rabushka & Shepsle 1972; Geertz 1973; Bates 1974; Horowitz 1985; Posner 1993; Landa 1994; Kaufmann 1996; Cox 1997; Fearon 1999; Przeworski et al. 2000; F. Caselli & W.J. Coleman, unpublished manuscript; Reilly 2001; Petersen 2002; Chua 2003; Toft 2003). Claims as to why these variables matter for some outcome are always based on the assumption that ethnic identities have particular properties that explain the outcome. If we are to assess these claims and build new ones, we need some basis on which to judge which properties can reasonably be associated with ethnic identities. A definition provides an analytical basis for making this judgment.

This article proposes a definition of the term ethnic identity that captures the conventional classification to a greater degree than previous definitions. According to this definition, ethnic identities are a subset of identity categories in which eligibility for membership is determined by attributes associated with, or believed to be associated with, descent (described here simply as descent-based attributes). Most previous definitions also emphasize the importance of descent. This definition differs from previous ones in two ways. First, it introduces a distinction between categories of membership and the attributes that qualify individuals for membership in that category. These two concepts have been conflated in previous work, but making a consistent distinction between them has large consequences for how we think about ethnic identity. Second, it empties the definition of characteristics such as a common culture, common history, common territory, and common language, which are only sometimes associated with the identities that we think of as ethnic and thus cannot be thought of as defining characteristics.

My approach to building this definition is to identify the principles underlying the classification of the term ethnic identity within the specialized community of comparative political scientists—not to define ethnicity objectively nor to capture broader social scientific usage or everyday usage. The virtue of this approach lies in the opportunities it provides for cumulation of research on ethnic identity as an independent variable. In order to theorize about the effect of ethnic identity in a cumulative fashion, we must evaluate the previous body of work in comparative political science that argues that ethnicity matters, retain the insights that survive an evaluation, and discard those that do not. To evaluate whether and how ethnicity matters in the way these works propose, we need a definition that identifies the properties of ethnic identities, as classified by this body of work. It would be an added advantage if this definition also captured the way in which the term is understood among other communities, but that is not my main concern.

I show here that many of the properties commonly associated with ethnic identities in our explanatory theories do not characterize the identities that we classify as ethnic in general, although they may apply to particular subsets of these identities. These properties include common ancestry, common myth of ancestry, common language, common culture, and common homeland. On the basis of the definition proposed here, I also identify two properties that are indeed intrinsic to ethnic identities, on average: constrained change and visibility. By “constrained change,” I mean that although an individual’s ethnic identities do change in the short term, the pattern of change and the mechanisms driving it are constrained by an underlying set of attributes. By “visibility,” I mean that some information about an individual’s ethnic identity categories—and the categories to which she does not belong—can be obtained through superficial observation. But these two properties are not uniquely associated with ethnic identities; they characterize all identity categories in which membership is determined by descent-based attributes. And they are only associated with descent-based identity categories on average. Particular descent-based identities may resemble particular non-descent-based identities in particular contexts.

This forces us to conclude that ethnic identity—and concepts related to ethnic identity such as ethnic diversity, ethnic riots, ethnic parties, ethnic violence, ethnic conflict, and so on—either does not matter or has not been shown to matter as an independent variable by most previous theoretical work on ethnic identity. Only a small subset of previous claims about why and how ethnic identity matters rely on properties that have been shown to be intrinsic to ethnic identities. In most instances, the mechanisms driving our explanatory theories about the effect of ethnic identity assume properties such as fixedness of identity, cultural homogeneity, and a shared history, which are not associated with ethnic identities even as classified by this body of work. The outcome our theories seek to explain, then, must be caused by some other variables that act independently or interact with ethnic identity. Thus, these theories must either be reformulated by taking into account one or more omitted variables, or reinterpreted as theories that are not about the effect of ethnic identities at all.

Note that defining the concept of ethnic identity in a way that accords with the conventional classification in comparative political science is an enterprise distinct from defending or perpetuating the use of the concept in our explanatory theories. Rather, it provides a basis on which to question the claims of previous theories and the continued use of the concept. But if we discard the claims of previous theories or discontinue the use of the concept, we must know just what we are rejecting and why—and what should replace it. A definition of ethnic identity, therefore, is necessary not only to defend the use of the concept but also to justify discarding it.

The section below elaborates on the definition proposed here. Next, I situate this definition in the lineage of past definitions, eliminating some of the properties routinely associated with ethnic identity. The third section identifies two of the properties that can indeed be taken to be intrinsic to ethnic identity: constrained change and visibility. The final section uses the discussion of the properties that can and cannot be associated with ethnic identity to evaluate theories about how ethnicity matters.

DEFINITION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

By “identity,” I mean any social category in which an individual is eligible to be a member. Ethnic identity categories, I propose, are a subset of identity categories in which eligibility for membership is determined by descent-based attributes.

By attributes that “determine” eligibility for membership, I mean either those that qualify an individual for membership in a category or those that signal such membership. By “descent-based attributes,” I mean attributes associated with, or believed to be associated with, descent. Attributes “associated with descent” include those acquired genetically (e.g., skin color, gender, hair type, eye color, height, and physical features), through cultural and historical inheritance (e.g., name, language, place of birth, and origin of one’s parents and ancestors), or in the course of one’s lifetime as markers of such an inheritance (e.g., last name or tribal markings). Attributes “believed to be associated with descent” are attributes around which a credible myth of association with descent has been woven, whether or not such an association exists in fact. The definition thus includes both a subjective and an objective element.

The set of identity categories in which membership is determined by descent-based attributes is large. Ethnic identity categories are a subset of this larger set, defined by the following restrictions: (a) They are impersonal—that is, they are an “imagined community” in which members are not part of an immediate family or kin group; (b) they constitute a section of a country’s population rather than the whole; (c) if one sibling is eligible for membership in a category at any given place, then all other siblings would also be eligible in that place; and (d) the qualifying attributes for membership are restricted to one’s own genetically transmitted features or to the language, religion, place of origin, tribe, region, caste, clan, nationality, or race of one’s parents and ancestors.

If some of the restrictions that constitute the subset of ethnic identities appear somewhat arbitrary, they are. Why impose a rule that requires siblings to be equally eligible for membership before a category can be called ethnic? Why allow this particular set of descent-based attributes and not others? I do not offer analytical justifications for these restrictions here. Indeed, I argue that there is so far no good reason to wall off ethnic identities from other types of descent-based identities. My purpose here is simply to identify those restrictions that must be imposed in order to approximate the conventional classification of ethnic identities. Having identified these features, we are in a position also to recognize their arbitrariness and discard them where necessary.

Let me illustrate this definition using the fictionalized example of Helen, imagined from a *mélange* of characters in Waters' (1999) study of West Indian immigrants in New York City. Born in the English-speaking island of Trinidad to parents of African origin, Helen has dark skin, dark brown eyes, and straight hair. She moved to the United States after obtaining her high school diploma in Trinidad and works as a food service employee, earning \$25,000 a year. She belongs to and votes for the Democratic Party. Helen married a Haitian man in New York and learned to speak French, which is now her primary language of communication with her children and husband. Her brother Derek, who has lighter skin, light brown eyes, and otherwise similar features, remained behind in Trinidad. Their parents are well-educated professionals who belong to the People's National Movement in Trinidad. They are Presbyterians, but Helen herself converted to Catholicism after meeting her husband.

According to the definition above, Helen's ethnic identity categories include "Black" (in which the qualifying attribute, according to current norms, is descent from African parents, signaled by attributes such as the color of her skin and physical features) and West Indian (in which the qualifying attribute is descent from parents who lived in Trinidad, signaled by her accent, among other attributes). Both these categories are determined by attributes associated, or believed to be associated, with descent, and both sets of attributes place Helen and Derek in the same categories. Helen's ethnic identity categories also include African-American (in which membership is determined by the attributes of descent from African parents, skin color, and physical features, in the United States). Derek, because he stayed behind in Trinidad, cannot call himself African-American, but if he moved to the United States, he would be eligible for membership in this category, just like his sibling.

Helen's ethnic identity categories according to this definition do not include several other identity categories also based on descent-based attributes, such as "descendant of People's National Movement supporters" (excluded because it is not based on physical features nor on her parents' language, religion, race, tribe, caste, nationality, or place of origin), "people with dark brown eyes" (excluded because, although it is based on her physical features, it excludes her sibling Derek), and "female" (also excluded because it excludes Derek).

Helen's ethnic identity categories also do not include Catholic (determined not by descent nor by a myth of descent, but by conversion, openly acknowledged,

during her lifetime), French speaker (determined by acquisition of a language that was not her ancestral language), working class (determined by attributes acquired during her lifetime, such as her high school diploma and her job as a food service worker), and Democrat (determined by her joining the Democratic party during her lifetime).

This definition captures most, but not all, of the categories listed by comparative political scientists include in the list of ethnic categories. For instance, although that list includes all categories based on language, this definition distinguishes between categories in which the attribute for membership is an ancestral language (or a language presented as an ancestral language), which it considers ethnic categories, and categories in which the attribute for membership is a language acquired during a lifetime, which are not considered ethnic categories. It also provides a decision rule for whether and when to classify ambiguous categories, such as those based on clan and region, as ethnic categories. A regional category is an ethnic category according to this definition only if the membership rule takes into consideration the region of origin of an individual's parents and ancestors, rather than the region in which an individual currently resides. And an identity category based on clan membership is an ethnic category according to this definition only if it constitutes an imagined community of individuals not connected to each other by direct ties of kinship, and if the clan membership in question is that of one's parents and ancestors.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER DEFINITIONS

The most widely used definitions of ethnic identity proposed in previous literature include the following:

1. According to Max Weber, "ethnic groups are those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization or migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists" (quoted in Hutchinson & Smith 1996, p. 35).
2. According to Horowitz (1985, p. 52), "[e]thnicity is based on a myth of collective ancestry, which usually carries with it traits believed to be innate. Some notion of ascription, however diluted, and affinity deriving from it are inseparable from the concept of ethnicity."
3. According to Fearon & Laitin (2000, p. 20), an ethnic group is "a group larger than a family for which membership is reckoned primarily by descent, is conceptually autonomous, and has a conventionally recognized 'natural history' as a group."
4. In a subsequent refinement, Fearon (2003, p. 7) defines a "prototypical" ethnic group as one that has several of the following features: (a) Membership

is reckoned primarily by descent; (b) members are conscious of group membership; (c) members share distinguishing cultural features; (d) these cultural features are valued by a majority of members; (e) the group has or remembers a homeland; and (f) the group has a shared history as a group that is “not wholly manufactured but has some basis in fact.”

5. According to Smith, an ethnic group is “a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of a common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity” (Hutchinson & Smith 1996, p. 6).

Virtually all definitions in this inventory agree that descent is somehow important in defining an ethnic group. The differences are over how to specify the role of descent, and whether and how other features should be combined with it in defining ethnic groups. The role of descent is specified in four different ways: (a) a common ancestry, (b) a myth of common ancestry, (c) a myth of a common place of origin, and (d) a descent rule for membership. The features combined with descent include a common culture or language, a common history, and conceptual autonomy.

Below, I consider whether any of these characteristics, taken separately, can adequately define ethnic identity, and then I evaluate definitions based on combinations of these characteristics. Taking examples of sets of categories commonly classified as ethnic by comparative political scientists, I ask three questions of any single defining characteristic: (a) Does the rule for inclusion in any single category within a set require individuals to have this characteristic in common? (b) Does the rule for inclusion in different ethnic categories within a comparable set require individuals to have different values on this characteristic? (c) Do the sets of categories that comparative political scientists classify as ethnic uniquely possess these characteristics? An ideal definition should fulfill all three conditions, but the first two are most consequential for the purpose of this project. A definition that covers most of the categories we call ethnic allows us to evaluate claims about how ethnic identity matters, even if it includes some extra categories, since it describes, at a minimum, the entire sample from which the inferences are drawn. A definition that excludes categories we routinely classify as ethnic makes us less able to evaluate these claims because it describes a truncated sample.

Common Ancestry

A definition of common ancestry must stipulate the nearness of the connection required to call a group an ethnic group. Does common ancestry mean a shared ancestor one branch ago, a hundred branches ago, or a million branches ago? Without such a stipulation, we can find a point of intersection in the family trees of any two individuals by going back far enough, thus eliminating group differentiation altogether (Cavalli-Sforza 2000). Let us stipulate that “common ancestry” means individuals in the same ethnic group share a more proximate ancestor than

individuals in different ethnic groups. This minimally reasonable stipulation excludes many of the categories classified as ethnic.

Consider, for example, the categories black and white. As a set of categories based on race, they fit the conventional classification in comparative politics, and they are explicitly counted as ethnic by at least Fearon (2003), Alesina et al. (2003), and the Minorities at Risk dataset (which uses the term African-American rather than black). However, many white Americans from former slave-owning families share proximate ancestors with black Americans. Consider the example of E.C. Hart, classified as a Louisiana white, who had several children with Cornelia, a woman of color (Dominguez 1986, pp. 26–27). Hart's children with a white wife would have shared common ancestry at the most proximate level (the same father) as his children with Cornelia. But the two sets of children were not classified in Louisiana as members of the same group. Hart's children with Cornelia were then classified as colored and would now be classified as black, whereas his children with a white wife would then and now have been classified as white. Thus, in classifying these categories as ethnic, comparative political scientists appear to follow a rule that does not rely on common ancestry.

At the same time, individuals with far more distant ties of ancestry—such as Irish-Americans and Lithuanian-Americans, or Jamaican and Nigerian immigrants—are classified as members of the same ethnic categories. And in the case of other categories, such as Hindus and Muslims in India, Punjabis and Sindhis in Pakistan, or Flemish and Walloon in Belgium, the question of common ancestry does not even arise. A common ancestry, thus, cannot be a defining feature of an ethnic group. Indeed, individuals often belong to different ethnic groups despite the objective fact of common ancestry.

A Myth of Common Ancestry

Many ethnic groups have a *myth* of common ancestry, especially among tribes in Africa. For example, Yorubas in Yorubaland trace their descent to the mythical ancestor Oduduwa, and Yorubas in different “ancestral cities” trace their descent even more specifically to particular sons of Oduduwa (Laitin 1986, p. 110). Zulus in South Africa claim direct descent from the patriarch Zulu, who was born to a Nguni chief in the Congo Basin area. Kikuyus in Kenya claim descent from the single ancestor Gikuyu. Indeed, the great influence that scholars who study Africa have had on the study of ethnicity may be one reason why a myth of ancestry is so often proposed as a defining characteristic of ethnic groups.

However, this criterion excludes a significant number of groups that we also classify as ethnic, both in Africa and in other regions, which do not claim an ancestor in common and do not differentiate themselves from others in a comparable set on the basis of myths of ancestry. This is the case with blacks and whites in the United States; Punjabis, Sindhis, and Pathans in Pakistan; Hindus and Muslims in India; Serbs and Croats in the former Yugoslavia; and blacks, whites, coloreds, and Indians in South Africa, among others. None of these groups claims an ancestor in common (whether or not such an ancestor exists in fact) or differentiates itself from the others on the basis of ancestry myths.

The irrelevance of a myth of common ancestry to membership rules in groups that we commonly consider ethnic is especially clear when we consider the process by which new ethnic groups form as a result of fissures from old ones. Consider one example of this process of fission:

The anticolonial struggle produced the ethnic category of Pakistani. An early fissure in this category (itself a product of a fissure from the larger category Indian), the split between Bengali Muslims and others, resulted in the creation of the separate state of Bangladesh for Bengali Muslims. Other new ethnic groups to emerge within Pakistan included Punjabis, Sindhis, Pathans, and Baluchs. Myths of common ancestry were not part of the process by which political entrepreneurs and masses within these groups distinguished themselves from each other. Yet comparative political scientists routinely categorize these groups as ethnic (e.g., Horowitz 1985, p. 281; Alesina et al. 2003; Fearon 2003).

Perhaps what is important is not a myth of common ancestry but a myth of common origin, with which ancestry is often conflated. In the case of blacks and whites, although neither group is defined or distinguished by a common ancestor, each is associated with a distinct point of origin: blacks with Africa and whites mainly with Eurasia. Similarly, although Serbs and Croats are not distinguished by common ancestry, they can be associated with distinct territories in central and southern Europe. And in the example of Pakistani group fission, each fissure is associated with a distinct territory. I will turn to this point shortly.

But first, let us relate the critique so far to the definition that I propose in this article. To argue that the fact or myth of common ancestry does not capture the classification of ethnic groups used by comparative political scientists does not imply that ancestry, real or imagined, is not important—quite the opposite. According to the definition proposed here, ancestry, or a myth of ancestry, is critical to the definition of an ethnic group; however, common ancestry or a myth of common ancestry is not. For instance, the membership rule for classification of individuals as black or white in the United States separates individuals who have, or are believed to have, some African blood from individuals who do not have, or are not believed to have, a drop of African blood (Nobles 2000). This membership rule renders the categories black and white ethnic categories because it requires the possession of attributes based on ancestry (the proportion of African blood) even though it does not require common ancestry. By the same logic, the category Mohajir in Pakistan would be classified as ethnic because the qualifying attribute is descent, or fabricated descent, from parents who immigrated from northern India. The fact of common ancestry, even if it were verifiable, is irrelevant to this membership rule.

A Common Region of Origin, or Myth of a Common Region of Origin

Suppose, instead of common ancestry, we define an ethnic group as a collection of individuals with a common region of origin, or a myth of common origin. We can certainly identify a subset of ethnic groups associated with a common region of

origin. However, the perception of a common homeland presupposes the existence of a group; it does not define it. Given a group with this perception, we can reason backward, proposing that definition of a "region" and choosing the time span that allows us to discover a common region of origin. But we cannot, from the point of origin, predict ethnic group boundaries.

To illustrate this rule, we return to the case of blacks and whites in the United States. Blacks in the United States may be associated with a common origin in Africa and whites with a common origin in Eurasia, but these associations depend on (a) the definition of "region" that we employ and (b) the time period we choose as a starting point. Some definitions of region and choices of time period would reveal distinct homelands for both groups, whereas others would reveal a shared one.

If we categorize Africa and Eurasia as distinct regions, then we can associate blacks and whites with distinct regions of origin and thus define them as distinct ethnic groups. But there is no analytical reason to think of Africa and Eurasia as distinct regions instead of disaggregating further within both "regions." If we thought of regions in Africa, including present-day Liberia, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin, and Cameroon, as distinct, then we should find not one but several ethnic groups corresponding to origin in these regions. Similarly, if regions in Eurasia, including France, Ireland, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, and Italy, were considered distinct, then we would expect to find several ethnic groups originating in Eurasia. The identification of Africa and Eurasia as regions of origin requires us first to define blacks and whites by some criteria other than region and then employ a definition of "region of origin" that includes members of these predefined groups and excludes nonmembers.

Furthermore, even if Africa and Eurasia are considered distinct regions, arguing that blacks and whites originate in these two regions makes sense only when the argument is based on a particular time period. We can identify a distinct point of origin for blacks, for instance, if we start with the beginning of the slave trade in the sixteenth century. But if we continued back in time, we would reach a point at which both blacks and whites originated in present-day Africa (Cavalli-Sforza 2000). And if we started at a more recent point in time, we could just as easily say that both groups share a common homeland, the United States.

Thus, the argument that ethnic groups are defined by association with a common homeland holds up only when we (a) take the groups in question as given and (b) trace them back to exactly the point at which their ancestors lived in separate geographical regions.

Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims in the former Yugoslavia, for instance, are now associated with distinct homelands in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia, respectively. But by simply looking back to the ninth century, we might have thought of all three groups as possessing a common homeland in the South Slav regions, and so perceived one, not three, ethnic groups. Punjabis, Sindhis, Pathans, and Baluchs can also be seen equally reasonably as belonging to distinct territories or as belonging to the same one. Similarly, Sinhalas and Tamils in Sri Lanka have distinct

homelands only if we define northern Sri Lanka and the rest of Sri Lanka as two distinct regions—or if, going even further back, we define present-day Tamil Nadu as a distinct region and trace the migration of Tamils from there to Sri Lanka. But why should we define the region in this way? Why not think of all of Sri Lanka, or the northern tip of Sri Lanka and the southern tip of India, as a single region, and thus think of both the Sinhalese and Tamils as having a common homeland? Just as the definition of group comes before the definition of a distinct region of origin, a fact or myth of a common region of origin cannot be a defining characteristic of ethnic groups.

Furthermore, there are many sets of ethnic groups, defined often by religion and race, in which the distinctions between categories in the same set do not depend on the fact or myth of a distinct homeland. Examples include Hindus and Muslims in India; Christians and Muslims in Nigeria; Blanco, Pardo, and Preto in Brazil, and so on.

The Descent Rule

The descent rule, identified by Fearon & Laitin, is the most recent attempt to clarify the role of descent in the definition of an ethnic group. As they point out, “[i]n deciding a person’s ethnicity, we do not need to know anything about his or her cultural habits, mother tongue, religion or beliefs of any sort. Rather, we simply need to know about parentage. In ordinary usage, to ask ‘What is her ethnicity?’ is to ask about what ethnic group her parents (or other close ancestors) were assigned to All that is necessary to be counted as a member of an ethnic group is to be able to have accepted the claim to be immediately descended from other members of the group” (Fearon & Laitin 2000, p. 13).

There is an important ambiguity in this definition. Should we define a group as ethnic if the criterion for membership is that the parents of all members were coded as members of the same group *whether or not that group was also considered ethnic* (hereafter referred to as Descent Rule 1)? Or should we define a group as ethnic if the criterion for membership is that the parents of all members were also coded as members of the same group *and that group was also considered ethnic* (hereafter referred to as Descent Rule 2)?

The difference between the two versions is illustrated by the example of American Jews. According to Fearon & Laitin (2000, p. 14), “many Americans who cannot perform a Jewish ritual and don’t speak Hebrew still consider themselves and are considered by others as ethnically Jewish because that is the way their parents and grandparents were coded.” For the analyst to code American Jews as an ethnic group, is it sufficient that the criterion for membership in the category American Jew is simply that one’s parents were coded as Jewish, whether or not Jews were considered an ethnic group in the lifetime of one’s parents (Descent Rule 1)? Or must the criterion for membership in the category American Jew be that one’s parents were also coded as ethnically Jewish, requiring one’s grandparents to also be coded as ethnically Jewish, which in turn would require one’s

great-grandparents to be coded as ethnically Jewish, and so on into infinity (Descent Rule 2)?

Descent Rule 1 covers a larger set of cases that we commonly understand to be ethnic than the rules in which ethnic groups must have a myth of common ancestry or common origin. However, it excludes several cases in which individuals routinely consider themselves, and are considered by others, members of a group that we classify as ethnic even when their parents were not coded as members of this group.

When the category Yoruba was invented in Nigeria in the nineteenth century, the parents of those who were classified as Yoruba were not themselves classified as Yoruba because this category did not exist during their lifetimes. According to Descent Rule 1, then, the category Yoruba in the nineteenth century would not be coded as ethnic. But the category Yoruba is coded as an ethnic category by all comparative political scientists, without a distinction between time periods.

Another example is the category of Other Backward Caste (OBC) in India, whose members possess a particular set of last names and/or ancestral occupations. The category was introduced by the Indian Central Government in 1990. Within a few years, 52% of the Indian population classified itself and was classified as Backward. Yet the parents of those who termed themselves Backward Caste were not coded that way by themselves or by others because this category did not exist during their lifetimes. A straightforward application of Descent Rule 1 would lead us to code the first generation of Backward Castes as a nonethnic group to the extent that membership in the category of Backward Caste did not depend on one's parents also being classified as Backward Caste.

A third example is the identity category Mohajir, routinely classified as an ethnic group in our datasets (Alesina et al. 2003, Fearon 2003). As noted above, this category refers to those who migrated to Pakistan from northern India and their descendants. The parents of many of those classified as Mohajir were not classified as Mohajir themselves. Applying Descent Rule 1 would lead us to code the first generation of Mohajirs as a nonethnic group to the extent that membership in this category did not depend on being able to code one's parents as Mohajirs.

A fourth example is the case of the Creoles in Louisiana (Dominguez 1986). Individuals were initially classified as Creole in Louisiana if they were born in colonial Louisiana and descended from French and/or Spanish parents. The parents were in many cases not classified as Creole. Again, Descent Rule 1 would lead us to code Creoles as a nonethnic group because one could be Creole even if one's parents were not coded as Creole.

Finally, consider the case of categories such as colored. Individuals were classified as colored in the United States not only when their parents were also classified as colored, but also when one parent was classified as white and another black. (Dominguez 1986, Nobles 2000). An application of Descent Rule 1 would treat "colored" as a nonethnic category. In a partial attempt to address such cases, Fearon & Laitin (2000, p. 13) note that "in the case of mixed marriages, arbitrary (and political) conventions that may vary from place to place are employed." But

although arbitrary conventions may determine which group the children of mixed marriages should be assigned to—black, white, colored, mulatto, quadroon, mestizo, multiracial, and so on—the conventional classification of all such groups, at least within political science, is that they are ethnic. A definition of the term ethnic, therefore, should include such cases.

The discussion above suggests that although Descent Rule 1 covers many categories classified as ethnic, it needs to be modified to take these additional cases into account. The definition proposed in this article is one such modification. According to this definition, Yorubas, Mohajirs, OBCs, Creoles, and coloreds are all ethnic categories because membership in each depends on the possession of descent-based attributes that refer to language, religion, tribe, race, caste, nationality, region, or physical features—descent from parents who belonged to a set of ancestral cities in the case of Yorubas, descent from parents who were born in northern India in the case of the Mohajirs, descent from parents who belonged to a set of caste categories in the case of the OBCs, descent from parents who were born in Europe in the case of Creoles, and descent from parents and ancestors who included both whites and blacks in the case of coloreds. This definition does not require that children share the same descent-based categories as their parents, only that the attributes that qualify them for membership in ethnic categories are acquired through descent.

Descent Rule 2 is circular. For a present-day individual to be classified in the ethnic category of American Jew, every preceding generation of his ancestors must also have been descended from ethnically American Jews, who themselves should have been descended from ethnically American Jews, and so on into infinity. There is no logical way to identify an original set of ethnic American Jewish parents. We could apply Descent Rule 2 only if we arbitrarily stipulated that some set of identities was ethnic at some starting point and then coded other identities as ethnic in relation to this initial set. This arbitrary application of Descent Rule 2 would eliminate even more of the categories that are routinely classified as ethnic than Descent Rule 1 does.

A Common Culture

Suppose we define “a common culture” broadly as a shared set of symbols, values, codes, and norms (consistent with Rogowski, cited in Wedeen 2002). Broad definitions of this sort do not specify which symbols, values, codes, and norms are important for group members to share. Requiring group members to share all of them would probably disqualify almost all the groups that we count as ethnic. For example, those classified as Yorubas share some aspects of culture so defined—e.g., a common myth of origin, the worship of a common set of deities, and a common language—but there are also many aspects of culture that they do not share. Yorubas who trace their origin to different ancestral cities in Yorubaland speak different dialects of the Yoruba language, have localized festivals, and have distinct myths of origin, institutions, and rituals. Christian and Muslim Yorubas

not only have different modes of religious practice and observance but also have different sets of value orientations (Laitin 1986). The symbols, codes, and norms of those classified as black are similarly diverse. There are actual or perceived differences between Jamaican blacks and American blacks on the basis of language, work ethic, and family values (Waters 1999), between American blacks from the north and those from the south, (Lemann 1992), between middle-class and poor blacks, and between urban and rural blacks (Malcolm X 1964). Consider, finally, the category Hindu.” There are many symbols, codes, and norms that those classified as Hindu do not share or do not believe they share. Adharmis, for instance, speak different languages, have different rules for interdining and intermarriage, and practice different rituals than Satnamis. The same goes for Bengali-speaking Hindus and Malyalam-speaking Hindus, for rich and poor Hindus, for urban and rural Hindus, for Hindus who are academics and Hindus who are businessmen, and so on.

Suppose we interpret the common culture definition to mean not that individuals should share all or most of the same values, symbols, codes, and norms to qualify as members of a common culture, but that they should share more with each other than they do with non-group members. In other words, a pair of individuals from the same ethnic group should have more in common than a pair of individuals from different ethnic groups. Although it appears initially appealing, this condition is logically unsustainable in a world of cross-cutting ethnic identities.

Let’s return, first, to the case of the Yorubas. On one dimension of ethnic identity, Yorubas, Ibos, and Hausa-Fulanis are classified as distinct ethnic groups. To satisfy the above condition, a pair of Yorubas must have more in common with each other than a pair consisting of a Yoruba and an Ibo or a pair consisting of a Yoruba and a Hausa-Fulani. But on the dimension of religion, we classify the same population as Christian and Muslim, and we also think of Christian and Muslim as ethnic identity categories. If ethnic categories are defined by a common culture, any two Christians must have more in common with each other than a Christian and a Muslim. If these two dimensions cross-cut to some extent, the second claim contradicts the first. If all Yorubas have more in common with other Yorubas than with Ibos and Hausa-Fulanis, for instance, then all Christians cannot have more in common with each other than with Muslims because at least some Yoruba pairs will consist of a Christian and a Muslim. The same logic also applies to our other running examples: Hindu and Muslim, black and white. Individuals in many groups classified as ethnic have cross-cutting memberships in other ethnic groups. So, if we say that ethnic groups are defined by a common culture, as defined above, we rule out an unreasonably large number of cases.

As a third conceptualization of culture, suppose that when we say a group has a common culture, we mean simply that they inhabit the same framework of meaning—they use the same concepts and can understand each other. It does not matter whether they subscribe to an identical set of symbols, values, codes, and norms, or whether they speak the same language. This is akin to Wedeen’s

(2002) conceptualization of culture as “a semiotic practice.” Individuals who share a common culture must, to paraphrase Geertz (1973), be able to agree that a certain movement is a wink rather than a twitch, regardless of whether they wink at the same time and whether they value a wink in the same way.

Even within this very reasonable definition of culture, ethnic groups cannot be defined as cultural groups. Many ethnic groups comprise still smaller groups with specialized vocabularies that are not mutually intelligible. In New York in the 1960s, the street vocabulary of sections of Harlem was the equivalent of Sanskrit for many middle-class blacks (Malcolm X 1964, p. 317). However, all would classify themselves, and be classified by others, as members of the same ethnic category—black. Although a middle-class black may have been able to comprehend perfectly her middle-class white neighbor, this shared conceptual vocabulary would not lead her, or others, to classify these two individuals as part of the same ethnic group on that basis. Given some prior basis for defining ethnic groups, we can then probe the extent to which they share common frameworks of meaning. But if we were to define ethnic groups as groups that shared such common frameworks, we would lose many of the groups that we routinely classify as ethnic.

Consider a fourth definition: Perhaps a common culture means not that group members share all symbols, values, codes and norms, but that they share some key symbols, values, codes, and norms that distinguish them from members of other groups. This is a restatement of Barth’s (1969) claim that ethnic groups are defined by the cultural markers that differentiate the boundaries between them, not by the cultural stuff contained within these boundaries. In many of the groups that we classify as ethnic, cultural markers must be backed up by descent-based attributes, or the myth of having descent-based attributes, in order to delimit group boundaries. Sikhs in Punjab can acquire the cultural markers associated with being Hindu, for instance, by cutting their hair and ceasing to wear a turban. But if they are descended from a Sikh family, they count themselves, and are counted as, Sikhs rather than Hindus. Furthermore, cultural markers that coincide with descent-based attributes are often the product of ethnic group mobilization rather than a preexisting characteristic that defines the group itself.

Finally, suppose we define culture as language. An ethnic group, then, is simply a group that has a common language, and different ethnic groups should have different languages. A survey of a handful of examples illustrates the lack of fit between this definition and the groups often recognized as ethnic. Some ethnic groups do have a common language, which distinguishes them from other groups in the same partition of the population; examples include the Yoruba in Nigeria, Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, Zulus and Xhosas in South Africa, and French and German speakers in Switzerland. But many groups that we classify as ethnic do not have a common language. Hindus include speakers of at least 17 major languages, not to mention hundreds of dialects. Christians and Muslims in Nigeria do not all speak the same language, but we think of both as ethnic categories. And blacks and whites in the United States speak the same language but are classified as different ethnic groups.

A Common History

An ethnic group can also be defined as a group with a common history. Suppose we define “a common history” to mean simply a shared past. What does it mean to say that individuals share a past? Does it mean having lived through the same key events in the course of a lifetime? In that case, all individuals of the same age group throughout the world would share a common history in that they all lived through the same events, whether or not they were aware of them.

Suppose we try a definition that is less absurd, defining history to mean events that occurred at least one generation ago and were claimed as part of the particular experience of some group. For instance, although the potato famine may in some sense be part of the history of the world, it is particularly part of the history of the Irish living at that time, who experienced it most directly. A common history, then, means a shared connection to events that marked the lives of the generations before ours.

How would an individual know which generations of people to affiliate herself with when looking for a common history? Should someone of Irish descent born in the United States affiliate herself with generations that were born in or lived in the United States? Should she affiliate herself with generations born in Ireland? Should she affiliate herself with subsets of generations born in the United States, for instance, the ancestors of university professors, or the ancestors of black men? To identify her history, she needs a rule to tell her which group she belongs to.

A common history, then, cannot be the defining characteristic of a group, ethnic or otherwise. A common history presupposes the existence of a group on the basis of other criteria. Appiah puts it best: “Sharing a common group history cannot be a criterion for being members of the same group, for we would have to be able to identify the group in order to identify *its* history. Someone in the fourteenth century could share a common history with me in a historically extended race only if something accounts for their membership in the race in the fourteenth century and mine in the twentieth. That something cannot, on pain of circularity, be the history of the race” (Appiah 1992, p. 32).

Conceptual Autonomy

By “conceptual autonomy,” Fearon & Laitin (2000, p. 16) mean that “the existence of an ethnic category does not depend conceptually on the existence of any particular ethnic category.” However, a large body of literature demonstrates that the definition of any ethnic group presumes and depends on the existence of ethnic “others.” Indeed, membership rules exist for the sole purpose of distinguishing insiders from outsiders. The criterion of conceptual autonomy would eliminate virtually all ethnic groups from the definition.

A Combination of Characteristics

Although I have discussed each characteristic individually, most definitions of ethnic identity incorporate various secondary characteristics in addition to the primary

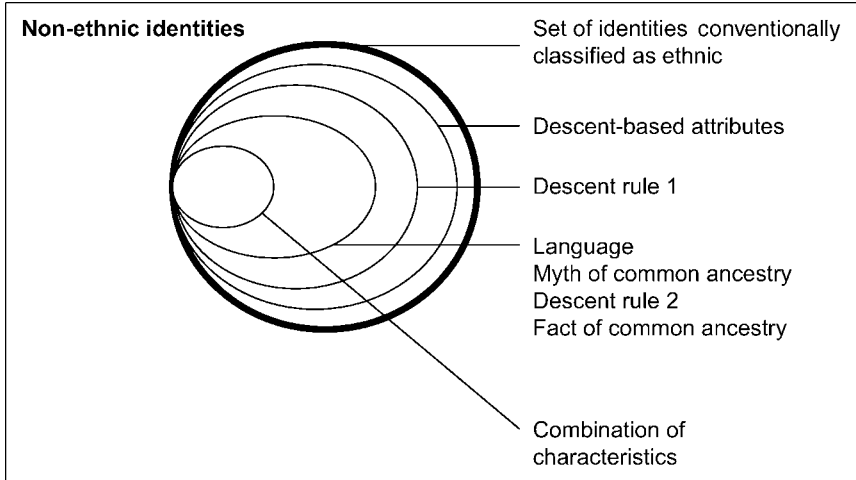


Figure 1 Subsets of the conventional classification of ethnic identities captured by different definitions.

characteristic of descent. Any definition that requires a combination of characteristics captures only a subset of most of the identities that comparative political scientists classify as ethnic. This is because, as shown above, each characteristic, taken singly, captures only a subset of these identities. Because any one of the defining characteristics discussed above captures at best a subset of the classification that we started with, any combination of characteristics will capture a still smaller subset. Figure 1 illustrates this point.

The bold circle represents the set of identities comparative political scientists conventionally classify as ethnic, that is, identities based on race, language, caste, tribe, religion, nationality, and, sometimes, region and clan. Each circle within it represents a subset captured by a particular definition. The largest subset is captured by the definition proposed in this article (labeled descent-based attributes), which eliminates only categories based on religion, or language and so on if the attributes for membership are acquired voluntarily over a lifetime rather than by descent. This is followed by Descent Rule 1, which eliminates several additional categories such as Yorubas in Nigeria in the 1900s, OBCs in India in the 1990s, Mohajirs in present-day Pakistan, the first generation of Irish-Americans in the United States, the first generation of Creoles and coloreds, and so on. These two subsets are followed, in some unspecified order, by language, a myth of common ancestry, the fact of common ancestry, and Descent Rule 2, each of which covers a smaller subset of identities. Independent subsets defined by characteristics such as a common culture, common history, common territory, and conceptual autonomy are not included because they are secondary rather than primary criteria that may be associated with a preexisting group but do not define it. The smallest subset in the diagram represents a definition based on some combination of characteristics.

If we define an ethnic group as a group in which membership is determined by Descent Rule 1 and by a distinct history, for example, we eliminate still more sets of categories, including Hindus and Muslims in India, blacks and coloreds in Louisiana (Dominguez 1986), and Christians and Muslims in Yorubaland, since categories in each set share a history with others in the same set. With every additional characteristic included in the combination, still more sets of categories would be excluded. As such, these definitions cannot be used to evaluate causal claims associated with ethnic identity in general because they would truncate the sample of categories to which the claims refer.

PROPERTIES OF ETHNIC IDENTITY CATEGORIES

I identify two intrinsic properties of descent-based attributes: stickiness and visibility. From these properties of descent-based attributes, I infer two properties of ethnic categories: constrained change and visibility.

Constrained Change

Attributes associated, or believed to be associated, with descent are, on average, difficult to change in the short term. By contrast, attributes not associated, or not believed to be associated, with descent can, on average, easily be changed even in the short term. This claim, illustrated in Figure 2, refers to the average tendency of distributions of attributes rather than any single one.

Imagine a scale of “stickiness” that orders all attributes according to the degree of difficulty associated with changing them in the short term. Descent-based attributes are distributed in the upper half of this scale, whereas others are distributed in the lower half, with an area of overlap in between. To illustrate, let us

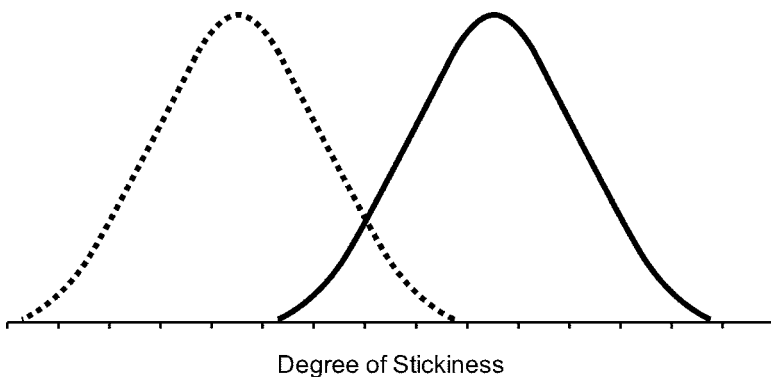


Figure 2 Degree of stickiness of descent-based (*solid*) and non-descent-based (*dotted*) attributes.

go back to Helen. One of her attributes from birth, skin color, lies at one extreme on the scale of stickiness. Skin color can, with medical help, be changed within a single generation, and there are a handful of cases where it has been (Griffin 1996, Larsen 1997). Skin color can also be changed through an adjustment in the interpretive framework within which it is viewed: If a sufficiently large number of observers adjust their frameworks, Helen's particular shade of skin color might be reinterpreted as light rather than dark. But such a change is likely to be difficult and slow.

There are degrees of difficulty. Changes in skin color and gender are likely to be the most difficult. Changes in physical features are likely to lie in the middle, in part because of the constraint of making a change in any one feature appear consistent with other features. Helen might easily change her hair type, for instance, by having it curled, or her eye color, by wearing contact lenses; but in order to make credible the myth that these new attributes were given at birth, she would also need to change her skin color and features. "Changing" the place of birth of one's parents and ancestors, last name, or ancestral religion may be the least difficult, especially in the context of relocation or migration, when new histories can more easily be invented.

Attributes not based on descent, or not believed to be based on descent, are, on average, easier to change. Helen can change her educational qualifications, for instance, simply by returning to school. She can alter her income by asking for a raise or alter both her occupation and income by getting a higher-paying job. She can effect these changes without having to erase her previous attributes. Although Helen cannot claim birth in the United States without renouncing birth in Trinidad, getting a master's degree does not require her to disguise the fact that she has a high school diploma.

Here, as well, there are degrees of difficulty. Changing one's initial endowment of economic resources, acquiring more land for instance, can in some contexts be almost as difficult as changing one's skin color. Changing one's educational credentials is often less difficult, but it requires a significant investment in time and money. And changing jobs or political parties perhaps is easier. The degree of difficulty here depends on context rather than on some intrinsic property of these attributes.

There is also an area of overlap in the degree of stickiness of individual attributes that are descent-based and non-descent-based. Some attributes that are not descent-based, such as land ownership or accent, may lie toward the high end of the scale of stickiness, whereas some descent-based attributes, such as last name or the religion of one's parents, may lie toward the low end in the sense that the myths required by these changes are easily invented. Such overlap is consistent with differences in the average tendency of both types of attributes.

It is common to assume that because the attributes that define ethnic identity categories are fixed in the short term, the categories themselves are also fixed in the short term. Individuals can change between identity categories, often quite rapidly, by combining and recombining elements from their set of attributes differently.

This point, and its implications for theories of ethnic identity as an independent variable, is developed further in a separate project (K. Chandra & C. Boulet, manuscript in progress). However, the pattern of change should be constrained by the underlying distribution of attributes. Thus, the property of constrained change can be legitimately associated with ethnic identities in the short term, whereas the property of fixedness cannot.

Consider Helen again. Helen's stickier attributes consist of her skin color, birth in Trinidad, and descent from African-American parents. Although she cannot change these attributes in the short term, she can, by selecting different attributes, change the categories in which she activates her membership. If she emphasizes the attribute of birth in the English-speaking island of Trinidad, she can activate membership in the category West Indian. If she de-emphasizes her foreign birth and highlights instead the attributes of skin color and descent, she can activate membership in the category black. Her ability to choose the categories that she activates is constrained: Although she can change to categories defined by a different selection of her sticky attributes, she cannot change to categories based on sticky attributes that she does not possess (e.g., German, if the category German is defined on the basis of birth).

Visibility

A second property of descent-based attributes is that they are, on average, more visible than attributes acquired in the course of a lifetime. Visible attributes are ones that can be ascertained through superficial data sources such as an individual's name, speech, physical features, and dress. The larger the number of sources that contain information about an attribute, the more visible it is. Invisible attributes are those that can be ascertained only by more careful observation and background research (Chandra 2004). As above, this claim refers to distributions rather than particular attributes.

Some of Helen's descent-based attributes, such as her gender, skin color, hair type, and physical features, are immediately displayed on her person. Others, such as her parents' language (English), are contained in her name. Less precise information on the religion of her parents is also available in her name, which, even though it does not allow the observer to pinpoint it precisely, supports the guess that it is not Islam or Hinduism. The way in which observers code such information is the result of social construction. Helen's shade of skin color, for instance, might be interpreted in the United States as black, but in Brazil as brown. This difference is the result of different historical and institutional contexts that have taught individuals to instinctively code the same data in different ways (see Chandra 2004). The main point is that some raw data about some of the attributes given at birth are always visible, often in multiple data sources, regardless of how the observer interprets them.

Information about attributes not associated with descent can also be visible. Perhaps the most visible of non-descent-based given attributes is age, always visible in speech and features. Education, income, and place of residence

(rural or urban) are sometimes visible in accent and appearance, but typically not in the name or features (unless they are correlated with descent). Profession or organizational membership can be visible in dress (the suits that lawyers and bankers wear, the uniforms of policemen and firemen, badges and rosettes signaling party membership, etc.), but these are not visible when an individual is off-duty, nor evident in the name or features. On average, attributes not based on birth are less visible and less frequently visible.

For instance, Helen's occupation as a food service worker is signaled during working hours by her uniform. When she is wearing her uniform, or when she is at work, her income and educational background may be inferred from her occupation. However, when she is dressed differently and/or off-duty, her non-birth-given attributes immediately become less visible. In contrast, some information about her descent-based attributes is always visible, no matter what the context of observation, in her name and features.

The overlap in the degree of visibility associated with both types of attributes is probably larger than the area of overlap associated with the stickiness of both types of attributes. Gang membership is not given at birth, but when it is proclaimed in tattoos, haircut, and other marks on the body, it can sometimes be more visible and more frequently visible than many descent-based attributes. The religion of one's parents, although given at birth, can often be less visible than one's educational qualifications or age.

The link between the visibility of descent-based attributes and properties of descent-based categories is straightforward. When attributes are visible, membership in the categories based on them will also be visible. But visibility can coexist comfortably with multiple identities and with error (Chandra 2004). The information an individual displays on her person can make several of her identity categories visible, not just a single one. And even though information on an individual's declared and potential ethnic memberships is visible, observers can often get it wrong. Two of the ethnic categories in which Helen is eligible for membership are West Indian and black, made visible by her skin color, hair, and features, but observers might well miscode her as Nigerian or Brazilian. The main point is that our ethnic categories are visible enough, on average, to permit such guesses.

The properties of constrained change and visibility apply to all descent-based identities rather than ethnic identities specifically, and they apply to all descent-based identities only on average. Because ethnic categories are only a subset of categories based on descent-based attributes, we should also see constrained change and visibility in some categories that are based on descent-based attributes but are not thought of as ethnic, e.g., gender. However, because some attributes associated with descent are either not sticky or not visible, those ethnic categories based on such attributes may not exhibit the properties of constrained change and/or visibility. Finally, because some non-descent-based attributes may also be sticky and/or visible, we may also see the properties of constrained change and visibility associated with some categories that are neither ethnic nor descent based.

The two properties identified here need not be exhaustive. There may well be others that apply precisely and uniquely to ethnic identities as identified here. One

promising direction in which to proceed in identifying other properties is to explore the fact that offspring of the same parents typically share the same set of ethnic identity options. Because individuals are more emotionally connected to siblings than nonsiblings, membership in ethnic categories may arouse greater emotional attachments, create a greater tendency to demonize ethnic others, or increase the stakes of conflict than membership in other types of categories, even those based on descent (e.g., gender). By the same logic, if individuals care more about the well-being of siblings than that of more distant associates, there may be a greater degree of within-group altruism among members of ethnic categories than among members of other types of categories.¹ This may be a critical difference between ethnic identity categories such as black and other descent-based identities such as women or non-descent-based identities such as Republicans. When identities are visible (e.g., women) and sticky (e.g., Republican in the United States), they often cut across siblings, and this may be a consequential fact. Such properties are routinely associated with ethnic groups by comparative political scientists, but without justification.² The definition proposed here provides an analytical foundation on which to infer such an association or establish its absence.

EVALUATING THEORIES ABOUT THE EFFECT OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

It is startling how few of our previous claims about the effect of ethnic identity are sustainable in light of the intrinsic properties of ethnic identity identified here. These include Caselli & Coleman's (unpublished) and Fearon's (1999) recent work on patronage and ethnic mobilization, Landa's (1994) work on trading networks, and my own work on patronage (Chandra 2004). Caselli & Coleman and Fearon argue that there should be an association between patronage politics and ethnic politics because patronage politics favors coalitions based on identities that are hard to change, and ethnic identities are hard to change. This argument is consistent with the property of constrained change identified here. Ethnic identities, I suggest, are not quite as hard to change as Caselli & Coleman and Fearon argue—it can be easy for individuals to switch between ethnic identities within the constraint of the underlying set of attributes. But to the extent that change in ethnic identities is more constrained than change in nonethnic identities, the argument is upheld. Landa (1994) argues that under conditions of uncertainty, the visibility of ethnic cues allows individuals to select trading partners and enforce

¹I was introduced to this idea by Will Le Blanc, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science at MIT.

²Indeed, it is surprising, given how important descent has been in the definitions of ethnic identity in comparative political science, how few of our explanatory theories actually explore fields such as sociobiology, which can tell us something about the properties of groups that keep offspring together. The work of Pierre Van Den Berghe is a prominent exception.

contracts. Chandra (2004) argues that given the information-constrained environment of elections in a patronage democracy, the visibility of ethnic identities makes them more likely than nonethnic identities to be activated in voter and party behavior. Although these arguments remain to be tested empirically, their reliance on properties that can be taken as intrinsic to ethnic identities at least makes them logically sustainable.

However, the arguments made even in this handful of works should be read as applying to descent-based categories in general, not ethnic identities in particular. There are constraints not only on changing identity categories based on ancestral language and physical features, but also on changing identity categories based on gender or the party membership or class of one's parents (e.g., descendants of landowners, children of Communists). And although ethnic identities are visible, on average, so are identities based on gender or age. These theories, therefore, must be read as theories about a larger class of identities than simply ethnic identities.

By far the largest number of explanatory claims about ethnicity rest on properties that I have argued above are not intrinsic to ethnic identities in general, such as fixedness, a common culture, and territorial concentration. As such, they cannot be taken as claims about the effect of ethnic identities in general. Rather than reading them to mean that ethnicity is associated with some dependent variable Y, we should read them to mean either that a particular subset of ethnic identities are associated with dependent variable Y or that ethnicity, along with some other variable X, is associated with the dependent variable Y.

Consider, first, a family of theories that link the politicization of ethnic divisions with democratic destabilization. With some variations, the reasoning underlying such arguments is as follows: Democracies are destabilized by the permanent exclusion of some minority groups from power. Ethnic divisions are fixed. Elections based on ethnic divisions, therefore, produce permanent winners and permanent losers based on ethnic demography. Consequently, the politicization of ethnic divisions threatens democratic stability (Rabushka & Shepsle 1972, Horowitz 1985, Chua 2003). The key property of ethnic identity on which this argument rests is fixedness. If ethnic identities are fluid, not fixed, then the other propositions fall through. But we know, based on the definition proposed in this article, that fixedness is not an intrinsic property of ethnic identities—constrained change is. If ethnic identities consistently acquire fixedness in a democratic context and that fixedness in turn threatens democratic stability, it must be because of some extrinsic variable, not been theorized, that interacts with ethnic identity.

A second body of work examines institutional prescriptions for multiethnic democracies. Among the most influential of these prescriptions is that democratic governments should accord ethnic minority groups collective cultural autonomy (Lijphart 1977, Kymlicka 1995). The reasoning is as follows: Cultural recognition is an important right. Ethnic minority groups have distinct cultures. Therefore, democratic governments should assign minority groups cultural rights (Kymlicka 1995). Opponents of this proposal take the position that economic rights are more important than cultural rights (Barry 2001), but all sides assume that ethnic groups possess the property of a common culture.

As argued above, no matter how we define a common culture, it is not a distinguishing principle of ethnic groups in general. Rather than thinking of culture as a constant property of ethnic groups, we should reconceptualize it as a variable associated with all types of groups to varying degrees (Wedeen 2002). In their current form, then, these institutional prescriptions cannot be taken to apply to multiethnic democracies in general. They should be read and evaluated as prescriptions for democracies in which social groups have acquired a high degree of cultural cohesiveness, whether or not such groups are ethnic.

A third family of arguments links ethnic identities with various forms of violence. According to one such argument, one cause of civil war between ethnic groups is the "security dilemma" introduced by the collapse of the state (Posen 1993). The collapse of the state governing a multiethnic society is said to create an environment analogous to anarchy in the international environment, with ethnic groups analogous to states. In an anarchic environment, ethnic groups, like states, arm themselves out of fear for their own security. This makes other groups, like states, more fearful and gives them an incentive to arm themselves also. The result is an increased threat of war, reducing everyone's security in the long run. War is especially likely when the groups in question have a history of rivalry, which gives each more reason to assume the worst of the other.

This argument assumes that ethnic identity categories, like states, are fixed entities. If individuals could change their ethnic identities, then one response to the collapse of the state would be to switch to less threatening identities rather than go to war. The argument also implies that ethnic groups are more likely than other types of groups to have a common history. Otherwise, the security dilemma should be an explanation for intergroup conflict in the wake of state collapse in general, rather than ethnic conflict in particular. However, neither fixity nor a common history are intrinsic properties of ethnic identities. Ethnic identities can change even in the short term as individuals combine and recombine elements from their fixed set of attributes differently. Furthermore, a common history does not distinguish ethnic groups but is a product of some process by which ethnic groups are mobilized. This argument, thus, cannot be read as an argument about the effect of ethnic identities per se. The effect of ethnic identities here is contingent on some extrinsic variable that produces fixity in ethnic identities and a perception of a common history. This omitted variable should be included in the analysis.

According to a fourth argument in this family, ethnic violence is motivated by emotions such as fear, hatred, or resentment (Petersen 2002). The initial trigger for such violence, lies in the collapse of the state, but given this trigger, the target of violence will depend on the specific emotional response aroused among ethnic groups. Groups motivated by fear will choose as their target those ethnic others who are the greatest threat. Groups motivated by resentment will choose as their target those ethnic others who are farthest up the status hierarchy whether, or not they are the greatest threat. Groups motivated by hatred will target those ethnic others with whom they have battled in the past, regardless of their threat potential and their position on the status hierarchy.

If this argument is to be read, as it is intended, as an argument about ethnic violence rather than violence in general, then ethnic groups must experience different or stronger emotional reactions in the wake of state collapse than other types of groups. Neither the definition of an ethnic group that I have proposed here, nor the alternative definitions, justifies this assumption. This does not mean that this argument is wrong, but it does mean that it is incomplete. In order to sustain the argument, we would have to demonstrate that individuals have distinct emotional associations with their ethnic identities that they do not have with other types of identities.

A fifth argument in this family theorizes that intragroup policing can prevent interethnic violence. One assumption underlying this argument is that ethnic groups are distinguished by the property of dense network ties, which make within-group cooperation easier than across-group cooperation. As Fearon & Laitin (1996, p. 730) put it, "Why are interethnic relations frequently characterized by a tension that is relatively absent in intraethnic relations, giving interethnic relations, even when peaceful, an ominous quality? Because social networks are better developed and interactions more frequent within ethnic groups, individuals have easier access to information about their coethnics than they do about ethnic others." But we cannot infer this property from the definition proposed in this article and the classification of the ethnic categories that it justifies. In order to accept this argument, we would have to either demonstrate that such ties are indeed intrinsic to the groups we classify as ethnic, or identify some omitted variable that creates social networks within and not across ethnic groups.

A sixth argument explains the association between modernization and ethnic politics by invoking the property of territorial concentration (Bates 1974). The reasoning is as follows: The goods of modernity are distributed on a spatial basis. Individuals desiring access to these goods, therefore, organize on a spatial basis. According to Bates (1974, p. 464), "there is no denying that the members of an ethnic group tend to cluster in space." The struggle for access to goods, therefore, is organized on an ethnic basis.

The argument is informed by the study of ethnic politics in Africa, and it certainly appears to be the case that several ethnic categories in Africa are territorially concentrated. However, neither territorial concentration nor the memory of a common territorial homeland can be taken as an intrinsic property of ethnic categories in general. And we can certainly imagine nonethnic categories that are territorially concentrated. This argument, thus, should be read, not as a general argument about ethnic identities, but as an argument about territorially concentrated identities, a concept that overlaps imperfectly with a subset of ethnic identities.

CONCLUSION

This is only a quick survey of a few influential examples of the body of work that theorizes about the effect of ethnic identities or concepts related to ethnic identities. A more extensive and more detailed discussion of several such arguments can be

found elsewhere (Chandra 2001a,b, 2005). The broad point I wish to make here is not that these arguments are wrong, but that we do not so far have reason to believe they are right. These families of theories have not demonstrated on analytical grounds that ethnic identity categories, as they classify them, should have an explanatory effect on the outcomes of interest. For these theories to be sustainable, we must show at a minimum that the properties they take to be intrinsic to ethnic identity can actually be inferred from the definition of ethnic identity proposed here, or a better one.

Ultimately, if we cannot identify any further properties that are unique to ethnic identity, we would be better off substituting the concept of ethnic identity in our theories with concepts such as descent-based identities or identities based on sticky or visible attributes. If we do, does this mean that this attempt at definition was wasted? Not at all. The negative claim, that ethnicity does not matter, is a discovery of great magnitude. It should have far-reaching consequences for research and data collection, suggesting that we should abandon the large number of theories and datasets on ethnicity and start again on an entirely different foundation. A claim of this magnitude cannot be made lightly. It must be justified perhaps even more strongly than the claim that ethnicity matters. And, just as we need to define the concept of ethnic identity to establish that it matters, we also need a definition in order to establish that it does not matter.

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