Ethnic conflicts and their impact on international society

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The persistence of ethnic conflicts

A survey on states in armed conflict in 1988 reports that of a total of 111 such conflicts in the world, 63 were internal and 36 were described by the authors as ‘wars of state formation’, that is, conflicts involving one government and an opposition group demanding autonomy or secession for a particular ethnic or region. In fact, in recent years, the number of classic inter-state wars has been decreasing and the number of intra-state conflicts, particularly in Third World countries, increasing. Another report tells us that ‘state-sponsored massacres of members of ethnic and political groups are responsible for greater loss of life than all other forms of deadly conflict combined . . . On average, between 1.6 and 3.9 million unarmed civilians have died at the hand of the state in each decade since the end of World War II . . .’

Despite such evidence, relatively little attention has been paid over the years to ethnic conflicts by specialists of peace and conflict research and of international relations. More attention has been given to inter-state confrontations of the traditional type. One of the reasons for this situation is that many scholars consider that ethnic confrontations are domestic matters of states, perhaps related to dictatorial and/or repressive governments, or simply by-products of larger conflicts.

Ethnic conflicts and theory

At the theoretical level, ethnic conflicts do not easily find a place in the usual analytical models of conflict studies or the sociology of change and development. For decades the so-called modernization paradigm dominated thinking in the social sciences, and according to this point of view the process of societal change leads from the traditional to the modern, from the simple to the complex, from ‘particularism’ to ‘universalism’, to use concepts developed by Parsons in the Weberian tradition. Within this framework, ethnic issues pertain to the ‘particularistic’ or pre-modern world and are swept aside by the modernization process. If they do arise, they are seen as ‘obstacles to change’ or as the consequence of ‘incomplete modernization’, and thus of minor importance to the theorist. In a similar vein, theories of ‘nation-building’ emphasize the comprehensive nature of the transformation of subnational units and loyalties into a wider polity. Here again, ethnic issues may be considered as stumbling-blocks in a more general process of change.

Other approaches relate conflict basically to economic interests, in which the group actors tend to be social classes defined in terms of their position in the system of production. Where social relations of production are paramount in determining power relationships in society and at the international level, ethnic issues may appear as decidedly of secondary importance.

Thus we see that in general liberal, functionalist and Marxist approaches to conflict and
development have neglected the importance of ethnic issues and conflicts. Consequently there are few helpful theoretical models available to guide research on these contemporary issues.

Types of ethnic groups in conflict

In order to place ethnic conflicts into proper perspective, it may be useful briefly to refer to different kinds of situation in which ethnic groups interact within a wider framework. But even before this, it will be necessary to provide a minimum working definition of ethnic groups, because the term is used rather loosely in the literature and there is no general consensus regarding this concept. For brevity’s sake, an ethnic group or ethnie is a collectivity which identifies itself and is identified by others according to ethnic criteria, that is, in terms of certain common elements such as language, religion, tribe, nationality or race, or a combination thereof, and which shares a common feeling of identity with other members of the group. True, such a definition raises more questions than it answers, but it may serve a useful purpose in introducing the rest of this article.

Ethnic groups so defined may also be considered as peoples, nations, nationalities, minorities, tribes or communities, according to different contexts and circumstances. Frequently, ethnic groups are identified in terms of their relationships with similar groups and with the state. In fact, many ethnic conflicts in the world result from problems arising out of changes in the position of an ethnic group within the wider society. Let us identify a number of different kinds of situations which are common around the world:

1. Ethnic groups within a state which identifies itself as being multi-ethnic or multinational. Such groups may base their identity on language (as in Belgium and Switzerland), religion (as do Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus in India; Christians and Muslims in Lebanon), nationality (as in the Soviet Union) or race (South Africa). In such cases, ethnic groups which are different from the dominant or majority nationality may or may not enjoy special legal status, and they are usually in a minority and non-dominant position.

2. Ethnic groups within a state which does not formally recognize its own multi-ethnic composition, such as France, Japan, Indonesia, Turkey, Portugal and numerous African countries. Here minorities may be regionally based such as Bretons and Corsicans in France, or Scots and Welsh in Britain; or they may be racial (as Blacks in the United States), religious (as the Copts in Egypt or the Baha’i in Iran), linguistic (as the Berbers in Algeria), or tribal (as in Afghanistan); or a combination of several of these elements.

3. National minorities which identify with their ethnic kin in a neighbouring state in which they may have majority status (such as the Hungarians in Rumania, the Turks in Bulgaria, the Albanians in Yugoslavia, the Chicanos in the United States).

4. Multiple ethnic groups within a state in which none enjoys a particularly dominant position, specifically in recently independent, formerly colonial countries, in which the state itself is a relatively weak, artificial construct; this situation tends to prevail in Africa south of the Sahara.

5. Ethnic minorities which straddle international boundaries and with minority status in each one of the countries, as in the frontier areas in Southeast Asia, the Basques in Spain and France, and the Kurds in the Middle East.

6. Ethnic immigrants and refugees resulting from extensive migrations, particularly from the Third World countries into other Third World countries or into industrialized nations. Whereas in earlier centuries European settlers colonized numerous areas around the world, and their descendants constitute ethnic groups in many countries (sometimes as minorities, or else as majorities), in recent decades migratory flows have turned around and Third World immigrants are now settling their former metropolises, constituting ethnic enclaves in numerous countries and giving rise to serious social and cultural problems.

7. Indigenous and tribal peoples constitute a special case of ethnic groups, generally being regarded as minorities, because of the historical circumstances of their conquest and incorporation into new state structures as well as their attachment to their land and territory.
and their secular resistance to genocide, ethnocide and assimilation. Indigenous peoples are found mainly in the Americas, Australia and New Zealand, but numerous south and southeast Asian tribal peoples are nowadays also considered as indigenous, as well as the Inuit and Sami in the far north.8

This schematic classification does not exhaust all possibilities of situations in which ethnic groups interact, and there may be overlapping between the categories. It is, however, a useful device to identify situations in which ethnic conflicts tend to occur.

Varieties of ethnic conflicts

The term ‘ethnic conflict’ actually covers a wide range of situations. In fact, it might be argued that ethnic conflict as such does not exist. What does exist is social, political and economic conflict between groups of people who identify each other in ethnic terms: colour, race, religion, language, national origin. Very often such ethnic characteristics may mask other distinguishing features, such as class interests and political power, which on analysis may turn out to be the more important elements in the conflict. Still, when ethnic differences are used consciously or unconsciously to distinguish the opposing actors in a conflict situation – particularly when they become powerful mobilizing symbols, as is so often the case – then ethnicity does become a determining factor in the nature and dynamic of the conflict.9

Scholars usually distinguish between ranked and unranked systems of inter-ethnic relations, though there are numerous borderline cases. In unranked but nevertheless severely divided systems ethnic conflicts may occur between groups which enjoy relatively equal shares of wealth and power, when one or several of the groups fears or perceives that its position vis-à-vis another ethnic group tends to deteriorate. Here ethnic conflict may be localized and particularistic, without involving the centre of political power. Arguably, however, most cases of ethnic conflict in the world today involve a ranked or stratified system of inter-ethnic relations in which not only different ethnic groups are ranked on a scale of power, prestige and wealth and generally placed in a superordinate/subordinate position in relation to each other, but more importantly, the centre of power and the state apparatus are more or less controlled by a dominant and/or majority ethnie, leaving the subordinate ethnie or ethnies in a position of marginality.

Frequently, in ranked or stratified ethnic systems an ethnic group may be identical to, or tends to overlap, a social class. Consider, for example, the ethnically distinct ‘guest workers’ from the Third World in Western Europe, the history of the Blacks in the United States, the Indian Tamil plantation workers in Sri Lanka, the indigenous peoples of Latin America, the Africans in South Africa and so forth. However, ethnic stratification is also a phenomenon which stands by itself, regardless of the class affiliation of an ethnic group’s members. In stratified systems, social and political conflict may be expressed as ethnic conflict, and it usually implicates the power of the state, threatening the institutional model upon which state power is based. The major ethnic conflicts of the 1980s – whether in Lebanon, Sri Lanka, India, East Timor, Northern Ireland, Cyprus, Eritrea, Burundi, South Africa, Western Sahara, Nicaragua – echoing such earlier ones as Nigeria, Pakistan and Canada, involve not only a confrontation between ethnic groups but between one such group and the ethnocratic state, that is, the state controlled by a dominant ethnic group.

The persistence of such conflicts over relatively long periods and the intense violence which may accompany them has led some observers to distinguish between ‘conflicts of interest’ and ‘conflicts of values’ or ‘identity conflicts’, the former being relatively more easily negotiated or resolved than the latter. Ethnic conflicts are usually of the second type, in which the goals or objectives of the parties in conflict tend to be mutually exclusive or incompatible, and therefore much more difficult to resolve. Ethnic and communal cleavages, argues E. Azar among others, are to be found at the source of the protracted social conflicts which bedevil so many countries in the world today.10

One of the reasons for these cleavages is to be found in the almost universal model of the nation-state, inspired by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European nationalism, which has served as an example of state-building
around the world, particularly as a legacy of the colonial system. Numerous ethnic conflicts occur because the homogenizing, integrating model of the nation-state, expressed in official ideologies, government policies of various sorts, dominant social attitudes and political behaviour, enter into contradiction with the ethnic and social identity of subordinate groups. When the dominant nation-state ideology is incapable of accommodating cultural and ethnic diversity, the likelihood of protracted ethnic conflict increases. Cultural genocide or ethnocide, which frequently accompany such conflicts, are common occurrences in many parts of the world.

Ethnic conflict can be expressed in many forms, ranging from individual behaviour involving avoidance, exclusion and hostility accompanied by stereotyping, prejudice, intolerance and discrimination at the level of interpersonal relationships; through institutional political action, secessionist movements, to violent confrontations which may take the form of riots, massacres, genocide, uprisings, rebellion, revolution, terrorism, civil war, wars of national liberation and inter-state warfare.

International comparisons of situations in which ethnic conflicts occur point to the prevalence of recurrent issues which inspire ethnic mobilizations and which are at the bottom of many ethnic conflicts. These issues have to do with the allocation of resources and power between ethnic groups, the question of land and territory (homelands, colonization, settlement, immigration, etc.), language, religion, cultural identity, as well as discrimination based on race or colour.\textsuperscript{11}

**Four cases**

A glance at four of the more significant ethnic conflicts taking place in the world in 1989–90 will show how these factors are involved:

1. In *Northern Ireland*, the historical roots of the conflict between the majority Protestants who wish to remain linked to Britain and the minority Catholics who aspire to join the Republic of Ireland, go back to the sixteenth century. The Irish nationalist Catholics feel that they have been traditionally discriminated against and subordinated to the dominant unionist Protestants. The partition of Ireland decided upon by the British in 1920 did not solve this protracted conflict, and after it erupted violently in 1969, the imposition of Direct Rule by London in 1972 was not particularly helpful in solving the problem. An Anglo-Irish agreement signed in 1985 ‘has been generally welcomed as a balanced and pragmatic means of recognizing the identities and interests of both communities in Northern Ireland’, but it has been opposed by both unionists and traditional republicans.\textsuperscript{12} An early solution to the conflict is unlikely.

2. The conflict in *Sri Lanka* has gone through several phases. The minority Tamils, distinguished by religion and language from the majority Buddhist Sinhalese, are mainly concentrated in the northeast of the island, where they settled over two thousand years ago. A subgroup of Indian Tamil plantation labourers was brought over by the British during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to work on the tea estates in the central highlands. Upon independence, the Sinhalese community felt that the Tamils had obtained disproportionate economic and political privileges from the British and set about to change the situation. First, they denied citizenship to most of the Indian Tamil labourers, then they established a Sinhala-only language policy and reorganized university entrance requirements to favour Sinhalese youth, and finally established Buddhism as the official religion. Though some of these measures were revoked or downgraded later on, in fact the Tamils now felt that they were being discriminated against. Tamil ethnic mobilization ranged from defence of their ‘homelands’ against settlement by Sinhalese ‘outsiders’ to political demands for regional autonomy or federation. Finally, militant Tamil organizations demanded the establishment of the separate state of Tamil Eelam, and initiated an armed struggle to attain their objective. After a number of violent riots in which hundreds of Tamils were killed and left homeless (1983, 1985), and many more became internal and international refugees, the conflict escalated into a full-scale civil war. The Tamil movement received aid from sympathizers in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu, and the Sinhalese government decided upon a policy of military victory in the name of national sovereignty. As the conflict dragged on with increasing numbers of victims and no
solution in sight, an agreement was signed between India and Sri Lanka in 1987, providing for Indian military intervention to guarantee a cessation of hostilities and the recognition of a number of Tamil demands. In 1990, at the request of the Sri Lankan government, India withdrew its troops. The Tamil guerrilla movement which was not actually dismembered by the Indian army, expressed its willingness to negotiate with the central government. But in the meantime, an extremist nationalist Buddhist Sinhalese movement stepped up its own violent attacks against the central government, inviting equally violent countermeasures by the government. Again, hundreds of civilians were the victims of this escalation. By early 1990, after the Indian troops had withdrawn, the level of violence appeared to decrease but an early political solution to the conflict is not yet in sight.\textsuperscript{13}

3. The Sandinista revolution of 1979 in Nicaragua, after several years of guerrilla warfare, succeeded in overthrowing a bloody thirty-year dictatorship and establishing a popular revolutionary government. Due to the Marxist inclinations of the new leadership, the government soon became the victim of ‘low-intensity warfare’, high-intensity economic boycott and attempts to overthrow it by the Reagan administration. In their struggle to resist imperialism and defend both the revolution and their endangered national sovereignty, the Sandinistas were eager to establish their effective control over the whole country. This brought them into direct conflict with the Miskito and other indigenous peoples of the Atlantic Coast, a region which had never been effectively integrated into the centralized political structure of Nicaragua. Due to their long-standing Caribbean contacts with Britain and the United States and the influence of the Moravian Church originally established by American missionaries, the Miskitos, many of them educated in American missionary schools along the coast, distrusted the Spanish-speaking revolutionaries of the Western region, now in charge of the central government, who wanted to change the Miskito’s lifestyles, economic activities and traditional land rights. The Sandinistas, in turn, had little sympathy for the ‘ethnic’ demands put forth by the Indians and soon considered their resistance to revolutionary policies as being equivalent to counter-revolutionary activity. Detentions, evictions, displacements and some violence occurred in 1981, and a number of Miskitos did indeed join the US-sponsored \textit{contras}. Others found refuge among Miskito communities across the Coco river in neighbouring Honduras. Still others opted to work for their objectives within the new political structures in the country.

By 1985 the Sandinista regime recognized its mistakes and proceeded to rectify its policies. After lengthy consultations, a new Nicaraguan constitution in 1988 established regional autonomy for the communities of the Atlantic Coast but still retained a large amount of control for the central government. Most Miskito refugees returned from abroad, others laid down their arms and returned to undertake legitimate political activity, and many more accepted the Sandinista challenge to work for effective regional autonomy within the new political structures.\textsuperscript{14}

In early 1990, the Sandinista government was voted out of office and an opposition coalition came to power. The majority of the Miskitos voted against the revolutionary government. How the new government will deal with the autonomy issue was still an open question at the time of this writing.

4. In Spain’s Basque provinces, the country of Euzkadi, regional nationalism arose as a political force in the nineteenth century, after the central Spanish government abolished long-standing local legal institutions. At the same time, incipient industrialization brought about migrations and increasing class conflict. During the Franco dictatorship, the Basque language and other ethnic expressions were suppressed. Basque nationalism grew, and by the 1970s a military separatist organization using terrorist tactics, known as ETA, dominated the field. The Basques not only adhere to their traditional institutions, but also to their language and consider themselves to be racially distinct from other Spaniards. Despite the guarantee of regional autonomy provided for in the new Spanish constitution and the Regional Autonomy Statute of 1978, the local effects of the economic crisis have fuelled sympathy among the population for the nationalist movement. It has also received support from the Basques in Northern Euzkadi, that is, in neighbouring France, but here Basque nationalism is a minor issue. The governments of Spain and France

\textsuperscript{13} UNESCO 1998.
have agreed jointly to combat ETA terrorism. At present, conditions for a peaceful solution to the problem within the democratic process seems to be possible, but tensions and violent confrontations between extremist Basque nationalists and the repressive forces of the central government are still acute, and the different Basque nationalist factions are not yet ready to agree to a common strategy.\textsuperscript{15}

As the cases outlined above show, when ethnic conflict occurs between a minority ethnic group and a dominant ethnie which controls the power of the state, then frequently the concept of the nation and the nature of the state itself is questioned. Within the dominant statist ideologies of our time, this kind of conflict threatens the stability of a country’s institutions and throws into sharp focus the weaknesses of existing political structures. When political mechanisms which might command the consensus of the parties in conflict do not exist or do not operate, then the recourse to violence by one or both of the parties is likely and this in turn stimulates an escalating spiral of violence and counter-violence.

In the cases mentioned above, all the elements generally associated with ethnic conflict are present to a greater or lesser degree in one or the other. Needless to say, not all elements are present in all cases: e.g. the problem of the unequal distribution of economic and/or political power; the issue of control over land and territory; the conflict over language; the religious identification of the parties; the question of collective identity and self-esteem; the problem of boundary maintenance; the stereotyping of the adversary; the anxiety and fear of the ‘other’ generated by different perceptions of the issues at stake; the use and role of mobilizing myths and symbols, etc.

**Ethnic movements**

The objectives of ethnic movements and organizations engaged in conflict vary according to the circumstances and may – indeed often do – change over time. What begins as a simple protest against discrimination or political oppression, or against perceived injustices and inequalities, may evolve from the aim of gaining full equality or a larger measure of individual liberty, to a demand for greater local or regional autonomy, to participation in political power and changes in the structure of the state, to separatism and independence. In general, secessionist movements, while costly in political, economic and human terms, have been rather unsuccessful in contemporary times. Still, the objective of secession or a separate state, inspires many ethnic movements and is often used by them as a political bargaining chip. In fact, nothing scares an established state more than the threat of territorial secession. States would rather lose populations than territory; ever since Westphalia, territorial boundaries of states have been considered the sacred markers of the international system. Too many wars have been fought over pieces of territory to allow us to underestimate the power of the ‘territorial imperative’, which some scholars attribute to our animal nature.

**Ethnic bonds**

A major question which arises in relation to ethnic political movements is the nature of the ethnic bond itself, that is, the meaning of ethnicity. There are two principal schools of thought on this issue. The ‘primordialists’ would hold that ethnicity is a primordial bond between the members of a ‘natural’ community which precedes modern nation-states and class systems, and transcends them. Ethnic identity is a permanent feature of group life, though at times it may be repressed or exists only latently. The aim and function of ethnic movements is to ‘awaken’ an ethnie and build up collective awareness about it; in other words, to paraphrase Marx, to transform an ‘ethnie-by-itself’ into an ‘ethnie-for-itself’. Many ethnies hold to this approach. The Basques, Tamils, Kurds and many others would certainly maintain that their ethnic identity existed prior to, and transcends the current conflicts in which they are involved.\textsuperscript{16}

The ‘instrumentalists’, on the other hand, would consider that ethnicity is a political weapon, to be created, built up, used, manipulated or discarded, according to political expediency. Ethnic identity is but one of several options which a given collectivity may use to its own advantage, a question of ‘rational choice’.\textsuperscript{17} Miskito Indian identity in Nicaragua, for
example, is generally considered to be a fairly recent phenomenon and has certainly thrived on the political conflict in that country. The same might be said about the identity of the Palestinians, the Sikhs, the Eritreans, the Saharouis and many other groups around the world who appeal to ethnic identity in order to get their political message across. While any generalization would be hazardous, it is likely that most ethnic conflicts today contain a mixture of both ingredients: ethnic identity probably has its historical roots in the collective consciousness, but it is also used intentionally by militant elites to mobilize support and stake out a precise area for political action.

Ethnic elites and masses

The last statement leads to another important issue in contemporary ethnic conflicts, and that is the relationship between the elites and the masses, between the leaders and the followers, between the militants and the onlookers, in other words, the role of the ethnic ‘vanguard’. Not all members of an ethnic group are equally involved in an ethnic conflict. Though individuals may be victims of discrimination or genocide simply because of their ethnic affiliation, ethnic claims and demands are usually formulated and fostered by militant elites before the rank and file members of an ethnic even become aware of them, let alone adopt them as their own formulations. Elites, in turn, may split among different factions distinguished not only by issues of strategy and tactics, but often by the objectives of the conflict itself. Thus it is with Basques, Tamils, Kurds, Miskitos, Irish Republicans, Palestinians and so many others. Do ethnic elites simply express the underlying demands and aspirations of the peoples they purport to represent, or do they impose their own ideologies on their followers and their political adversaries and rivals? This question is by no means easily answered, inasmuch as in situations of ethnic conflict, by its very nature, democratic decision-making within the ranks of an embattled ethnic is hardly likely to occur. When more or less democratic consultations do take place (as in the Euzkadi elections of 1979 or the referendum in Quebec in 1980), the most radical elements frequently do not receive massive popular support from their own peoples.

The internationalization of ethnic conflicts

At first glance, most contemporary ethnic conflicts appear to be mainly internal matters of nation-states. Ethnic groups confront each other within the framework of an existing society; or else an ethnic struggles over rights and power with a central government; state policies may be questioned and perhaps altered; the legal position or status of an ethnic minority may be modified. To the extent that the modern international system is based on the principle of state sovereignty, such internal matters are conveniently kept outside the concerns of the international community. This may be the ideal situation to which contemporary spokesmen adhere, but in fact ethnic conflicts and the situation of ethnic minorities have long had international implications, and they still do so today.

European states were concerned about the protection of Christians in the Ottoman empire; a number of treaties were signed between states in the post-First World War period regarding the protection of each other’s national minorities; the League of Nations instituted an international regime for the protection of minorities, which floundered after the Second World War. Again, in that period, a number of bilateral agreements were reached between states, regarding the treatment of national, religious and linguistic minorities.

Ethnic kin abroad

There may be a number of reasons why an ethnic conflict spills over national boundaries and involves outside actors. A common occurrence is that an ethnic group in conflict has ethnic affines or kin in other countries. Thus, the Sri Lankan Tamils, the Kurds, the Basques, the Sikhs, the Miskitos, the Ulster Catholics, the Turks in Cyprus and Bulgaria, the Albanians in Yugoslavia, the Hungarians in Rumania, among others, have ethnic kin groups in other, generally but not always, neighbouring countries where they seek and often obtain political and material support. The Tamil insurgency finds support in Tamilnadu across the Palk strait; militant Basques in southern Euzkadi find refuge in the Pays Basque in France and so do members of the IRA in the Republic of Ireland.
Sikh communities in Britain and Canada support the struggle of the Sikhs in the Punjab. Kurdish nationalist militants in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria have found support in neighbouring countries according to the unstable and moving circumstances of Middle Eastern politics. Miskito refugees from Nicaragua were harboured by the Miskito communities in neighbouring Honduras before returning home as circumstances changed. Thus ethnic kin abroad may be a potent factor in the evolution of an apparently purely domestic ethnic conflict.

A caveat is in order here. The idea of an ethnic conflict being a purely internal or domestic matter of states is simply one more statist myth. In fact, if an ethnic group is involved in a conflict, it is quite logical that in terms not of a fictitious raison d’état, but also of a, perhaps equally fictitious, raison d’ethnie, ethnic kin, no matter where, should provide support to their ethnic affines regardless of international borders or the question of state sovereignty. This is obviously a controversial issue, because what may seem logical to the members of an ethnie is deemed highly dangerous and subversive by states. A case in point: when the conflict between the Miskitos and the revolutionary Nicaraguan government was at its height, a number of international indigenous organizations suggested that the indigenes had the responsibility to come to the aid of their embattled brethren. Of course, the Nicaraguan government, which at that time was itself the victim of external intervention, considered this posture to be a clear invitation for further interference into its sovereign affairs. Most governments react in similar fashion and often attempt to downplay the local causes of an ethnic conflict by attributing it simply to foreign interference in its internal affairs.

Outside ideological support

There may be other reasons for external participation in an ethnic conflict. The most common element has to do with the ideological sympathies that one of the parties in the conflict may command amongst outside actors, and these in turn may see in an ethnic conflict an opportunity to extend their influence and strengthen their ideology. Much has been written about the involvement of Ghadafi’s Libya in a number of such conflicts: its support for extremist nationalist movements such as ETA and the IRA, and the role it has played in supporting the Moro rebellion in the Philippines and then arranging for negotiations between the Moro leadership and the Philippine government. Leftist movements in the 1970s and 1980s supported ‘national liberation movements’ in various parts of the world. Conservative groups, in turn, provided moral and sometimes material support to embattled governments of similar ideological persuasion trying to cope with ethnic uprisings.

Concerned neighbours

Some foreign interventions have nothing to do with ethnicity or ideology, but simply with geopolitics. Neighbouring countries can easily be drawn into an ethnic conflict for their own political reasons of state. Thus, for example, both Iran and Iraq have given support to the Kurds fighting against the state in the neighbouring country, and yet have been accused of repressing the Kurds in their own territories. India has accused Pakistan of abetting the extremist Sikh nationalist movement in the Punjab as well as the Kashmir Muslim uprising for geopolitical reasons of its own. And the government of India, in turn, has been accused of doing similar mischief in both Sri Lanka and Tibet.

Involved superpowers

Finally, superpower involvement has increased, as ethnic conflicts multiplied around the world. The Soviet Union, for its own political interests, has intervened in the ethnic conflict in Ethiopia, first supporting one side, and then the other, with little regard for either ideology or ethnicity. The United States has systematically supported the Christians in Lebanon, the Miskitos against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua, the Sri Lankan government against the Tamil insurrection, the Philippine government against the Moros and the tribal uprisings, the Ovambos against the Angolan government, and the Hmong against the Vietnamese government, among others. In early 1990, the Soviet Union’s three Baltic republics declared their independence unilaterally and received sympathetic understanding in the West, from the very
sources which would not countenance the independence of the Basques, the Northern Irish, the Quebeccois or Puerto Rico.

**The burden of history**

A number of ethnic/nationalist movements today are carry-overs from earlier periods of state-formation and empire-building and as such carry with them the international implications of these processes. Currently, the Baltic republics in the Soviet Union express anew a long suppressed nationalist tendency and question the secret agreements between Stalin and Hitler which allowed the Soviet Union to annex the three independent Baltic states in 1940. The Puerto Rico independence movement still rejects the island’s incorporation into the United States as a result of the 1898 Spanish–American war. Several ethnic groups in India, who would have opted for independence if they had had an opportunity to do so, reject the way the formation of the Indian state impinged upon their own sovereignty (Sikkim, tribal peoples of Bihar and Assam). A similar case can be made for the Karen and Shan in Burma, as well as East Timor and West Papua, which are now a part of Indonesia. The conflicts in Western Sahara and Cyprus have a similar origin. Some of these cases have been dealt with by the United Nations in its specialized organs, particularly when the issue of ‘self-determination of peoples’ is involved. But in general, the United Nations tends to favour the respect of state sovereignty over its sympathy for the self-determination of non-state peoples, except in some cases of flagrant decolonization, such as Namibia.

**The changing ethno-demographic balance**

When ethnic conflicts arise as a result of migrations and the changing demographic equilibrium of certain countries, then the ‘home country’ of the migrants may express some concern at the international or bilateral level for the well-being of its offspring. Thus, India expresses interest in the fate of Indians in East Africa or the Pacific (Uganda, Fiji). China casts a paternal eye over millions of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Turkey and Algeria, among others, sign agreements with Western European governments concerning the situation of their migrant workers in the latter countries.

**Direct intervention**

The Indo–Sri Lankan Accord of 1987 is one recent example of direct formal intervention by a regional power in a domestic ethnic conflict. Several precedents made this intervention almost inevitable, as mentioned before. Furthermore, as an increasingly assertive regional power, India was worried about the geopolitical implications of instability on its southern flank. India had offered its good offices to mediate, with little success, between the Tamil insurgents and the Sri Lankan government. By the terms of the Indo–Sri Lankan Accord of 1987, Indian troops were to disarm the Tamil guerrillas, and the Sri Lankan government would recognize certain of the legitimate demands of the Tamil movement. In fact, however, Indian troops helped to repress several of the Tamil factions, at great cost of human lives, and were seen in Sri Lanka, by both Tamils and Sinhalese, as a new occupation force. In 1990, the Indians withdrew. In the Sri Lankan example, outside intervention followed an almost predictable pattern. At first India discreetly sympathized with one of the parties in conflict (the Tamils), then it tried its hand at mediation; subsequently it intervened militarily as ‘pacifier’, with a restricted mandate; thereafter it was accused of trying to impose its own diktat on the parties in conflict, and finally it was rejected by all parties concerned.

**The ethnicization of international relations**

In Sri Lanka, as in the case of Euzkadi, Ulster, Cyprus and many others, it might be said that an internal ethnic conflict ‘spilled over’ into the international arena and became internationalized. However, it often happens that international relations between states become ‘ethnicized’ when potential or actual ethnic conflict occurs. Some countries’ foreign policies are clearly inspired by ethnic sympathies or
considerations. It is unnecessary to recall the aggressive use Nazi Germany made of ethnic Germans abroad in preparation of the Second World War. Colonial powers, up to very recently, used to couch their colonial designs in terms of racial supremacist theories. Whenever there are ‘white’ victims in some political disturbance in a Third World country, Western governments and public opinion are particularly concerned, and little attention is paid to the more numerous local victims. US foreign policy, in particular, is especially sensitive to the desires of American interest groups who lobby Congress and the White House. Thus, though the American government’s interests lie with the white supremacist South African regime, it cannot ignore the pressures of the Afro-American community against apartheid, expressed, among others, through public demands for economic sanctions against South Africa. One of the reasons for America’s continued support for Israel is the strength of the Jewish-American lobby on Capitol Hill. Arab-Americans are just beginning to understand the importance of such activity in order to express their own support for the Arab cause. US support for Poland over the years was as much a function of anti-Soviet ideology as of the pressures of the Polish community in the United States.20

Public opinion, NGOs and ethnic conflicts

The internationalization of ethnic conflict has other aspects besides the direct or indirect intervention of neighbouring states or superpowers. World public opinion, particularly in the West, can be swayed by the use of the mass media. Let us simply recall the media-wide coverage which the Palestinian Intifadah and the Black resistance in South Africa received for a time, till Israel and the South African governments, respectively, imposed severe restrictions on such coverage. Almost overnight, world public concern dropped. The Palestinians and the Shiites in Lebanon, among others, have learned how to make use of the power of the international media in order to make an impact on, or garner the sympathy of (the two being of course not always identical), world public opinion.

To the extent that so many ethnic conflicts today occur in the Third World, numerous non-governmental organizations and voluntary agencies who work in Third World countries sometimes play a role in international involvement. They may become external advocates of the cause of some ethnic group in conflict. The Kurds, the Miskitos, the Tamils, the East-Timorese, the South African Blacks and others can count on the support and sympathy of numerous such organizations which operate out of Western Europe and North America, and which not only provide external publicity to the ethnic group’s cause, but also channel resources and all sorts of aid to such groups. Donor agencies from the industrialized world play an increasingly important role in the development projects of many underdeveloped countries. While some of the aid goes directly to local projects and helps people at the grassroots level, very often it is channelled through local government agencies. Ethnic groups in conflict with a state frequently complain that such aid does not reach them, or is withheld from them and actually reinforces the power of the state. Under such circumstances, donor agencies may threaten to withdraw or withhold their contributions to a certain country, thus attempting to influence the behaviour of a government in relation to such a conflict. Examples are the pressures put on the Sri Lankan government by numerous donor agencies to change its policies vis-à-vis the Tamils. Similar pressures were exerted upon the Sudanese government in relation with the conflict in southern Sudan or Ethiopia as regards the conflict in Tigre and Eritrea. Governments, of course, react negatively to such policies, considering them to be undue interference in their internal affairs.

The United Nations

Another significant and potentially more effective form of international concern is being expressed through the United Nations system. While the UN is scrupulously respectful of the sovereignty of states, in principle it can become involved in ethnic conflicts (as in other kinds of internal conflict) under three distinct mandates: (a) when a conflict represents a clear danger to the maintenance of peace; (b) when it is a problem of decolonization; and (c) when it involves serious human rights violations. The UN has undertaken peace-keeping missions in some ethnic conflicts (Lebanon, Cyprus), but only when the conflict had already become internationalized and an external country had
intervened. In terms of the United Nations’ role in the process of decolonization, the General Assembly has adopted numerous resolutions regarding the right of self-determination of peoples, but these have not always been heeded by the states which exercise power over the territory and people concerned. Cases in point are Western Sahara and East Timor.21

The competent organs of the United Nations have become increasingly concerned in recent years with conflict situations in which massive violations of human rights occur. To be sure, the procedures in the competent UN bodies are quite slow-moving and cumbersome, yet they are with increasing frequency being asked to do something about such violations. The Human Rights Commission, the Human Rights Committee, the Sub-Commission for the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities, among other specialized bodies, have taken up cases of human rights violations in the framework of ethnic conflicts. In recent years, for example, the Sub-Commission has heard about the situation in Sri Lanka, the plight of the Chakmas and other tribes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the Armenian genocide of over seventy years ago (the Armenians would like the UN to recognize that this genocide took place, and the Turkish government denies it), and of course about apartheid. Communications about human rights violations addressed to the UN specialized bodies are based on the rights set out in the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights and in the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Ethnic conflicts, because of their protracted and intense, sometimes irrational, nature are particularly likely to result in massive human rights violations.

**Consequences of internationalization**

The internationalization of ethnic conflicts may have different kinds of consequences for the conflict itself. One scholar distinguishes five patterns:

1. the exacerbation of the conflict through foreign intervention;
2. the prolongation of the conflict as the result of the intervention of outside interests;
3. the moderation of conflict because of international concern and pressures;
4. conciliation of the parties to a conflict due to the mediation or intervention of an outside party;
5. supercession of the conflict, in other words, the ethnic conflict may be superseded by the non-ethnic and particular interests of outside parties and turn into another kind of conflict altogether.22

**Conclusions**

The study of the internationalization of ethnic conflicts and the ethnicization of international relations is just beginning. Social science and international theory have as yet made few contributions to this emerging field. The world importance of ethnic conflicts can no longer be denied or neglected. As the major ideological conflicts of the twentieth century fade into the background, conflicts of identity and values, that is, protracted ethnic conflicts, will surely become more salient and more virulent. New forms of conflict management and resolution must be found. Ethnically defined non-state peoples are becoming new international actors as the traditional functions of the state become transformed. Third parties (whether states or non-governmental organizations) become involved in ethnic conflicts. The international community, and particularly the regional and universal multilateral organizations, must rise to meet the challenge posed by ethnic groups in conflict.
Notes

*This article, which appeared in the ISSJ, Vol. XLIII, No. 1, 1991, was written when Rodolfo Stavenhagen was professor at the Colegio de Mexico, Mexico.


6. A major contribution in this field, with strong emphasis on social psychology as an explanatory factor, is Donald L. Horowitz, Ethnic Groups in Conflict, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.


10. Edward A. Azar, 'Protracted international conflicts: ten propositions', in Edward A. Azar and John W. Burton (eds), op. cit.


21. Hector Gros Espiell, El derecho a la libre determinación. Aplicación