

Debating the “Wild Beast”
Examples from Ethnic Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia

Ethnic conflict has eluded easy explanation. It appears to be a very situational construct that only happens when the conditions are just right; like a perfect storm of warfare. Peter Maass uses Ivo Andric’s image of the “wild beast” to describe the inhuman actions and situations that often accompany ethnic conflict. The “wild beast” image assumes an innateness of violence in all humans. This assumption is faulty given the evidence of Yugoslavia. John Mueller’s instrumentalist approach takes into account the process of identification that forms groups, the catalysts for ethnic conflict, and the continuation and often escalation of violence during the conflict. His theory is unique in how it identifies specific, small groups of “thugs” as the actors in ethnic conflicts. It goes beyond sociobiology and primordialism. Mueller’s theory also addresses both the identification process and actions during the conflict more thoroughly than other constructivists, such as Charles Tilly and Russell Hardin. Given the evidence of Yugoslavia, Mueller’s position that the wild beast is present in all societies, but only in a small portion of the population and it is these corrupt criminals that carry out the violence on behalf of political entrepreneurs, explains most convincingly why ethnic conflict is not a universal occurrence.

In order to understand why Mueller’s argument is the most comprehensive, other theories and their strengths and weaknesses must first be addressed. Sociobiology is a theory that has been used to explain ethnic conflict on the assumption that ethnic conflict is natural. According to the theory, people naturally act to protect their genes and the genes of those most similar to them (Kecmanovic 1996, 40). Humans naturally form groups and develop an in-group preference for members of their group and then will act to protect or advance their group over others (35). The “wild beast” then is a natural part of all people and ethnic conflict is inevitable.

However, the most difficult part of this assertion is the idea that people can somehow detect whose genes are most similar to their own. All humans on the planet are extremely closely related genetically, even those within the same ethnic group, and so the idea that individuals can somehow tell who is most closely related to them is unreasonable. This is especially true in Yugoslavia in which the warring groups were all Slavs and so if sociobiology held true, they should not have been fighting each other because in doing so they were eliminating their related genes. Additionally, it is more evolutionarily advantageous for the species to have a diverse gene pool to deal with new possibilities and adaptations and so sociobiology's assertion that people act to eliminate other genes goes against evolutionary logic. Sociobiologists also have difficulty explaining mixed ethnic marriages, as this goes against acting to promote only one group's genes. Furthermore, the children of such ethnically mixed marriages *choose* which ethnic group to identify with, casting serious doubt on the premise that ethnicity is an innate and unchanging trait. The same problem accompanies immigrants who define themselves by the culture of their new country and identify themselves as members of their new country.

Primordialism is closely related to sociobiology in its position that ethnicity is a natural, inborn part of people that does not change. Conflict in primordialism is a natural part of human nature and hence, the "wild beast" is a natural inescapable part of all people. There are many strains of primordialism and Walker Connor presents an interesting approach to primordial theory. He argues that it is not actual blood ties that matter, but rather *believed* relationships (Connor 1994, 197). These believed blood ties are emotional and non-rational and these characteristics make ethno-nationalism a stronger force than any other political or social

grouping (214, 207-8). So Connor argues that people will always choose their ethnic groups over their government or state, if the two are different and in conflict (207-8).

The second part of the claim is the most problematic. While Connor does address that ethnic groups are often not in reality groups that are actually related, and it is the *belief* that matters, his claim that people will choose their ethnic group over the state all the time is open to criticism. For example, Japanese Americans during WWII who risked being sent to internment camps identified themselves as Americans and renounced any connection with Japan. A related example is that in Yugoslavia some people defined themselves as Yugoslavs before the conflict began. Connor's theory cannot account for why people would then switch to identifying as Croat, Serb, Bosnian, etc. since he claims that ethnicity is an inborn and unchanging identity. Mueller uses the argument that the seemingly randomness and rapidness with which some people in Yugoslavia went from being complacent neighbors with other ethnic groups to engaging in ethnic cleansing actually points to the weakness and flexibility of ethnic identity in the region (Bernard, "Bosnia" p. 24 qtd. in Mueller 2000, 55). The fact that people switched their behavior points to the instrumentalist aspect of the conflict. The switch was a tool manipulated by political entrepreneurs to stay in power. "Why now" remains unanswered in Connor's theory and why is perhaps the most important question.

Mueller's theory addresses the "why" question of ethnic warfare as well as the who, what, where, when, and how. The who and the how according to Mueller's instrumentalist theory consists of political entrepreneurs who use small gangs of essentially criminals and thugs to do their dirty work (often ethnic cleansing of some kind) and intimidate co-ethnics into cooperating (Mueller 2000, 42). These political entrepreneurs and their thugs take advantage of weakened political and economic structures to engage in campaigns of violence, pillaging, and

intimidation. Mueller perceives the “wild beast” as being present in all societies, but only in a small percentage of the population (67-8). The Hobbesian view of conflict, all against all, does not characterize ethnic warfare according to Mueller (42). Most members of a society embroiled in ethnic conflict are not active participants supporting the violence. It is the political entrepreneurs utilizing opportunistic criminal gangs seeking material gain through plundering, social positions of power through intimidation, or revenge that are responsible for sparking ethnic conflict. The masses are generally bewildered by the actions of these small groups and often fall into silent submission or even unwilling participation out of fear (43). For example, polls showed that the populations of Croatia and Serbia were actually not very supportive of Tudjman and Milosevic. These leaders gained power through a manipulation of the system, not through actual popular support. The real divide was more between urban and rural than between the ethnicities as Tudjman and Milosevic promoted through propaganda (45-7).

The first stage that such political entrepreneurs as Tudjman and Milosevic embarked upon was “takeover” (Mueller 2000, 53). Mueller uses this term to describe the beginnings of the conflict in which circumstances became ripe for manipulation for the leaders and their gangs. When Milosevic began trying to use the army to carry out the war against Croatia, many members of the JNA deserted or mutinied (50). The collapse of the discipline and order of the army is a key point in Mueller’s theory. Without the overarching control of a disciplined, legitimate force, the small gangs of criminals were allowed free rein. The government used these criminals partly because the army was no longer capable of acting alone (Mueller 2000, 47).

While an undisciplined army is itself problematic enough to contribute to the outbreak of ethnic conflict, the core problem in the case of Yugoslavia was that the weakened army was then

supplemented by these gangs whose members' "primary motive was not fighting the enemy but robbery of private property and inhuman treatment of Croatian civilians (UN experts qtd. in Mueller 2000, 49). They were out for material gain and were serving their self interest above all else. Mueller quotes Rieff as stating that "the political aims of the war became hopelessly intertwined on a day-to-day level with profiteering and black market activities (qtd. 56). For example, Serbs would sell weapons to the Bosnians and Croats to use to fight against the Serbs and Serb tanks were also reportedly available for daily rent (58). These contradictory actions illustrate that ethnic conflict, especially in the example of Yugoslavia is like a scorched earth policy. The warlords and gangs destroyed whatever they could and sapped the rest of society to the point where the only productive actions left were more violence and war. The ethnic conflict rationally benefits no one. Victims are traumatized, homeless, or dead and the conquerors are left with a decimated region. The only people left are fanatics, economic pirates, criminals, opportunistic "sycophants" or revenge seekers, certainly not the population of a well functioning state (57).

While the criminal gangs were recruited and activated by the political entrepreneurs, they most likely also acted on their own accord and to some extent were outside the control of their creators (Mueller 2000, 63). Indeed, since the system in Yugoslavia at the time of the conflict was so chaotic and anarchic and ethical boundaries ceased to exist, it is unlikely that any action would have been deemed inappropriate. Mueller describes the atmosphere as "carnival" in which the sadists and psychopaths which exist in every society indulge in the opportunity to abandon all forms of political, social, and moral constraints and carry out atrocities in some type of bizarre self interest (55). This disintegration of order and rise of sadistic gangs created an atmosphere of fear in which civilians either fled out of fear or became unwilling observers or

participants in the violence. The populations that could not flee fast enough or had no place to go were trapped within the conflict (Mueller 2000, 53). While Mueller argues that most people sought alternatives to participation, he recognizes that some did join willingly out of revenge or extreme ethnic loyalty primarily with the motive of material gain (63). By considering the strong motivating factor of revenge, he addresses the emotional aspects of ethnic war.

Critiques of Mueller's argument often claim that he lets too many people off the hook. However, it seems meaningless to hold innocent civilians who were coerced under fear of death to participate actively or passively responsible for the unethical agenda of the few. Blanketing a group with blame prolongs or prevents a return to cooperative relations. The more credible criticism of Mueller's theory is that its preconditions of political entrepreneurs in a state lacking a legitimate police force exist in many places where ethnic strife does not occur. A possible response is that these societies that have so far avoided ethnic strife either have lacked political entrepreneurs adept enough at mobilizing support, or that the cultural/social norms and mores of the society are stringent enough to forbid ethnic violence on their own. More egalitarian societies that lack political and social hierarchies offer less to the political entrepreneurs and their gangs.

Mueller's theory also provides more convincing support for the cause of ethnic identification and why people act on it than other constructivist theories, such as Charles Tilly's theory that it is a self-interested response largely due to capitalism, or Russell Hardin's claim that ethnic groups are modeled on the coordination game in which it does not matter what people coordinate around, as long as they all agree (Hardin 1995, 20). Tilly's argument is that states engaged in warfare to gain more resources (capitalistic motivation) and that the states were structured similarly to organized crime (class notes). However, this only explains why leaders

engaged in warfare, but not why people organized into ethnic groups. Hardin's assumption that ethnic groups are modeled on the coordination game is suspect because it seems unreasonable to assume that ethnicity is a random factor with no more importance than hair color. People will disagree and do not form groups just for the sake of it. Hardin's theory also assumes that people stay in ethnic groups because it is easier, but often that is not the case (Hardin 1995, 23-4).

People will identify with whichever group is more politically, socially, economically advantageous. The earlier example of Japanese Americans identifying themselves as American and renouncing their Japanese heritage to avoid internment camps applies. Hardin does agree with Mueller that it is the security dilemma between groups that causes ethnic conflict and that prevention is possible through an overarching authority and a healthy economy.

Mueller's argument addresses who, what, where, when, why and how aspects of ethnic conflict. Political entrepreneurs engage small criminal gangs to spark ethnic animosities by using violence and intimidation. People mostly try to hide or leave, but some are drawn into the violence out of self interest, be it out of revenge or for material gain. The key unique point of Mueller's theory is that the "wild beast" exists in every society, but only in a small number of the people (Mueller 2000, 67-8). Ethnic conflict can be prevented by strong, well-disciplined police forces and a stable, legitimate government (65). Economic well-being is a factor in preventing ethnic conflict in the sense that these states are more likely to have a well equipped military (68). Such a stable overarching authority and legitimate police force were lacking in Yugoslavia. Milosevic used ethnicity as a tool to be wielded by his gangs in attempts to stay in power. The examples in Yugoslavia contradict a sociobiology or primordialist approach to ethnic conflict because ethnicity is not purely innate as these two theories posit. Mueller's emphasis on the political entrepreneurs using small gangs engaging in ethnic violence for personal, social, or

economic gain along with the clear political and economic conditions that act as catalysts make it the most compelling theory with which to approach ethnic conflict.

Bibliography

Class notes. Spring 2011. POLS 254: Ethnicity and Internal War, Dr. Ellen Carnaghan.

Connor, Walker. 1994. *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hardin, Russell. 1995. "Self Interest, Group Identification." In *Perspectives on Nationalism and War*, edited by John L. Comaroff and Paul C. Stern, 15-45. Australia: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers.

Kecmanovic, Dusan. 1996. *The Mass Psychology of Ethnonationalism*. New York: Plenum Press.

Mueller, John. 2000. "The Banality of 'Ethnic War'." *International Security* 25, no.1 (Summer): 42-70.

Debating the “Wild Beast”
Examples from Ethnic Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia

Ethnic conflict has eluded easy explanation. It appears to be a very situational construct that only happens when the conditions are just right; like a perfect storm of warfare. Peter Maass uses Ivo Andric’s image of the “wild beast” to describe the inhuman actions and situations that often accompany ethnic conflict. The “wild beast” image assumes an innateness of violence in all humans. This assumption is faulty given the evidence of Yugoslavia. John Mueller’s instrumentalist approach takes into account the process of identification that forms groups, the catalysts for ethnic conflict, and the continuation and often escalation of violence during the conflict. His theory is unique in how it identifies specific, small groups of “thugs” as the actors in ethnic conflicts. It goes beyond sociobiology and primordialism. Mueller’s theory also addresses both the identification process and actions during the conflict more thoroughly than other constructivists, such as Charles Tilly and Russell Hardin. Given the evidence of Yugoslavia, Mueller’s position that the wild beast is present in all societies, but only in a small portion of the population and it is these corrupt criminals that carry out the violence on behalf of political entrepreneurs, explains most convincingly why ethnic conflict is not a universal occurrence.

In order to understand why Mueller’s argument is the most comprehensive, other theories and their strengths and weaknesses must first be addressed. Sociobiology is a theory that has been used to explain ethnic conflict on the assumption that ethnic conflict is natural. According to the theory, people naturally act to protect their genes and the genes of those most similar to them (Kecmanovic 1996, 40). Humans naturally form groups and develop an in-group preference for members of their group and then will act to protect or advance their group over others (35). The “wild beast” then is a natural part of all people and ethnic conflict is inevitable.

However, the most difficult part of this assertion is the idea that people can somehow detect whose genes are most similar to their own. All humans on the planet are extremely closely related genetically, even those within the same ethnic group, and so the idea that individuals can somehow tell who is most closely related to them is unreasonable. This is especially true in Yugoslavia in which the warring groups were all Slavs and so if sociobiology held true, they should not have been fighting each other because in doing so they were eliminating their related genes. Additionally, it is more evolutionarily advantageous for the species to have a diverse gene pool to deal with new possibilities and adaptations and so sociobiology's assertion that people act to eliminate other genes goes against evolutionary logic. Sociobiologists also have difficulty explaining mixed ethnic marriages, as this goes against acting to promote only one group's genes. Furthermore, the children of such ethnically mixed marriages *choose* which ethnic group to identify with, casting serious doubt on the premise that ethnicity is an innate and unchanging trait. The same problem accompanies immigrants who define themselves by the culture of their new country and identify themselves as members of their new country.

Primordialism is closely related to sociobiology in its position that ethnicity is a natural, inborn part of people that does not change. Conflict in primordialism is a natural part of human nature and hence, the "wild beast" is a natural inescapable part of all people. There are many strains of primordialism and Walker Connor presents an interesting approach to primordial theory. He argues that it is not actual blood ties that matter, but rather *believed* relationships (Connor 1994, 197). These believed blood ties are emotional and non-rational and these characteristics make ethno-nationalism a stronger force than any other political or social

grouping (214, 207-8). So Connor argues that people will always choose their ethnic groups over their government or state, if the two are different and in conflict (207-8).

The second part of the claim is the most problematic. While Connor does address that ethnic groups are often not in reality groups that are actually related, and it is the *belief* that matters, his claim that people will choose their ethnic group over the state all the time is open to criticism. For example, Japanese Americans during WWII who risked being sent to internment camps identified themselves as Americans and renounced any connection with Japan. A related example is that in Yugoslavia some people defined themselves as Yugoslavs before the conflict began. Connor's theory cannot account for why people would then switch to identifying as Croat, Serb, Bosnian, etc. since he claims that ethnicity is an inborn and unchanging identity. Mueller uses the argument that the seemingly randomness and rapidness with which some people in Yugoslavia went from being complacent neighbors with other ethnic groups to engaging in ethnic cleansing actually points to the weakness and flexibility of ethnic identity in the region (Bernard, "Bosnia" p. 24 qtd. in Mueller 2000, 55). The fact that people switched their behavior points to the instrumentalist aspect of the conflict. The switch was a tool manipulated by political entrepreneurs to stay in power. "Why now" remains unanswered in Connor's theory and why is perhaps the most important question.

Mueller's theory addresses the "why" question of ethnic warfare as well as the who, what, where, when, and how. The who and the how according to Mueller's instrumentalist theory consists of political entrepreneurs who use small gangs of essentially criminals and thugs to do their dirty work (often ethnic cleansing of some kind) and intimidate co-ethnics into cooperating (Mueller 2000, 42). These political entrepreneurs and their thugs take advantage of weakened political and economic structures to engage in campaigns of violence, pillaging, and

intimidation. Mueller perceives the “wild beast” as being present in all societies, but only in a small percentage of the population (67-8). The Hobbesian view of conflict, all against all, does not characterize ethnic warfare according to Mueller (42). Most members of a society embroiled in ethnic conflict are not active participants supporting the violence. It is the political entrepreneurs utilizing opportunistic criminal gangs seeking material gain through plundering, social positions of power through intimidation, or revenge that are responsible for sparking ethnic conflict. The masses are generally bewildered by the actions of these small groups and often fall into silent submission or even unwilling participation out of fear (43). For example, polls showed that the populations of Croatia and Serbia were actually not very supportive of Tudjman and Milosevic. These leaders gained power through a manipulation of the system, not through actual popular support. The real divide was more between urban and rural than between the ethnicities as Tudjman and Milosevic promoted through propaganda (45-7).

The first stage that such political entrepreneurs as Tudjman and Milosevic embarked upon was “takeover” (Mueller 2000, 53). Mueller uses this term to describe the beginnings of the conflict in which circumstances became ripe for manipulation for the leaders and their gangs. When Milosevic began trying to use the army to carry out the war against Croatia, many members of the JNA deserted or mutinied (50). The collapse of the discipline and order of the army is a key point in Mueller’s theory. Without the overarching control of a disciplined, legitimate force, the small gangs of criminals were allowed free rein. The government used these criminals partly because the army was no longer capable of acting alone (Mueller 2000, 47).

While an undisciplined army is itself problematic enough to contribute to the outbreak of ethnic conflict, the core problem in the case of Yugoslavia was that the weakened army was then

supplemented by these gangs whose members' "primary motive was not fighting the enemy but robbery of private property and inhuman treatment of Croatian civilians (UN experts qtd. in Mueller 2000, 49). They were out for material gain and were serving their self interest above all else. Mueller quotes Rieff as stating that "the political aims of the war became hopelessly intertwined on a day-to-day level with profiteering and black market activities (qtd. 56). For example, Serbs would sell weapons to the Bosnians and Croats to use to fight against the Serbs and Serb tanks were also reportedly available for daily rent (58). These contradictory actions illustrate that ethnic conflict, especially in the example of Yugoslavia is like a scorched earth policy. The warlords and gangs destroyed whatever they could and sapped the rest of society to the point where the only productive actions left were more violence and war. The ethnic conflict rationally benefits no one. Victims are traumatized, homeless, or dead and the conquerors are left with a decimated region. The only people left are fanatics, economic pirates, criminals, opportunistic "sycophants" or revenge seekers, certainly not the population of a well functioning state (57).

While the criminal gangs were recruited and activated by the political entrepreneurs, they most likely also acted on their own accord and to some extent were outside the control of their creators (Mueller 2000, 63). Indeed, since the system in Yugoslavia at the time of the conflict was so chaotic and anarchic and ethical boundaries ceased to exist, it is unlikely that any action would have been deemed inappropriate. Mueller describes the atmosphere as "carnival" in which the sadists and psychopaths which exist in every society indulge in the opportunity to abandon all forms of political, social, and moral constraints and carry out atrocities in some type of bizarre self interest (55). This disintegration of order and rise of sadistic gangs created an atmosphere of fear in which civilians either fled out of fear or became unwilling observers or

participants in the violence. The populations that could not flee fast enough or had no place to go were trapped within the conflict (Mueller 2000, 53). While Mueller argues that most people sought alternatives to participation, he recognizes that some did join willingly out of revenge or extreme ethnic loyalty primarily with the motive of material gain (63). By considering the strong motivating factor of revenge, he addresses the emotional aspects of ethnic war.

Critiques of Mueller's argument often claim that he lets too many people off the hook. However, it seems meaningless to hold innocent civilians who were coerced under fear of death to participate actively or passively responsible for the unethical agenda of the few. Blanketing a group with blame prolongs or prevents a return to cooperative relations. The more credible criticism of Mueller's theory is that its preconditions of political entrepreneurs in a state lacking a legitimate police force exist in many places where ethnic strife does not occur. A possible response is that these societies that have so far avoided ethnic strife either have lacked political entrepreneurs adept enough at mobilizing support, or that the cultural/social norms and mores of the society are stringent enough to forbid ethnic violence on their own. More egalitarian societies that lack political and social hierarchies offer less to the political entrepreneurs and their gangs.

Mueller's theory also provides more convincing support for the cause of ethnic identification and why people act on it than other constructivist theories, such as Charles Tilly's theory that it is a self-interested response largely due to capitalism, or Russell Hardin's claim that ethnic groups are modeled on the coordination game in which it does not matter what people coordinate around, as long as they all agree (Hardin 1995, 20). Tilly's argument is that states engaged in warfare to gain more resources (capitalistic motivation) and that the states were structured similarly to organized crime (class notes). However, this only explains why leaders

engaged in warfare, but not why people organized into ethnic groups. Hardin's assumption that ethnic groups are modeled on the coordination game is suspect because it seems unreasonable to assume that ethnicity is a random factor with no more importance than hair color. People will disagree and do not form groups just for the sake of it. Hardin's theory also assumes that people stay in ethnic groups because it is easier, but often that is not the case (Hardin 1995, 23-4).

People will identify with whichever group is more politically, socially, economically advantageous. The earlier example of Japanese Americans identifying themselves as American and renouncing their Japanese heritage to avoid internment camps applies. Hardin does agree with Mueller that it is the security dilemma between groups that causes ethnic conflict and that prevention is possible through an overarching authority and a healthy economy.

Mueller's argument addresses who, what, where, when, why and how aspects of ethnic conflict. Political entrepreneurs engage small criminal gangs to spark ethnic animosities by using violence and intimidation. People mostly try to hide or leave, but some are drawn into the violence out of self interest, be it out of revenge or for material gain. The key unique point of Mueller's theory is that the "wild beast" exists in every society, but only in a small number of the people (Mueller 2000, 67-8). Ethnic conflict can be prevented by strong, well-disciplined police forces and a stable, legitimate government (65). Economic well-being is a factor in preventing ethnic conflict in the sense that these states are more likely to have a well equipped military (68). Such a stable overarching authority and legitimate police force were lacking in Yugoslavia. Milosevic used ethnicity as a tool to be wielded by his gangs in attempts to stay in power. The examples in Yugoslavia contradict a sociobiology or primordialist approach to ethnic conflict because ethnicity is not purely innate as these two theories posit. Mueller's emphasis on the political entrepreneurs using small gangs engaging in ethnic violence for personal, social, or

economic gain along with the clear political and economic conditions that act as catalysts make it the most compelling theory with which to approach ethnic conflict.

Bibliography

Class notes. Spring 2011. POLS 254: Ethnicity and Internal War, Dr. Ellen Carnaghan.

Connor, Walker. 1994. *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hardin, Russell. 1995. "Self Interest, Group Identification." In *Perspectives on Nationalism and War*, edited by John L. Comaroff and Paul C. Stern, 15-45. Australia: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers.

Kecmanovic, Dusan. 1996. *The Mass Psychology of Ethnonationalism*. New York: Plenum Press.

Mueller, John. 2000. "The Banality of 'Ethnic War'." *International Security* 25, no.1 (Summer): 42-70.