EXPLAINING ETHNIC CONFLICTS WITH ETHNO-SYMBOLISM AND RATIONAL CHOICE THEORIES

INTRODUCTION

This article will examine the reasons for genocide, ethnic cleansing and ethnic violence by using two points of view. The most popular approaches, rational choice theory (RCT) and the opposing perspective of ethno-symbolic theory, will be used to comprehend and analyze these crimes. RCT depicts security concerns and gives tangible reasons for genocide by framing the arguments from a realist perspective. In contrast, the ethno-symbolist approach insists on emotional motives behind genocide (Kaufman 2006: 46).

Firstly, the terminology and definitions will be briefly discussed. Secondly, RCT will be examined. Finally, ethno-symbolist theory will be discussed to identify what circumstances generate the conditions for genocide. The unique dynamics of each individual conflict make it difficult to directly contrast RCT and ethno-symbolist theory against each other. Nevertheless, when these two independently important theories are combined, research can provide far more comprehensive analysis of the reasoning behind genocide and ethnic violence, as rationality and emotivity can be difficult to separate when examining such cases.

Genocide, ethnic cleansing and the root of ethnic violence

Scholars’ agendas brought many definitions together in order to not abandon the victims of genocide. In 1944, Raphael Lemkin brought forward a concept that improved on UNGC’s (United Nations Genocide Convention) definition. Lemkin observed, ‘genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation except when accomplished by the mass killings of all members of that nation, rather it is a coordinated plan of different actions that aim to destroy the essential foundations of the lives of national groups’ (1947: 146). Following this concept, the UN expanded its definition and filled some gaps that Lemkin left blank, such as assimilation and the interruption of parenting (The Genocide Convention 2018). Critique over the Genocide Convention’s definition arose from Allison Palmer, based on the definition’s omission of political groups and social classes. Palmer argued, ‘genocide is the intention to physically destroy a whole or substantial part of a group because they are part of that group and defined by the perpetrator, regardless of whether or not the whole group is
This definition of genocide was approved by many social scientist and more broadened versions also emerged.

Virtually everyone acknowledged that genocide is primarily a crime of state (Fein 1990: 26). Dadrian observed, ‘genocide is an attack by a master group, directed with a formal incumbent to diminish by using pressure or deadly savagery on minorities which extreme eradication is held alluring and helpful and whose separate defenselessness the group for destruction to take action on for this crime’ (1975: 213). Similarly Chalk and Jonasson stated genocide to be ‘a form of one-sided mass killings that crime is initiated by a state or an authority to annihilate that group’ (1990: 23). With this, Chalk and Jonasson refer to the state or other authority as perpetrators, and they encompass settlers in their definition of state. Gurr and Harff also agree with the state factor to add; ‘genocide is mass murder carried out by or with the complicity of political authorities and controlled at distinct communally defined groups’ (2004: 190).

However, giving credit to the definitions’ insistence on the importance to not leave the perpetrator unpunished is not enough to understand the deep roots of the sociological reasons behind these crimes of genocide, ethnic cleansing or ethnic violence. It is hard to differentiate categorically between genocide and ethnic violence and what the main duty might distinguish the causes of the conflicts. When sociologists have recognized the genocide, it is most often assumed to be result of ethnic conflict. To gain more thorough understanding, the conflict’s reasons must be explored.

Rational Choice Theory- fear, elites and greed:

Rational Choice Theory’s (RCT) security dilemma, information failures, and commitment perspectives define the causes of the genocide and ethnic conflict based on Lake and Rothchild's ethnic conflict theory set within the weaknesses and greed of states. A group’s tendency to potential violence is constructed on the fear element and their excuse is the protection of their lives against to weaker group’s potential threat. (Lake and Rothchild 1996: 41) According to RCT, groups transform into sensitive entities due to perceived information failures, security concerns and deficiency of allegiance (Lake and Rothchild 1996: 41). They add that politicians and ethnic activists mobilize the groups that are polarized in society, yet the main element of ethnic conflict is fear and security dilemmas that have been created by political incumbents. The process starts with central authority declining, groups feel threatened, then they invest in and prepare for violence, and thereby make actual violence feasible (Lake and Rothchild 1996: 42). Lake and Rothchild argue that Eastern European and
the former Soviet Union regimes' violent actions, and the commitment of genocide in African states have occurred at times of state weaknesses (1996: 43). The process often follows that the state uses force to repress ethnic groups, and, in turn, the group rely on unlawful reaction rather (Lake 1996: 43). When anarchy emerges, physical security is threatened and violence becomes inevitable.

RCT finds emotional elements to be a triggering factor, not a leading motive besides substantial strategic interactions. RCT proponents do not deny the power of myths concerning other groups, however, they argue that myths and emotion are not the main reason for violence. Emotions, historical memories and mythological symbols concerning the suppressed group, can fuel the violence perception of groups but are not the main factor of conflict (Lake and Rothchild 1996: 44). RCT discourses account for competition for resources that might affect certain ethnic groups since resources are controlled by politicians and they might create group interests and protect one group from another, which causes conflict. Also, credible commitment issues cause conflict by not tying the groups to each other with agreements and failing to enable different groups to involve agreements to clarify the parties’ position to eradicate the fear and security concept (Fearon 1995: 382). Ethnic contracts are seen as the warranty on self-commitment to gain stabilization among groups. Once groups are protected by law and order they will not be available to exploitation. Those factors, which are introduced by RCT scholars, are tangible and realist factors in helping to explain the causes of ethnic conflict from a rationalistic perspective.

Security dilemma is another component of RCT, which is to help ethnic conflict and related anarchy in the framework of rationality. Within chaotic conditions the state’s focal point is security and regarding this focus, they might expand their military capacity, which can intimidate the others and lead to the other group reacting by increasing their own capacity to protect themselves which can cause arm-racing and hostility (Posen 1993: 35). The dubiousness determines both sides’ intentions. Lake and Rothchild agree on Posen’s extended concept of the security dilemma but from their perspective, the security dilemma must be considered alongside ‘information failures [and] problems of credible commitment’ (Lake and Rothchild 1996: 52). ‘The unique analytic core of the security dilemma lies in situations where or more disputing parties have incentives to resort the preemptive uses of force’ (1996: 52). As RCT emphasizes, where the encouragement to use force is more likely, states can act for their survival.
In contrast to RCT’s explanations, ethno symbolists think that RCT’s ethnic conflict approach on security dilemma is not fully comprehensive. Kaufman raises the question that a dictator or authoritarian leader’s motivation might be realistically based on a security motivation but how is it that they turn to criminal behaviour? (Kaufman 2006: 54).

Other reasons for ethnic conflicts are elite groups’ strategic actions, which aim to build the political support needed to hold the power. Ethnic violence has been explained as a product of political elites’ efforts. Elite groups trigger animosity in order to find enough support for their reign and construct hostility among groups to create violence (Fearon and Laitin 2000: 853). Violence may be used as a tactic by leaders to provoke less aggressive groups into becoming extremists. De Figueiredo and Weingast did not find enough evidence for the reasoning of security dilemma and instead contributed violence to the hunting methods of elites, the ‘masses do not violence but elites want’ (1999: 263). Based on De Figueiredo and Weingast’s approach, fear factor and uncertainty are not excluded but it is also in addition to the factor of elites’ desire for power. For instance, the cause of war in Yugoslavia was ‘the provocation of violence by threatened elites’ (De Figueiredo and Weingast 1999: 264). Likewise in the case of the Rwanda genocide, which is defined by political opportunity. The genocide emerged came about when politicians felt they were losing power and drive the crowds into chaos to hold their position by applying violence. On the other hand, De Figueiredo and Weingast question themselves, too. The leader of the state feeds fears and creates security concerns in any ethnic clash by harming its own people, however, those instrumentalist ingredients need more explanation to comprehend the impetus for the violence carried out by other side (De Figueiredo and Weingast 1999: 291). At this point, the constructivist/symbolist approach may fill the gaps left unanswered by the instrumentalist/rationalist approach.

RCT’s economic framework suggests that greed can drive groups to apply violence and that the motivations for rebellions can be mutual greed and opportunity. Hence ‘the incidence of rebellion is not explained by motive or emotions, but by atypical circumstances that generate profitable opportunities’ (Collier and Hoeffler 2004: 564). In this explanation, greed represents economic opportunities and, in RCT, these are the main motives. Moreover, Collier and Hoeffler add, opportunities such as those presented by goods allow for extortion, turning them into appealing and suitable entities, furthermore, low foregone earnings facilitate conflict (2000: 588). Another brief sketch is drawn by Harff and Gurr as to rational understanding of the reasons behind genocide. There are many instances in the past where elites applied constraint against rebels as the first step of ethnic violence or genocide. When
the state is ruled by an autocrat, elites use their network and strength to gain the support of certain groups based on the attachment of their goals. However, when the state has serious economic defects, elites struggle in dealing with and holding power over target groups (Harff and Gurr 2004: 98). Above all, rational choice theory’s realist approach might not respond the constructivists’ side of the story to understand the core behavior of genocide, ethnic cleansing or ethnic conflict/violence.

Ethno-Symbolist Approach to Explain Ethnic Conflict- Emotional Response

In the ethno-symbolist approach, symbols and myths are the main drivers of ethnic violence rather than the rational causes given RCT perspective. Based on the ethnic-symbolist model; the main reasons for the ethnic violence is that myths and symbols are fed with enmity and the fear of groups, then mobilization of a chauvinist idea with emotional symbols pave the way to conflict (Kaufman 2006: 47). According to Kaufman’s definition, those symbols are used by elite groups to mobilize people against each other. However, RCT proponents Fearon and Laitin, disagree with Kaufman’s view. These rationalists argue that symbols cannot cover the whole reasons for genocide or ethnic violence and suggest that something is missing with the ethno-symbolist explanation (Fearon and Laitin 2000: 869). Within this approach, Kaufman’s analysis of Sudan and Rwanda helps to explain his theory and his claims that RCT does not satisfactorily explain those two cases.

In these cases, group fears and myths derived from hostile attitudes and the groups’ leaders’ predatory attitudes, while hostile narratives delivered symbolic vocabulary as a tool to mobilize the society. Kaufman summarizes two cases to point out symbols powerful influence on ethnic violence: ‘in [the] Sudan case, Gaafar Nimeiri was forced to form a coalition with his strongest rivals because their hostile policy was more popular than his previous peaceful one and in Rwanda, the extremists’ genocidal strategy is explainable only in terms of their attachment to an ideology that led them to prioritize genocide over their own survival in power’ (Kaufman 2006: 49). These examples show that based on the symbolist justification of ethnic violence, conflict cannot be explained merely economic or security reasons that RCT proponents adhere to. Some codes that are different than wealth, power or security, must trigger the conflict.

Symbolist theory approaches ethnic conflicts with a neuroscientific explanation that refutes RCT’s claims of a rationalist explanation. As Kaufman says, motivation is emotions not rational calculations (2006: 51). In terms of the symbolism explanation, average people are
controlled by their emotions via their leaders’ symbols and they make choices emotionally among competing values. Kaufman observed that ‘ethnic symbols are immensely powerful in this context, enabling a politician to reinterpret a conflict of interest as a struggle for security, status, and the future of the group’ (2001: 61)

Preconditions of ethnic war and genocide strengthen symbolist theory’s hand with three components: a justification for hostility through myth; an emotional precondition; and political opportunity. Kaufman states that group mythology vindicates hostility for rigorous acts; furthermore, he adds, it must exist before a politician can exploit it for his or her benefit (Kaufman 2006: 53). However, on its own, myth is not enough to cause ethnic violence (2006: 53). But the center of the symbolist theory is emotions, particularly reciprocal fear for existence, which is the second element of ethnic violence. A third element is political space to mobilize people through institutions in order to escalate the opportunity for violence.

In contrast to the symbolist approach, RCT make different claims about the root of ethnic conflict and violence via linking it with rational desires, which come from universal interests (Lake and Rothchild 1996: 42). Also, Lake and Rothchild identify RCT’s stance with an instrumentalist perspective, which says ethnicity is used as a tool by elites, group or individuals to gain their political interests (1996: 42). Mass hostility, chauvinist political mobilization and the fear element concerned with security of the group, encourages groups to wage ethnic war or genocide in the rational perspective.

Although the Kosovo case is interpreted differently by Kaufman, the process can be found in Serbia where Milosevic used symbols and myths as his major policy to gain dominance over the Kosovo Albanians using historical motives that came from the Ottoman era and reminded people of past hostilities (Kaufman 2006: 53). Based on symbolistic elements, conflict is fuelled by symbolic hatreds and violence mobilized by political opportunity.

Ethno-symbolist theory explains the roots of the violence from its own perspective, yet the question remains, are symbols and myths enough to trigger a crowd to commit the crime of genocide? King evaluates Kaufman’s interpretation of the term ethnic war and causative elements of genocide. King comprehends Kaufman’s symbolist theory on ethnic violence as being framed within myths’ power and retaliation feeling that trigger and reveal violence among different polarities by the leader or any other external power (King 2004: 166). Based on Kaufman’s post-Cold War era analysis, King contradicts Kaufman’s symbolistic factors as insufficient given that few nationalists went so far as to exterminate their neighbors (2004: 166). King suggests that reasons for ethnic violence include leaders’ personalities, economic
grievances, and security dilemmas. However, these factors are not enough to strongly refute the symbolistic theory and exclude the role of myths and symbols. Kaufmann brings reasonable explanations about symbols and their powers, which anarchic atmospheres can increase with hateful discourses between ethnic groups that may even convert discourses of hate to war (Kaufmann 2005: 197). Kaufman argues, ‘dangerous symbols are myths that justify political domination of particular territory and myths of past atrocities that can be used to justify fears of future’ that RCT might suffocate (2005: 197).
CONCLUSION

The aim of this article has been to give a brief definition of the terms of genocide and ethnic cleansing mostly focusing on understanding why violence emerges from the perspective of two main approaches (RCT and ethno-symbolist theories). Explaining genocide or ethnic cleansing might help to comprehend the roots of ethnic violence. The analysis here shows that RCT and ethnic-symbolist theory are like yin and yang in that they cannot be considered separately once any ethnic conflict case is dissected. Power, symbols, greed or historical myths can drive any conflict together, and the case of each genocide is unique. As discussed at the beginning of this essay, it is possible to state the causes of the genocide and ethnic cleansing within the framework of RCT and ethno-symbolist theories when used together, instead of thinking that ethnic violence has only rational or emotional roots.
REFERENCES


