

PART THREE:
AGENCY, IDEOLOGY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY &
POLITICAL AGENCY, Part II

ETHNIC POLITICS:
PRIMORDIALISM,
INSTRUMENTALISM, &
BOURDIEU'S
PRACTICE THEORY

Why Ethnic Politics?

- local-level, cultural communities within state systems

What is Ethnicity?

- aura of shared descent
- descent symbolism
- mutual obligation
- fictive kinship

Why is ethnicity *political*, and if it is, what kind of politics is it? Introduction to Instrumentalism

Abner Cohen: ethnicity... “operates within contemporary political contexts and is not an archaic survival arrangement carried over into the present by conservative people (1969: 190)

Abner Cohen: “ethnic groups are in an advantageous strategic position, for it is difficult and costly for any state to suppress the customs of a group in such respects as marriage and kinship, friendship, ceremonial, and ritual beliefs and practices. And it is these very customs that can readily serve as instruments for the development of an informal political organization. Within the new developing states, a grouping of this type is more stable and more effective in achieving its aims than a formal association in which loyalties derive only from contractual, interests” (1969: 3)

Instrumentalism and Primordialism

(A) INSTRUMENTALISM

Cohen's *situational interest groups* approach to ethnic formation

★ “earning of livelihood, the struggle for a larger share of income from the economic system, including the struggle for housing, for higher education and for other benefits, and similar issues constitute an important variable significantly related to ethnicity” (Cohen 1974: xv)

★ Cohen: “in the perennial request for livelihood in a divided labour market, competition for a greater share of income results in the formation of interest groups”

★ interest groups robed in cultural garb

★ a weapon deployed to seek advantage

★ *intentionality*

★ calculated use of symbols: interests, means, ends

Instrumentalism and Primordialism

(A) INSTRUMENTALISM, cont'd

- self-serving ethnic *leaders*...masking divergent interests
- coopted by state elites
- possessing an awareness of own class interests?
- followers lack consciousness, not motivated by own interests?

(B) PRIMORDIALISM

- people can't help being attached to those like themselves
- seeking refuge, disoriented by rapid change
- deep-seated need for rootedness, to belong
- affectivity*
- long-standing cultural practices
- identification even without advantage

Instrumentalism VERSUS Primordialism

- motivations: intentionality vs. affectivity
- action: rational-oriented vs. value-oriented
- symbols: circumstantial vs. emotive power

Practice Theory: Overcoming the Instrumental-Primordial Divide?

- how do people recognize their commonalities in the first place?
- practice: affect + instrumentality

Practice Theory: Overcoming the Instrumental-Primordial Divide?

- *Habitus*: “the structures constitutive of a particular type of environment...produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions...the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of collective history, the objective structures (e.g. language, economy, etc.) to succeed in reproducing themselves” (Bourdieu 1977: 72, 85)
- “... comprises a set of generative schemes that produce practices and representations that are regular without reference to overt rules and that are goal directed without requiring conscious selection of goals or mastery of methods of achieving them” (Bourdieu 1977: 72)

Practice Theory: Overcoming the Instrumental-Primordial Divide?

- “What is commonly interpreted as rational interest-seeking behaviour is in fact largely habitual, an acting out of habitual constraints encoded in unexamined assumptions about what is reasonable and unreasonable” (Bourdieu 1977: 77)
- “Experience of objective constraints begins early in life, mediated by family relations attuned to them...the habitual dispositions thus engendered condition perception and appreciation of all subsequent experience” (Bourdieu 1997: 78)
- “Inculcation of the habitus depends on innate pattern-recognition capabilities...similar to language learning...competence is achieved without conscious awareness of the structure of what is learned” (Bourdieu 1977: 78)

Practice Theory: Overcoming the Instrumental-Primordial Divide?

- symbolic reproduction, unconscious work of habitus
- same compulsion for leaders & followers
- common experience underpins mobilization

Q: what part of habitus accounts for ethnicity?

structure ↔ habitus ↔ agency

So if it's all up to habitus, how does change occur?

- generational changes
- changes in political economic conditions
- recognition of previously unthinkable options
- leader vs. followers, instead = conflict over what is possible

Optional Sources for Additional Reading:

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1994. "Structures, Habitus, Power: Basis for a Theory of Symbolic Power". In *Culture/Power/History*. Nicholas B. Dirks, et al., eds. Pp. 155-199. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bentley, G. Carter. 1987. "Ethnicity and Practice". *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29(1):24-55.
- Yelvington, Kevin A. 1991. "Ethnicity as Practice? A Comment on Bentley". *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 33(1):158-168.
- Bentley, G. Carter. 1991. "Response to Yelvington". *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 33(1):169-175.
- Cohen, Abner. 1969. *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cohen, Abner. 1974. "The Lesson of Ethnicity". In *Urban Ethnicity*. Abner Cohen, ed. Pp. ix-xxiii. London: Tavistock.