

## **Ethnicity: "Ancient" or "Modern"?**

State-building is problematic in a fractious environment in which ethnic groups war against each other and resist incorporation into the state. That ethnic groups may be an important barrier to state-building raises the question: Why is it that persons might choose to embrace ethnic identity and to resist the state? My paper addresses this issue, first by arguing that much of the traditional thinking on this subject is misleading, as it relies on the idea that ethnic identity is an ancient, natural foundation of “traditional” community life. In this view, it is each person’s devotion to emotionally-charged notions of shared blood and a shared heritage of religion, language, and other aspects of culture that sustains community. By contrast, the modern nation-state is thought to represent a distinct form of community. Rather than emotion, a nation-state is built through purposeful and rational social action in the construction of institutions for effective governance and economy, alongside the active dissemination of language, knowledge, and ideas. Nation-building projects, it is argued, are made problematic when the forces of modernity and rationality collide with the force of ancient ethnic sentiment.

The idea that community life reflects either rational action or ethnic sentiment was challenged by Fredrik Barth, who noted the contingent and changeable character of ethnic identity and argued that group-building through ethnic affiliation is best understood as a product of the conscious actions of persons striving to create purposeful cooperative groups. My paper builds on Barth’s insights by rethinking them in light of the claims of collective action and costly signaling theories.

Collective action theory argues that the cooperative management of resources is always problematic because not every member of a group will act in a manner consistent with common interest. A person may anticipate benefit from cooperating, but will only do so if cooperator problems can be overcome, most notably the “assurance problem.” This refers to the fact that group members are more likely to cooperate when they are able to confirm that others’ actions will be consistent with group goals. Yet, how is it possible to ascertain the intentions of others? Costly (or “reputational”) signaling has been proposed as one possible solution to the assurance problem. Given that a potential cooperator looks for valid signals indicating others’ intentions, the theory argues that signals entailing penalties to the signaler are more difficult to fake than low-penalty signals.

I argue that ethnicity can be understood as a form of signaling. To outsiders, ethnic signals specify the limits of a group’s territorial boundaries, while, as Barth noted, within-group signaling serves to confirm the degree of commitment to shared value orientations. Barth and other students of ethnicity have pointed to the high costs of an ethnic group’s way of life, including the requirement to conform closely to conventional forms of housing, clothing, food and other aspects of material culture. In addition, there are expectations of conformance to proper public etiquette, language competency, and participation in public ritual cycles. Given the high signaling costs, I predict ethnicity will provide a framework for cooperation only when its benefits outweigh costs. In my paper, I emphasize two contexts where ethnicity is likely to provide a positive means to solve the

assurance problem:

(1) In Peripheries and Margins. Generally in the pre-modern world, but to some extent today, economic development and political complexity are restricted to “core” zones surrounded by relatively ungoverned margins. Core-zone economies require raw materials and labor, and, to gain these, cores extend their influence into ungoverned margins, but in the process bring social and demographic disruptions caused by competition for resources, wars, and pressure from slavers. Anthropologists have often noted the process of “ethnogenesis”—new ethnic group formation—in such zones as people come together for mutual defense and control of resources in chaotic conditions.

(2) In Failed States. Nation-states may strive to govern across their territories, but today, as in the past, many failed states lack the willingness or capacity to provide governing services equally to all within their territorial limits. As in the chaotic margins, local groups may turn to an ethnic strategy, either to provide for some level of effective cooperation at the local level or to better organize themselves to demand services from an incompetent and indifferent central government.

## Publication

[Theories of ethnicity and the dynamics of ethnic change in multiethnic societies.](#)

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