

Social Construction of Identities and the Role of Individual Agency in Ethno-Religious Conflicts

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Abstract

The social constructivist scholarship brings into discussion the dynamic and changeable nature of social identities, the permeability of their borders and the role of individual agency in mobilising conflict or defusing violence. This article focuses on the role of the social construction of identities, as a political resource to be utilised by individuals in making an autonomous choice for conflict or peace, while approaching the debates on who possesses the agency in this process: social construction by discourse, elites as agents of construction, or the masses as agents. For this goal, the case of Abkhazia is used in support of the social constructivist view on the role of individual agency and social construction of identities in conflict or non-conflict.

Introduction: social construction of identities as a political resource for conflict or peace

Conflicts in general, and civil wars in particular, have been largely portrayed by the IR literature as ‘binary conflicts’ (Kalyvas, 2008), with actors engaged along the two sides of a cleavage. In return, social constructivism argues that conflicts engage a large spectrum of local, regional, state and non-state actors, whose interests are defined through interaction with other actors (Kalyvas, 2008; Sharples, 2013) and are no longer regarded through the traditional approaches as being objective and static (Snetkov, 2012), but as being dynamic and under constant redefinition as a result of a process of mutual adjustment (Wendt, 1999; *see* Sharples, 2013). Thus, conflicts are complex processes reflecting the interaction between political and private identities and actions (Kalyvas, 2003), which are being articulated through the subjective interpretations of the various actors’ interests (Sharples, 2013; Snetkov, 2012).

The connection between social identities and conflict has been debated in literature, with the social constructivists attempting to discuss the role of the social construction of identities in

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the emergence of ethnic and religious conflicts. They have thus opposed an analytical understanding to the 'everyday primordialism' (Fearon and Laitin, 2000) viewing social identities as being natural, static, unchangeable, by arguing instead that they are malleable, fluid, socially constructed in order to explain ethnic violence (Fearon and Laitin, 2000; Gartzke and Gleditsch, 2006; Kalyvas, 2008; Demmers, 2012). Whereas primordialism sees ethnic conflict as a natural consequence of inter-ethnic differences (Rizova, 2011), social constructivists argue for the heterogeneous and fluid nature of the behavioural expression of ethnic and religious identities during conflict, identities which, even when they are the cause of war, do not remain fixed, they change during the conflict (Kalyvas, 2008). As such, the crystallization of identity and groupness often takes place during the course of a conflict, as the result and not the cause of it (Demmers, 2012).

The issue of identity shift takes a central place in the social constructivist debate on the role of ethnic and religious identities in conflict. Kalyvas (2008) emphasises the disruptive potential of civil wars, capable to alter and to redefine identity affiliations, or even change a country's ethnic demography, but concludes that this is rather the case of pre-modern conflicts, such as the religious wars where entire populations converted to new religions. Nevertheless, in lower Ajaria, even in the absence of a conflict, the proximity to the urban centres, and the high rate of intermarriages with the Christian Georgians, facilitated the integration of the local population into the Soviet Georgian society and lifestyle, later to be identified with Christianity. A large part of the population chose the conversion to Christianity in the past decades, a fast process, with most of the conversions taking place in the first years after the fall of socialism (Pelkmans, 2006).

In this sense, it has been argued that the choice for an identity shift has significant social benefits and it is contextual, with social identities being reshaped in response to varying situational contexts and growing social needs (Kasfir, 1979; Alba, 1990, *see* Cerulo, 1997). The changing nature of social identities fosters a complex and multileveled process of identity shift. Thus, an individual might hold a certain identity in a context, yet switch to another one in different political or social circumstances. Moreover, the identity shift might take place not only within the same category, from one religion to another, but also across social identities, such as from ethnicity to religion or class, as individuals may perceive themselves as having more affinities with other groups than the ethnic or religious one (Kasfir, 1979; Horowitz, 1998). As such, the option for a social identity shift becomes a political resource in the hands of the individuals (Kasfir, 1979), to be mobilised either towards conflict, or peace.

Conversion to Christianity in Ajaria has been utilised by people as an instrument to access modernity, to escape the perceived backwardness associated to the Muslim and Ottoman legacy. It was especially the representatives of the middle and upper class who converted to Christianity, civil servants, teachers and higher administrative personnel (Pelkmans, 2002). In return, this has contributed to softening the interactions with the nationalist Georgians, overlapping the national idea with the religious one and conditioning the loyalty for the Georgian state to Christianity.

Elites versus masses: the role of individual agency in mobilising or defusing conflict

Questions connected to who possesses the agency in making the choice for violence eruption or for conflict avoidance have been informing the social constructivist literature and its critique, in the attempt of discussing the role of elites and of the masses in conflict. Constructivist IR theory has been criticised for avoiding to theorise the role of the masses in

the social construction of identity, focusing on the distribution of identities, rather than power, in international politics (Hopf, 2013), or even for lacking a theory of agency altogether (Checkel, 1998). Moreover, it has dealt predominantly with the interaction among states, ignoring the social construction of state identities in interaction with their own societies (Hopf, 2013). Thus, Guzzini (2000) advocates for using intersubjective units of analysis, recommending that constructivists analyse institutional facts without reducing them to individual cognition, but taking into account an intersubjective one. As a consequence, by focusing on collective, intersubjective norms, constructivism has been criticised for neglecting the role of individual agency in creating and changing the social structures and norms (Checkel, 1998).

In response, the social constructivist IR literature has in part moved further to discussing approaches on the individual agency and, in particular, on the role of masses in supporting or rejecting conflict. Thus, Fearon and Laitin (2000) test three constructivist approaches: social construction by discourse, elites as agents of construction, and the role of masses as agents. In a similar understanding, Demmers (2012) distinguishes between the culturalist or ethno-symbolic approach encompassing the role of the historically conditioned cultural meanings and of the discourse in fuelling or defusing violence, and the instrumentalist one, where agency belongs either to the elites or to the masses.

According to the first, the culturalist approach, the agency is located at the level of supra-individual things, such as *discursive formations* or symbolic or cultural systems, acting independently from any particular individual and thus mobilising groups on non-material basis in opposition to another (Fearon and Laitin, 2000). In this model,

“it is not predatory elites that instigate collective fears and hostile mass attitudes, it is the other way around. It is ethnic mythologies, producing emotion-laden symbols and hostile mass attitudes which create a context for leaders in which predatory policy is more popular than moderate policy” (Demmers, 2012:31).

If the first approach merges with the culturalist one, the second one, placing the agency at the level of the *elites*, connects with the rationalist view (Fearon and Laitin, 2000; Demmers, 2012). In this sense, a large number of social constructivists has explained violence as a consequence and as an instrument in the hands of elites competing in order to seize power and build political support, by constructing antagonistic identities which, in response, feed back into the violence circle (Fearon and Laitin, 2000; Demmers, 2012). According to this instrumentalist view (Rizova, 2011; Demmers, 2012), the ethnic and religious identities are being utilised as tools in order to disguise more pragmatic goals of the competing elites, of the ethnic entrepreneurs (Kasfir, 1979), acting to mobilise the groups in antagonism with each other, by opposing different cultural and social identities, often for the benefit of material aims. Masses are thus perceived as passive followers of the elites, internalising the top-down, externally-ascribed identities (Demmers, 2012), including the ethnic or religious ones, and being locked in an agency-free context.

In response to the first two approaches, some of the social constructivist authors pursue a new understanding, contesting the role of *masses* as passive followers (Kasfir, 1979; Fearon and Laitin, 1996; Horowitz, 1998; Fearon and Laitin, 2000; Kalyvas, 2008; Demmers, 2012) and locating the problem of “sustaining inter-ethnic peace at the level of individual interactions rather than group-level grievances and animosities” (Fearon and Laitin, 1996:717). The actions, motivations and identities of local actors are not mere replicas of elites (Kalyvas, 2003; *see* Demmers, 2012), the masses often manipulate central actors to settle their own

conflicts. Social identities are not necessarily constructed by the elites, it is the individuals who, in the constructivist view, produce and reproduce identities “on the ground” (Fearon and Laitin, 2000:846), and whose boundaries are permeable and flexible. The masses do not follow, they are rational actors who pursue their own agenda (Fearon and Laitin, 2000; Horowitz, 1998; Kalyvas, 2008; Demmers, 2012). They engage in conflict for personal motivations, such as revenge, looting, access to resources, affirmation of own identity. However, masses may also choose to disengage from or reject violence, they analyse and filter the discourses, as well as the elites’ actions and decide whether to pursue violent or peaceful means, by exercising their autonomous agency. The choice might be fuelled by rational calculations regarding the costs of violence and thus the need to limit the violence (Keene, 2000) or by their own definition and understanding of the situation and the goals for which they would be willing to engage in conflict (Horowitz, 1998). Fearon and Laitin (1996) identify two institutional arrangements in an attempt to explain why in interethnic relations cooperation is more likely than violence: the “spiral equilibrium” where people fear that a misunderstanding or a mistake might lead to reciprocal retaliations; and the “in-group policing”, where people expect that someone who defects and turns against his or her co-ethnics be sanctioned by the members of the group. In general, inter-ethnic violence is less likely to occur than cooperation, due to the masses’ agency, able to choose or to reject violence.

In Ajaria, it can be argued that the individual agency was essential in stirring the region towards a non-violent path, despite the initial tensions of the early 1990s when violent wars erupted in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Contrary to the narratives of the Georgians, envisaging an image of Georgia not to be dissociated from Christianity (Pelkmans, 2006) and denouncing claims of independence in Ajaria as well, its autonomous status, based on religious and not on ethnic identity, created no local incentives for secession and self-determination, as no preconditions for nationhood were created through the Soviet ethnofederal system in its case. Ajarians identified themselves as Georgians. The masses exercised their autonomous agency, opting for a softening of the ethnic and religious identity borders, by considering themselves Georgians and choosing mass conversion to Christianity in the past decades.

Conclusions

The social constructivist IR literature takes a step further from the traditional approaches on the connection between social identities and conflict, by opposing the primordialist view on the static nature of ethnic and religious identities and the determinist understanding of conflicts as a natural consequence of inter-ethnic and inter-religious differences. As such, it regards the social construction of identities as being a dynamic process allowing for identities to be formed and changed through the interaction and in the light of the interests of various state and non-state actors, often as a consequence rather than a cause of conflict. It brings back into play the masses, which are not seen as passive followers, but as possessing autonomous agency and following their own agenda, by making the choice for conflict or non-conflict. In Ajaria, the population’s choice to use the permeability of the ethnic and religious borders contributed to softening the interactions with the nationalist Georgians who were overlapping the national idea with the religious one and conditioning the loyalty of the Georgian state to Christianity.

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