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

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Abstract

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

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

Introduction

Ethnicity is a notoriously slippery concept. The phenomenon it describes, in contrast, may be stark and intense. This paper begins with two theoretical strategies of approach to the ethnic phenomenon. One emphasizes the intensity of solidarity within ethnic communities and their resistance to change, and explains these phenomena in terms of the deep feeling evoked by the ethnic bond. The other emphasizes the contingency, situatedness, variability, even superficiality of ethnic feeling, and focuses on the emergent and unstable linkages formed from the interplay of ethnic categories and ethnic entrepreneurs within a given institutional and legal context. In this article we argue that the first strategy offers an explanation of the intensity and persistence of ethnic feeling based, however, on a characterization of the phenomenon which is methodologically and

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1 Acknowledgements
2 For the purposes of this paper we take ethnicity and ethno-nationalism as points on a continuum. The distinction between the ethnic and the ethno-national – which is made primarily in terms of political aims and organization – is not central to the argument of this article.
empirically flawed; the second strategy advances the characterization of the phenomenon but is unable to recognize or explain those specific instances when ethnic solidarity is intense and persistent. By radicalizing the second strategic approach to characterization, and proposing a different mode of explanation, we sketch a third theoretical strategy which promises better to accomplish both tasks.

Two theoretical strategies, foundationalism and cognitive interactionism

This section of the paper outlines and criticizes two major theoretical strategies of approach to ethnicity: foundationalism and cognitive interactionism. It takes as representative of these strategies two figures – Walker Connor and Rogers Brubaker – who give admirably clear statements of the strategies, although the general approaches are much more widely shared.

Theoretical strategy 1: foundationalism

Much of the comparative political science literature on ethnic conflict focuses on one aspect of the ethnic phenomenon: ethnic and ethno-national communities which are persistent, resilient and robust, capable of eliciting deep loyalty, intense attachment and strong motivations, and, in consequence particularly resistant to change (Connor, 1994; Connor 2002; Horowitz 1985; Horowitz, 2001; Horowitz, 2002; Conversi, 2002; Smith, 1986; Shils, 1995). A classic theoretical elaboration of these insights is given by Walker Connor in a series of articles written from 1966 to the present; Connor (1994, esp. 73-76; 197ff.) posits that the resilience of ethno-national solidarity and the strength of ethno-national belonging are an expression of a deep emotional feeling associated with ethnicity which has psychological roots in kinship bonds. Phenomenologically, ethnic feeling is a descent-oriented, quasi-kinship sense of belonging, incorporating a sense of shared blood (eg Connor, 1994, 74, 93, 197, also Fishman, 1980 reprinted in Hutchinson and Smith, 1996, 63; Gil White, 1999). This description underpins a specific explanation of the strength and persistence of ethno-national community – it is strong and persistent precisely because it is a socio-psychological fact that kinship and blood-ties tend to produce strong, intense and long-lasting bonding. Kin-ties also generate a sense of ethnic opposition: “The national bond, because it is based upon belief in common descent, ultimately bifurcates humanity into “us” and “them”’ (Connor, 1994, 207). Contextual changes, inequality, and symbols, it is argued, may all serve as ‘triggers’ for nationalist feeling and mobilisation but the ultimate explanation lies in the character and strength of the feeling itself ( Connor 1994, chapter 6; 2001). This feeling, crucially, is embedded in the populace as a whole; leaders do not manufacture it, but instead recognize and appeal

3 ‘Recognizing the sense of common kinship that permeates the ethno-national bond clears a number of hurdles. First, it qualitatively distinguishes national consciousness from non-kinship identities (such as race or class) with which it has too often been grouped’ (Connor, 1994, p. 74).
4 For a clear statement of the explanation, see McGarry and O’Leary, 1995, pp. 354-5. Connor himself emphasizes the descriptive element rather than the explanatory, but it is clear also that he believes the fault of previous explanations is their lack of grasp of the emotive, descent-oriented character of ethno-nationalism (1994, 73-75, 105)
to it; this theoretical strategy rejects a focus solely on the nationalist elite as reductionist and instrumentalist, and focuses instead on the mass basis of ethnic feeling. It also underlies a specific prescription on how (not) to deal with ethnic conflict: if ethnicity is so persistent and strong a motivating force, there is no realistic hope of assimilation of ethnic minorities, nor can social engineering lead to their disappearance, indeed such attempts are not just useless, but also politically dangerous, encouraging unrealistic expectations (Connor, 2002; 1994, chapters 2, 3; McGarry and O’Leary, 1993).

This approach is ontologically realist: ethno-national communities exist and the theoretical question is to identify the nature and explain the strength of the ‘ethno-national bond’ (Connor, 1994, 73-6). It treats this bond in essentialist fashion as based on one category, ethnicity. Ethnicity is in turn understood psychologically, as based on a primal kin-feeling. The universal strength of this feeling in turn provides the law-like generalization (the covering law) which explains the strength of the ethnic bond: the sense of descent-linkages always produces intense and lasting communal solidarity and opposition. This strategy tends to removes the ethnic bond from relational or social ties: the bond is not dependent on the actual relations with any other group, or the empirical content or ‘markers’ which the members may use to characterize group identity.

This approach proposes a particular characterization of the ethnic phenomenon, marked by three features:

A. Ontological realism: the ethnic phenomenon consists of strongly solidaristic ethnic groups which, once formed, tend to be persistent

B. Essentialism: the characteristic that marks these groups off from others also defines their essential nature, that which lies at the core of their behavior and functioning.

C. Substantivism: the specifically ethnic feeling is characterized by a sense or feeling of shared descent, or putative kinship among the group

These in turn underlies a specific explanation of the strength and persistence of the ethnic phenomenon:

D. Psychologism: the ethno-national bond is strong and resilient to change because kinship bonds in general elicit strong solidarity which is resilient to change.

We characterize this approach as foundationalist because it posits one foundation for ethnic feeling and solidarity, which in turn is characterized as a development of foundational human emotions.⁵ We note that these core assumptions are common to theorists who differ from the position outlined by Connor, and from one another, on many specific aspects of explanation and prescription (see for example, Horowitz, 2001, 47-50; McGarry and O’Leary, 1995, 354-7).

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⁵ The term ‘primordialism’ which is often used, is misleading to the extent that it suggests a claim about the origins, rather than the character, of the ethnic bond.
This approach has perenniially attracted criticism: its underemphasis on the relational, symbolic and situational character of ethnicity and the strategic and rational incentives for ethnic bonding has particularly been criticised. The problematic explanatory structure of the theory which moves directly from the phenomenological immediacy of ethnic consciousness to posit a socio-psychological mechanism of quasi-kinship bonding has also repeatedly been noted (for examples, McKay, 1982; Eller and Coughlan, 1993; Smith 2002, 63-5). We will develop criticisms of the essentialist and substantivist assumptions below. However the theoretical strategy has retained its appeal, as if untouched by criticism. This is because it gives a clear characterization of the ethnic phenomenon, which allows comparative generalization, and a powerful explanation of the strength and persistence of the ethno-national bond, and the resistance to change of ethno-national conflict. Those who study ethnic and ethno-national conflict need above all concepts which allow them to grasp the strength of the phenomenon at hand. As we show below, even the most cogent critics of foundationalism have in general failed to offer an equally clear and powerful alternative characterization and explanation of the ethnic phenomenon. Until this is offered, the theory will retain its appeal.

**Theoretical strategy 2: cognitive interactionism**

A very different strategy of approach to ethnicity looks at the multiplicity of interests, ideas and activities which make up the ethnic phenomenon, and explains ethnic solidarity and mobilization in terms of a multiplicity of situational factors, including the existence and effectiveness of ethnic entrepreneurs (for an overview of the literature, see Jenkins, 1997, chapter 3; Hutchinson and Smith, 1996, 8-10). Rogers Brubaker’s influential cognitivist reworking of constructivist interactionist approaches provides a clear, coherent and elaborated example of such an alternative theoretical strategy while also giving a radical critique of foundationalism and ontological realism (Brubaker, 1996, 13-16).

Brubaker’s theoretical strategy is to prioritise cognitive categories and frames in his analysis, asking when these ethnic mindsets actually kick into play in practical interactions (Brubaker, 2001). He argues that the very concept of an ‘ethno-national group’ falsely objectifies ‘group-ness’, which is in fact constituted by cognitive frames, actions and relations and should be described in these terms (Brubaker, 2002). His approach is nominalist in its ontological parsimony, its refusal to accord groups any ontological primacy. He sees ethno-national group-ness as a function of networks and entrepreneurs, working on a cognitive basis of ethnic categories formed in turn by institutions and laws. His research questions focus on the activities of networking, incipient and dissolving solidarity, the appeal to group-ness, his concepts are those of ‘practical categories, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, discursive frames, organizational routines, institutional forms, political projects and contingent events’

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6 See for example, McKay, 1982; Scott, 1990; Eller and Coughlan, 1993; Jenkins, 1997; Grillo, 1998.
7 Rather like classic nominalists, he prioritises categories rather than the things (collectivities or universals) to which they purport to refer. We will argue below, however, that the categories in this case are not innocent of collectivity.
(2002, 167, cf 1996, 16). In a manner parallel to Connor, with whom in every other respect he disagrees, Brubaker sees the core of what are normally called ‘ethnic groups’ as based upon the sense, that is the ‘practical category’, of ethnicity; but, finding no other evidence of group existence, he dissolves group into category.

At the core of Brubaker’s strategy is the insistence that ethnic groups, indeed groups or communities in general, should be seen not ‘entities’ but as ‘contingent events’ (1996, 16), constantly being built and rebuilt, by new agents for new reasons in response to new situations, as ‘something that suddenly crystallizes rather than gradually develops, as a contingent, conjuncturally fluctuating, and precarious frame of vision…’ (1996, 19). Groups or communities are denied not just ontological primacy but also social existence and causal efficacy, even when people act in their name, experience themselves as belonging to them, experience attacks on others as attacks on their group, and are willing to act in solidarity with other members. Brubaker gives analytic recognition only to ‘practical categories’ not ‘collectivities’ (1996, 16); conflict is ‘ethnicized’ or ‘ethnically framed’ rather than between defined groups (2002, 166). Sometimes Brubaker appears to take nominalism to an empiricist extreme –communities do not exist when we cannot see their networks, when they are not explicitly appealed to or when no-one speaks about them. His language makes it difficult adequately to conceptualise those situations where the building and rebuilding of group-ness is persistently successful. It does not invite analysis or explanation of the occasions when there is social convergence of practical categories, expectations and judgements, such as Bourdieu describes when, although acting spontaneously and individually, ‘the practices of the members of the same group or class are more and better harmonized than the agents know or wish…’ (Bourdieu, 1977, 80-1).

Characterizing the ethnic phenomenon in terms of categories rather than communities is a major theoretical advance, opening up a set of key questions about ethnic community formation: ‘By distinguishing consistently between categories and groups we can problematize – rather than presume – the relation between them’ (Brubaker, 2002, 169). Brubaker, however, stops short in the problematization, presuming the primacy of categories over groups, and failing conceptually to reconstruct group-ness from embedded practical categories. There is no logical justification for this, since the reasons for skepticism about the existence of groups apply equally to the existence of ‘practical categories’. Categories take on practical social meaning only where they converge within an entire population. To assert ‘I am X’, where ‘X’ is an ethnic category, is a simple matter only where self-categorisation converges with the categorization of others: ‘X’ becomes a practical category only when there is a convergence of views and understandings among the population which defines itself as ‘X’ about what is and what

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

9 Indeed Brubaker’s very language dissuades us from lingering on this possibility: he speaks of the ‘crystallisation’ of groupness as a temporary phenomenon, and he distinguishes his approach from one which looks for ‘deep developmental trends’ (1996, 19).
is not a reasonable claim to ‘X-ness’. The practical category of ethnicity, then, already presupposes a level of collective understanding and mutual recognition; communities and groups are in principle no more conceptually problematic than are such categories. Empirically too, the reduction of communities to categories must be supplemented by an analysis of how ‘groupness’ or ethnic solidarity is constituted. Brubaker’s own analyses refer to a range of variables which are important in processes and events of what he calls ‘ethnicisation’ - institutional depth, conceptual history and changes in the power structure in the wider political field (see Brubaker, 1992; 1996). The core of his explanation, however, lies in the activities of ethnic entrepreneurs, who successfully interrelate these aspects for the public; his explanation thus comes close to earlier instrumentalist approaches which fail to identify any mass basis of convergent feeling and group mobilization. This analysis is unconvincing: as Connor among others has argued: in situations of intense conflict, political entrepreneurs do not so much create group-ness as respond to it (or else they are swiftly replaced by others who will so respond). In these situations, spontaneous individual action and interaction, rather than elite manipulation, reproduces ethnic solidarity and boundaries (for a description in the case of one deeply divided society, see Harris, 1972). Why in some circumstances does normal interaction reproduce ‘groupness’ and in others not? Brubaker provides some of the categories for description of such cases, but does not point us towards an explanation.

Brubaker’s approach is also incomplete in another respect. He criticizes the ontological realism of the foundationalists, but does not directly criticize their essentialist or substantivist assumptions. A foundationalist approach could be reformulated, taking on board Brubaker’s criticism of ‘groups’, which interpreted the practical category of ethnicity as based on the shared sense of descent and explained the motivating force of this category in terms of the strength and power of kinship feeling.\(^{10}\) This of course is far from Brubaker’s own view. To gain the full theoretical benefit from his work, therefore, requires a radicalization of his approach, and in particular a direct critique of essentialist and substantivist assumptions about the character of the ethnic ‘bond’ or ‘category’. To this we now turn.

**Ethnic categories without ‘ethnicity’: beyond essentialism**

What characterizes the practical category of ethnicity, or – where it exists – that dense set of networks and shared expectations and goals that make up an ethnic community? We approach this question in two steps. First we criticize the essentialist concept of ethnicity, arguing that while ethnicity is a distinct category, it is also a thin one, and the dense, affective practical sense of ethnicity described in the literature always involves the importation of other content. It follows that the ethnic category and ethnic communities exist on a continuum with other forms of practical category and community. We go on to criticize the substantive general claim that the content of the ethnic category always consists in a sense or feeling of shared descent, or putative kinship. We show that neither

\(^{10}\) Indeed since Connor’s claims focus on actors’ perceptions and feelings, they can in principle be assimilated within Brubaker’s theoretical framework.
the quasi-kinship feelings nor the subjective beliefs in common descent so often associated with ethnicity are necessary or sufficient conditions for the ethnic phenomenon. Indeed we suggest that intense quasi-kinship feelings are characteristic of many highly mobilized and solidaristic groups. Our characterization of the ethnic phenomenon as under-determined by ‘ethnicity’ raises all the more sharply the need for an alternative explanation of the strength and persistence of ethnic solidarity where this exists.

The ‘ethnicity’ of the ethnic category

The practical category of ethnicity, like other practical categories, may be characterized in terms of what it does, and how it relates to other categories. What it does is to bound one set of persons off from another (Barth, 1969), although this does not distinguish the ethnic category from others. Ethnicity is distinctive in its definition of a spatially distinctive, territorially defined ‘people’, continuous over time and generations: it defines not just a ‘group’ in the present but a distinct and continuous community which stretches back into the past and moves into the future. It is inherently limited in space and continuous in time (unlike the ideal type categories of religion and class (cf Anderson, 1991, 6)). This sense of ‘peoplehood’ or ‘provenance’ carries with it an existential sense of continuity and identification, it is typically associated with a symbolism of origin and a set of origin-myths (Smith and Hutchinson, 1996, 6-7), and it has a distinctive logic of particularist loyalty which stretches back and forwards over time. By itself, however, it is a thin category, indeterminate, presupposing not just a multiplicity of peoples, but peoples who define their specificity in different ways. It requires to be filled by other content, and how actors fill their sense of peoplehood is a contingent matter. They may fill it with a set of beliefs in common biological descent and blood belonging, but they may equally fill it with religious or linguistic content, or with a set of cultural values or political ideas. The ethnic category is not essentially tied to any particular institutions, practices or systems of belief (see Anderson, 1991, 5-6) but, magpie-like, requires other institutional nests and conceptual food-supplies. As Barth (1969) among others has emphasized, it can be filled by any set of beliefs, interests and institutional practices. The precise set, however, defines the specific ethnicity in question, and changes in content (or in prioritization of different aspects of content) tend to be conjoined with changes in the practices of group boundary-maintenance. In short, the cultural ‘stuff’ of ethnicity is not essential to ethnicity in general, but is ‘contingently necessary’ to each particular ethnic group.

The substance and meanings of ethnicity are therefore always linked to other categories – language, historic origins, sometimes religion, sometimes other cultural or political values (Ndegwa, 1997; Fishman, 2002; Jenkins, 1997, chapter 8; Rao, 1999). In Northern

11 For similar views, see Jenkins, 1997, 107-8. Horowitz, 1985, 67-71 provides interesting data on the malleability of group boundaries and their relation to territorial content and political interests, while giving a socio-psychological explanation of this. Study of processes of negotiation of boundaries by ethnic-marginals, and of expulsions of these same marginals, is needed to see if and how subtly-changing emphases can radically change the position (and safety) of these individuals.
Ireland, Israel and South Africa, for example, there is a convergence of religious, ethnic and colonial categories among religious fundamentalists (Akenson, 1992). Similarly, religious and national categories converged in the period of English and British nation-building (Hastings, 1997; Colley, 1992; Duffy, 1982). In Kenya, as in Ireland, ethnic distinctions coincide with different conceptions of political citizenship and political obligation (Ndegwa, 1997; Miller, 1978). In India, ethnic distinctions overlap, converge and cross cut a multitude of distinctions making it a notoriously slippery category (Chakwabarty, 1998). Often colonial distinctions take on an ethnic resonance (Grillo, 1998; Memmi, 1990; Fanon, 1967); sometimes class distinctions also do so. The practical categorical distinctions made by individuals between, say, Scottish or English or Irish, traveler or settled, ‘Prod’ or ‘Taig’, involve whole sets of interrelated categories, embedded in a symbolic system of contrasts and oppositions.

It is not that these other categories become (surface) markers of a (deeper) category of ethnicity. It is rather that they partially constitute the felt significance of the ethnic category, the type of ‘peoplehood’ invoked and the values that are linked to it. Ethnicity becomes the dense, thickly meaningful, often highly affective practical category described in the literature only when it is filled by other content, and that content partially defines how it functions. When, for example, it is filled by religious belief and practices, there are continual tensions between the boundedness of the ethnic and the potentially unlimited scope of the religious category. Ethnicity thus not only overlaps with other practical categories, but it is fluid with respect to them; it may slide into a wider sense of commonality with co-religionists abroad, or alternatively, when the ties of religion to institutional practice and theological belief are loosened, religion itself may imperceptibly become ethnicised. The ethnic category thus tends to be fluctuating; it is a type of category which accentuates ‘the precariousness and incompleteness of the frontiers constituting social division’ (Laclau, 1996, 17).

The practical ethnic category may be felt to have an ineffable immediacy (Geertz, 1973; Fishman, 1980). In this respect, however, ethnicity is not qualitatively distinct from other practical categories. In societies with relatively stable class divisions, the sense of class-belonging takes on a similar ineffable immediacy: the intuitive, immediate, physical sense of ‘fine-ness’ that informs, for example, the French bourgeois woman’s choice of sweater, or way of knotting her scarf, or scrupulous avoidance of accidental physical contact, or her ensuring that her children develop these same dispositions, manifests an equally immediate, embodied sense of ‘us-ness’ (Bourdieu, 1984; de Wita, 1994). The class example, however, is easily seen to involve a complex set of learned dispositions, embodied in habitus so that they appear as ‘second nature’ and are highly resistant to change (Bourdieu, 1974, 86-9; 1990, chapter 3). So too with the ethnic sense; the immediacy of feeling and distinction associated with a strong ethnic consciousness may

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12 Class may be thought of as a form of ‘breeding’: For a striking example, see Etchegoin and Aron, 2002, 22.
13 The practical distinction between ‘Prods’ and ‘Taigs’ in Northern Ireland exemplifies this dense convergence of categories since one concept (Prod) refers to an explicitly religiously-defined grouping (Protestants), while the other (Taig) refers to an ethnically- or culturally-defined grouping (identified by the Gaelic fore-name, Taidgh).
be attributed to the blood, flesh and bones, but is in fact part of the socialized body. This immediacy and physicality of distinction is common to all important social categories, including class and religion, not specific to ethnicity.

It is thus misleading to characterize the ethnic category in essentialist terms. It exists on a continuum with other practical categories, and the end points on the continuum – pure (but thin) ethnicity, or religious categories with no sense of ‘peoplehood’ – are the extreme not the typical forms: the practical functioning of the ethnic category is exhibited in the typical, mixed cases, not in the ‘pure’ ideal type. The practical ethnic category is a product of multiple determinations, only one of which is ‘ethnicity’. The ‘pure’ but ‘thin’ concept of ethnicity-as-peoplehood characterizes the ethnic category, but it does not explain its social functioning; still less can it be seen as the essential feature of the still more complex and multiply-constituted ethnic ‘community’.

Descent, putative kinship, shared blood and the substance of the ethnic bond

On the foundationalist account, it is taken an evident empirical fact that the substantive content of the ethnic bond is descent-related, a putative kin relation, and that this explains the depth and strength of feeling that ethnicity engenders. It is a ‘sense of kinship’ that infuses a nation and ‘at the core of ethno-psychology is a sense of shared blood’ (Connor, 1994, 197; cf. Shils, 1995, pp. 94-7, 101). Surprisingly little empirical evidence is presented for these claims, the seeming clarity and obviousness of which dissolves on close analysis. The discussion below is intended to show that the deep feeling, sense of common provenance, kinship bonding, the sense of shared blood, thick affiliation, and community-ness so often associated with the practical category of ethnicity are in fact distinct, found separately, cross-cutting, and typically unrelated. When sometimes they come together, in some cases of intense ethnic conflict, this is the exception which requires explanation.

Consider first that the emotional power of ideas of kinship and of ‘shared blood’ are shared by many solidaristic communities, and are by no means exclusive to those which define themselves in ethnic terms. Evangelical Christians see themselves as ‘brothers and sisters in Christ’; militant trades-unionists speak to their ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’; within the feminist movement, all are ‘sisters’; the sense of blood-bonding in situations of

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

15 Connor (1994, chapter 8) details the references to descent and shared blood in the speeches of nationalist ideologues; other evidence from nationalist ideologues is common (see also Edwards, 2002 and Douglass, 2002 who use similar type of evidence). But the speeches of nationalist ideologues are not to be confused with the views of the members of the putative ethnic community; this is the instrumentalist fallacy. Gil White’s evidence is drawn from casual discussion with two acquaintances and a sample of 59 respondents from a small Mongol pastoralist group (amongst whom there is no intermarriage with neighbouring Kazakhs).
danger has to do with shared trauma not shared parentage. An example will show how deeply the imagery can permeate communities which prioritise religious categories. Fundamentalist Ulster Protestants in the Rev. Ian Paisley’s Free Presbyterian Church use an imagery of ‘shared blood’ which motivates them towards religious rather than ethnic animosity. A favourite hymn in this denomination is ‘There is power in the blood’ which, while explicitly referring to the blood of Christ, implicitly also refers to the blood of believers, has resonances with the ‘spilled blood’ of Ulster Protestants in the world wars and in the more recent ‘war with the IRA’, and has more specific reference to the blood of the Protestant martyrs, pictures of whose suffering are prominently displayed over the main Martyrs Memorial Church in Belfast. A sense of ‘blood-belonging’ thus links contemporary Northern Irish Protestants not just to those massacred in the twentieth century because of their loyalty to Britain, but also to those massacred in Ulster in 1641 because of their religion and settler status, as well as to those Protestants (mostly of Southern French origin) massacred in Paris some seventy years earlier and in the Cevennes some sixty years later. The example shows that the kin-related symbolism and emotional resonances which are attributed to ethnicity in fact have much wider applicability. Putative kin-feeling is not uniquely characteristic of the ethnic phenomenon and cannot therefore explain its particular strength and persistence.

Second, a belief in shared descent is not a necessary condition of ethno-national solidarity. French nationalism is a clear example, and not as exceptional as is sometimes supposed (see Peters’ 2002 analysis of the mixture of ethnic, cultural and civic meanings in German nationalism). Connor has rightly emphasized that the sense of French nationhood is much more than state-centred citizenship or ‘constitutional patriotism’. It does not, however, imply a belief in shared descent. Among the great historical origin-figures symbolising France is Joan of Arc. She, however, is symbolic of Frenchness not because all French people are descended from her (although this was the right-wing myth of the French nation, see Grillo, 1998), but (in the dominant centrist and left myths) because she symbolises the honour and courage and political principle of the common people, rising against tyrants and the English Crown to defend the common space. In Joan of Arc, we see the hegemony of a particular politico-cultural interpretation of France and of the French republican tradition transmitted via a historical origin-narrative. For most sections of the French population, this myth presented and presents a cultural rather than a biological lineage. It is this that permitted and motivated first and second generation Poles, Jews, Hungarians, Italians, Senegalese, Occitans, Alsatians and Réunion islanders to become French and to live or die for what had become their ‘patrie’.

Third, beliefs in shared descent or feelings of putative kinship do not always generate a sense of solidarity (ethnic or not) or even of positive feeling. Northern Irish Protestants

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

17 Connor stated (1994, 196. 215) ‘at one level of consciousness, the English, French, and German peoples are aware of their ethnic heterogeneity. Their history books record it. But at a more intuitive or sensory level, they “know” their nation is ethnically, hermetically pure’. This accurately captures the sense given by the Front National and the French right wing. But it is not the official, the dominant or the majority view in France. (see Grillo, 1998, chapter 6; Brubaker, 1996; Bernstein, 1999)
are a largely endogamous community who trace their provenance to the 17th plantation of Ulster and who have a variety of origin-myths referring to this period (MacBride, 1997; Miller, 1987; Bell, 1990). Ulster – now Northern Irish – Protestants have for centuries allied with one another against a common perceived Catholic (and later nationalist) threat (Ruane and Todd, 1996). Yet between sections of Northern Irish Protestants, there is little sense of commonality or affection, but rather cordial and mutual dislike and disrespect (Todd, 1987; Brown, 1985; Moore and Sanders, 2000; Whyte, 1991). If these people indeed sense each other as distant cousins (and some of them go to great pains to deny it) their cousins form that part of the family with whom they prefer to avoid contact. The motivation for common political action has more often come from perceived mutual need than from perceived mutual provenance, and has seldom involved (real or perceived) mutual bonding.  

The example suggests that there is as likely to be alienation as affection among the (putative) extended kin group. One might hypothesise that ideas of (extended) kinship are most powerful emotionally when they are used symbolically and metaphorically rather than to express an actual belief in common descent.

Fourth, a sense of shared provenance can exist and create a sense of mutual bonding which is independent of ethnic or nationalist mobilisation. The history of Alsace provides a multitude of examples. The population of this region, which stretches from the Vosges to the Rhine, has a strong sense of regional particularity, based in part on a Germanic regional language and a specific geo-political situation; for centuries Alsace alternated between the French and German states. In the world wars, choices presented themselves to young men as to their national loyalties. Siblings made different choices and fought and died for France or Germany. What is specific about contemporary Alsace and Alsatian identity is the self-conscious distinction of provenance and descent from nationality and the sense that the distinctive cultural community to which Alsatians belong is defined not just by culture or origins but also by its legacy of nationally divided families and traditions. Provenance and the sense of bonding it brings, may thus cut across as well as underlie the formation of ethno-national solidarity.

Fifth, belief in biological descent is not – in the cases with which we are most familiar - central to the practice of controlling group membership and policing community boundaries. We have already mentioned the French case where membership of the nation can in principle be achieved in one generation (see also Brubaker, 1996; Grillo, 1998, chapter 6). In Catalonia, a distinction is typically made in the scholarly literature not just between first generation immigrants and Catalans, but also between their children and the children of Catalan parents, because the children of, for example, Andalusian immigrants will have relatives and family memories rooted elsewhere in Spain and the language of

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

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

the family is likely to be Castilian.\textsuperscript{21} There is, however, no distinction in the third
generation – what is being measured is a social, linguistic and familial, not a descent-
defined, distinction. In Northern Ireland, among both communities (‘Ulster Protestant’
and ‘Irish Catholic’) a distinction is typically made between in-marriers from the other
community (who never achieve full socialisation into the community) and the children of
mixed marriages (who are unambiguously members of the community in which they are
brought up). Where children of the same (mixed Protestant-Catholic) parentage are
separated and brought up in different ethno-national communities, they typically take on
the ethno-national identity and community membership into which they were socialised.
Where a child is adopted, it automatically becomes a member both of the community and
the ethno-national category of its (adoptive) parents.\textsuperscript{22} In the Irish state, where genealogy
is one of many partially overlapping, partially conflictual, and typically contested, criteria
of Irishness, it is often overridden if other criteria are met: it is not uncommon for
children brought up in Ireland with two non-Irish parents to ‘be Irish’ not simply in terms
of citizenship but in terms of culture and belonging. But, as always in Ireland, ‘it
depends’, not least on the socialisation and networks of the individual and family
concerned and their perceived openness to Irish mores, with religion still an important
(not always crucial) variable. In practice as well as in belief, community belonging is
determined by a range of factors.

All the above points confirm that there is typically a gap between community belonging,
ethnicity and descent. Ethnic categories can exist without communities, as Brubaker has
argued, but strong and intense communal bonding infused with a sense of kinship may
also exist relatively detached from ethnicity. Indeed if a socio-psychological mechanism
exists which transfers the intense feelings generated by primary kinship relations to a
wider sphere, this mechanism seems to be common to all highly mobilized and strongly
bonded communities, not specific to those which prioritise ethnicity. Meanwhile, a sense
of common ethnic or ethno-national belonging may exist independent of consciousness
of common descent. The foundationalist approach is reductionist in two senses: in
reducing the multiplicity of meanings of intensely and densely bonded communities to
one – ethnicity - and in reducing the substance of the ethnic category to a belief in shared
descent. It follows that it is necessary to look beyond the category of ethnicity for an
explanation of the strength and persistence of intra ethnic solidarity and inter ethnic
opposition and conflict. A different type of theoretical strategy is necessary, which builds
on the multiplicity, mutual dependence and embeddedness in power structures of ethnic
and other practical categories.

\textit{Multiplicity, systemic interrelations and path dependence: an alternative explanation of
the strength and persistence of the ethnic bond.}

\textsuperscript{21} As a result, the second generation are likely to be distinct in their national identity and aims from the

\textsuperscript{22} It is usually assumed that the child will be of parents of the same religion (since the adoption agencies are
church-related) but this is not a matter into which others of the community pry, nor would it be taken to
make a difference to the child’s status as community member.
We have emphasized the radical multiplicity of elements which converge in the practical category of ethnicity. How is intense ethnic solidarity and resistance to change constituted out of such an untidy proliferation of elements? The answer does not lie in any essential feature of ethnicity – none exists - but in a particular set of interrelations of elements which form systemic feedback patterns, or a ‘path dependent’ system. The theoretical strategy proposed here sees intense and persistent ethnic solidarity as an emergent property of a system constituted inter alia by the intersection of practical categories and power relations. It promises both explanatory power and the ability to grasp the multiplicity of meanings, the range of determinants, and the variation in intensity of ethnic bonding and opposition.

The concept of ‘system’ is here used in a qualitative sense, as a set of interrelated and mutually dependent processes which, as the unintended by-product of their intersection, reproduce themselves. A system retains distinction from its environment, rather than merging into it, or being changed by outside forces; new ‘impacting’ elements are assimilated within the system, which thus ‘adapts’ to a changing environment. The basic form of the system is thus reproduced even if all the elements within it change. An ‘emergent property’ of a system is one whose existence is dependent on that of the system, and yet which appears, ‘acts’, as if an independent, complex, new entity. Holland (1998, 4-8, 225-231) speaks in this respect of ‘persistent patterns with changing components’ (225), not reducible to their simple parts.

What then is the form of a system which generates intra-ethnic solidarity and inter-ethnic conflict? The practical category of ethnicity is a crucial element, always linked with other such categories in a complex conceptual logic. These categories are always also embedded in sets of interlocking and intersecting power structures which, in the extreme case, generate a core conflict of interests which converges with the opposition of identity. The categories are dependent again on dense nested sets of linkages which themselves produce a multiplicity of ‘sub-communities’ at neighbourhood, local, town, and regional levels which, in the extreme cases, reinforce and strengthen one another, giving depth and density to an overarching ethnic division. The forms of ethnic solidarity and ethnic opposition thus produced are multi-faceted, plural in their cultural substance, manifesting – in collective and individual expressions - a fluidity in shifting from ethnic to national to political to religious identities and reference points, a convergence of interest and feeling, and a capacity to strengthen solidarity and motivation by moving back and forth in focus from macro to micro contexts.

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23 A useful example of the qualitative use of the (potentially highly technical and formalisable) concept of system may be found in Claus Offe, *Contradictions of the Welfare State*, edited by John Keane, London, Hutchinson, 1984, see the explicit discussion pp. 257-8. For the purposes of this paper, we do not discuss either the interrelation of subsystems and systems, or the way a system generating ethnic conflict may be configured within wider socio-political structures (or systems) – eg conflict in Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, the British Isles, the European Union, the ‘new world order’. On the wider international context of ethnic conflict, see Lake and Rothchild, 1998.

24 Where the local exemplifies in extreme form the divisions at the macro-level, as in many localities in deeply divided societies, a focus on the local does not detract from but gives depth and intensity to and further incentive for macro-communal organization.
Such systems tend to have strong self-reproductive properties. Once solidaristic networks and linkages are formed, feedback mechanisms tend to reproduce them: to distance oneself from one’s ‘community’ – at micro or macro level - carries a cost in terms of vulnerability, anomie, weakness; there are correlative benefits to solidarity in terms of safety, sense of belonging, the value of social and cultural capital; when used at all, even to minimize inter-group conflict, such networks reproduce intra-group solidarity (Fearon and Laitin, 1996). Once the ‘thin’ ethnic category is filled by a particular combination of other categories, the specific ethno-cultural symbolic system thus formed tends to be reproduced: those who have defined their own qualities as civilized and progressive (or authentic and just) have a strong interest in not blurring or qualifying that definition by admitting value to the opposite qualities. Once there is a clear ethnic power imbalance, there is a continuing impetus to power-struggle, not just to retain (or redress) a relative (dis)advantage but out of fear (or hope) of total reversal.

The closer and tighter the feedback mechanisms, the more entrenched and resistant to change ethnic bonding becomes. Where a particular ethno-cultural distinction is an entry ticket to resources, the social significance of this distinction is reinforced and the power relations which give it such significance come to be reproduced not just out of crude material interest, but out of a sense of self-respect and of the proper moral order. Similarly, where these power resources are ethnically distributed (in situations of structured inequality at the cultural and social as well as economic and political levels) this gives a strong strategic interest in ethnic solidarity in order to retain or gain resources. That solidarity in turn tends to appropriate new resources and institutions into the older ethnically-based order: in Northern Ireland, for example, changes in the form of the state (the move to direct rule in 1972) were assimilated within the older ethno-communal politics, with one community monopolizing newly created jobs in the security industries and appropriating the symbolism of the modern British state as their own (Ruane and Todd, 1996). Similarly, the dominant cultural binary oppositions reinforce ethnic solidarity: one should stick together with one’s own, who recognize one’s virtues and values, rather than mix with others who possess only bad qualities which may corrupt the self. Ethnic solidarity, in turn, means that when new cultural elements emerge they are appropriated within one or other conceptual schema, or given opposing meanings within the two schema, rather than used as alternatives to the older binary oppositions.  

These types of systemic feedback mechanism have been well described in analyses of ‘path-dependence’, where ‘increasing returns’ generate feedback effects which reinforce actors to continue to pursue the path on which they have started even when the initial conditions which produced this path have changed (Pierson, 2000; Mahoney, 2000).

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

26 The analogy is not intended as precise; some features emphasized in the path dependence literature are clear and striking here, for example complex matrices where mutual feed-back effects take place between a number of different processes, and weakly self-reproductive ‘feedback’ effects in each process are massively strengthened by the conjunction of processes (Pierson, 2000); other features, for example an increasing likelihood of continuing on the path over time (as in the Polya urn example) are not
Once set in motion, the complex set of feedback mechanisms which reproduce intra-ethnic solidarity and inter-ethnic opposition is powered by the normal human sense of rationality and self-interest, even if – looking at the system from the point of view of eternity – it would have been better for all concerned if ethnic opposition had never been set in place.\(^{27}\) The mechanisms sketched above allow the reproduction of entrenched social relations despite changes in institutions and laws: ‘learning patterns’ (Crouch and Farrell, 2002) allow dominant actors and ethnic entrepreneurs to adapt new institutions to older patterns of conflict, to assimilate new resources into entrenched ethno-cultural distinctions and to define new concepts in terms of old binaries. Of course such systemic feedback mechanisms are not seamless, and in some cases strong countertendencies (or ‘contradictions’) are produced within the social system when, for example, the ethnic categories of distinction valued in the local field are overturned in the wider state or macro-region, or where there is a lack of fit between power relations and cognitive categories. Even in tightly knit systems, ‘redundancies’ (Crouch and Farrell, 2002) exist - intermarriages, integrated schooling, a sports team which gets cross-community support - and while these are marginal in normal conditions, when the system is shaken they may become seeds of more radical change.

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

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\(^{27}\) Thus it captures the sense of paradox which Mahoney (2000) sees at the centre of path-dependence analysis.
This theoretical strategy provides new insight into the old theoretical debate on ‘instrumentalist’ views of ethnicity (Connor, 1994, 73-4, 85, chapter 6; Gil White, 1999). Within the systemic nexus, and informed by their categorizations of their world, actors act rationally, and their attachment to their religion, descent group, and communal cultural values brings mutual recognition, a sense of honour and ‘cultural capital’ as well as economic and political advantage. It is thus not a question of emphasizing strategy and instrumentality as opposed to ethnicity, nor ethnicity as opposed to strategy and instrumentality; ethnic assertion and strategic interests, instrumental and cultural motives, emotion and rationality are intrinsically linked.28

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

**Conclusion**

The theoretical strategy proposed here questions the essential ‘ethnicity’ of what are typically described as ‘ethnic communities’, ‘ethnic categories’ and by implication ‘ethnic conflicts’, highlighting the analogies between them and other forms of communities, practical categories and conflicts. Most persistent and deep conflicts, and most lasting social groups, are likely to have multiple and systemic roots; most are overdetermined in terms of cultural categories and interests.29 Ethnicity is, however, by no means totally dissolved into a general theory of conflict. The specifically ethnic mode of categorization – the sense of ‘peoplehood’, relating as it does the sense of past and present, territoriality, community, and self - is a particularly powerful way of situating oneself in space and time, although by no means the only way. It may absorb and blend into other categories, but conflicts have a different logic when it is present than when it is absent; in particular, the feedback patterns tend to be tighter, more elements are included within them, and the socialization process takes place from an early age. Sometimes other categories too – class or religion – may come to take on a particularly inclusive and

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

29 For an extended discussion with respect to religion, see Mitchell, 2001 and forthcoming, 2004.
systemic character, leading to conflicts which converge with ethnic conflicts in their form. Ethnic conflict thus remains on a continuum with other types of conflict, rather than qualitatively distinct from them.

The theoretical strategy proposed here borrows from and builds on existing theories. Systemic approaches to ethnic conflict are not new, although they have typically focused on the role of international and transnational actors in the macro-power balance, rather than on the constitution of ethnic categories and communities (see Lake and Rothchild, 1998). Our approach owes much to Brubaker’s cognitivism, although it departs in important ways from his strategy, not least in critically re-introducing collectivities to the analysis. Above all, however, it proposes an alternative way of explaining the persistence of ethnic solidarity, ethnic opposition and ethnic conflict, without hypostatizing ethnic groups or treating ethnic bonds as foundational. It shows how ethnic categories may contribute with other practical categories to the building of solidarity, with the meanings, emotions and interests associated with ethnic belonging tapping into and feeding off the meanings, emotions and interests associated with other categories, and giving rise to the intensely solidaristic, deeply felt sense of community-belonging and communal conflict which is too often explained in terms of quasi-kin, primordial qualities of ethnicity.

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