

## Virtual School of Dialogue, Democracy and Peaceful Conflict Resolution

### ***NATION AND CONFLICT – Elton Skendaj*** **Lesson IV**



Elton SKENDAJ

Education:

Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA (August 2005-present)  
PhD student, expected completion 2010.  
University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana, (2000 – 2001)  
Master of Arts in International Peace Studies.

Teaching Experience

- Graduate Teaching Assistant at Cornell University. (2006-2007)
- Adjunct Instructor at the University of Tirana. Taught courses on "Introduction to Political Science," "Political Philosophy" and "Conflict Resolution." (2001- 2005)

Work Experience

- Founder and executive director of the Center for Peace and Disarmament Education (CPDE), Tirana, Albania, <http://www.cpde.net> (August 2003-July 2005)
- National Project Coordinator for the joint project between UN Department for Disarmament Affairs and Hague Appeal for Peace on "*Peace and Disarmament Education to Disarm Children and Youth*". Tirana, Albania. (July 2002-February 2005.)

Recent Publication

- Contributed to the report '*The rifle has the devil inside,*' *Gun Culture in South Eastern Europe*, SEESAC, May 2006. <http://www.csd.bq/fileSrc.php?id=1908>

## Nation and conflict

The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.

John Maynard Keynes, *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936).

In this brief lecture, I intend to make explicit some theoretical issues about nation and conflict. Theory refers here to a set of assumptions and statements about causal relationships in the world. Theories guide our practices in many ways. As the quote above mentions, intellectuals make theories that become common sense after enough people have repeated them, learned them at school and inscribed them in state, school or cultural institutions. In a way we could say that theories can be thought of as stories that seek to explain a set of phenomena. In this lecture we will look at four theories, or stories, about nationalism and conflict. I am making two main arguments in this lecture. Firstly, conflicts between nations do not arise just because of old animosities. Secondly, conflict between nations is different from violence between nations. But first let's look at some concepts that we will need in order to understand these stories.

I will start by defining the main concepts of nation, nationalism, state, and differentiating between conflict and violence. Nation refers to a sense of shared culture amongst members of a community which, in their view, distinguishes them from other communities. The members of the national community may have a sense that they share a certain past, territory, language, religion or other attributes. Ethnic groups are also similarly defined as a group claiming to share a common culture and lineage. Nationalism refers to the political project for more self-determination for the nation (Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1992; Bunce 1999). Self-determination could mean greater autonomy within a state or empire, or the creation of a nation-state. A state refers to the internationally recognized supreme authority over a territory and its people. A nation-state is inhabited by a population that belongs to the same national community. Nation-states are rare in the world; most states are made of various nations or ethnic groups. Conflict between nations is not the same as violence between nations. Indeed, a main message of this virtual school is that conflict does not necessarily lead to violence. Conflict can be seen as both a threat and opportunity to transform the relationships into more peaceful and just ones. We should also not see the nation as necessarily bad or violent—the nation could support democracy or dictatorship, peace or violence.

Today the area of the former Yugoslavia is made up of 6 states that formerly were one. Nationalists in some of the new countries often claim that the new states belong to the core nation. For example, some nationalists would claim that the Croat state is primarily for ethnic Croats and the Serbian state primarily for ethnic Serbs. But it was not always like this. These categories, like the states we see today are of relatively recent origin. So how can we explain how they developed and why we have seen so much

conflict and violence between groups? I will introduce four different theories, or stories of how this happened.

There are four theoretical traditions on national conflict that we are going to examine. They each give answers to where the nation comes from and why the conflict happens. Briefly, *essentialists* believe, like *nationalists*, that the nation is a fixed perennial entity and that past animosities will translate into future conflicts. *Instrumentalists* believe that political elites strategically use national or ethnic cleavages to get power or resources. *Constructivists* believe that the nation is constructed historically and that violence makes group identities stronger. *Institutionalists* believe that political institutions matter in both channeling the nation and restraining the violence.

For *essentialists*, the nation has a fundamental core that remains the same in the past, present and future. The nation is part of the natural order of things. A person is born into a nation and dies as a member of that nation. Nation has a soul and character that is shared by its members. National stereotypes arise from such presumed national character—for example “all Swiss are precise” or other more derogatory stereotypes. Many nationalists share such ideas about their nation as well. Most history textbooks in any country describe the nation in these terms. Growing up in Albania, my school history lessons told me this essentialist story.

The implication of essentialism for violence between nations is that modern conflicts can be traced back in history to older animosities between the different groups. Making such an “ancient hatreds” explanation for the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, journalist Robert Kaplan (1993) wrote a very popular book called “Balkan Ghosts.” In this book, Kaplan blamed the Yugoslav wars on “primordial” and “tribal” loyalties of the various groups in the region that kill each other just like they have done in the past. Unfortunately, such unrealistic and irresponsible account of the wars was shared by the Western media and influenced the Western response to the conflicts (Gagnon 2005). Such essentialist notions also prevail in everyday understanding of national conflicts, even among people in the former Yugoslavia.

Many academics do not agree with essentialist theories. All the other three theories disagree with the essentialists’ understanding of the nation. There is a recognition that the nation and violence between nations are not natural, but come as a result of various factors other than old animosities. Having a sense of national identity is also a source of security and belonging, and it does not necessarily translate into conflict.

*Instrumentalism* claims that ethnic conflict and violence are not at all about identity. Instead, political elites strategically manipulate groups of people in order to get power and wealth. If a politician selectively uses history to justify attacking another group of people, instrumentalists would ask “who benefits from this?” (Faeron and Laitin 2000). Political actors use violence therefore to solidify their grip on power. Such violence on the other hand, strengthens national identities. Instrumentalists would look therefore at the ways elites use national identities to achieve other strategic goals.

*Constructivists* usually view national identity as constructed in recent history. The nation is usually constructed through dense shared experiences amongst the members. The nation has to be imagined before it can exist as a social fact (Anderson 1991). Most constructivists agree that the ideas of nation and nationalism are modern. On the other

hand, Anthony Smith (1987) argues that the nations are not fully modern, but rely on ethno-historical past that nationalists rediscover and reinterpret to give meaning to modern nations.

Constructivists emphasize that identity is relational. For example, I am an Albanian in Bulgaria, a person from the Balkans in Western Europe and an Eastern European in the USA. In the university setting in the US, I am a PhD student with my professors as well as an instructor to my undergraduate students. Being born into a nation does not mean one dies as member of that nation. North America, Australia, and South American are full of people whose ancestors came from elsewhere. Therefore, the expression “once a French, always a French” is not necessarily true.

Finally, *institutionalists* share the criticism of essentialism with the other two theoretical frameworks. Institutionalists place a lot of emphasis on how the political institutions impact national conflict and peace. First, state institutions could create nations out of plural societies—like the French state made French nationals out of Normans, Bretons, and other groups. Secondly, political institutions such as federal or unitary governments, as well as majoritarian or proportional governments, can be linked to national peace or violence. The lesson on “Conflict Prevention: Institutions for plural societies” already explained such mechanisms that link institutions to peace, so I will be brief on this point. It is important to note again the insight that conflict is not necessarily violent, and peace can be achieved through power-sharing institutions. National and other demands can be met in parliaments, bureaucratic offices, local assemblies, and local government and so on.

We mentioned earlier that for essentialists and nationalists, nations have always existed. All the other three theories emphasize the modern aspects of nations. Here is a very brief non-essentialist story of the nation’s emergence and conflict in the modern time. Before the modern, industrial societies, people related locally to each-other in the villages. Class divided people, and religion was a major identification trait. Communities managed their conflicts locally, and identities were more flexible. Instrumentalist accounts focus on the need for people to relate to each-other as they moved from the small villages to the anonymous towns (Gellner 1983). The idea of the common nation united these strangers. Intellectuals and teachers promoted such ideas in books and schools. Religion and class became less important than the national identification (Bunce 2005). Importantly, the leaders of the newly emerging states, like France, purged their state of groups of people—Protestants for example—who they thought did not properly belong to the new state (Rae 2002). The national idea started in Western Europe and then spread around the world.

Indeed, generalizing about what makes a people a nation is very hard. Let us look for examples in the Balkan region. Albanians share a language, but they culturally profess different religions. Indeed the early Albanian nationalists in the 18<sup>th</sup> century proclaimed that “the religion of Albanians is Albanianism.” The religion of Albanians at the time was Muslim, Catholic, or Orthodox (and other smaller denominations), but the nationalist intellectuals wanted to create and foster a new common identity that would connect Albanians of different religions and classes. The Croats, on the other hand, differentiate themselves from the other South Slavs mainly through their religion. After they created their state based on the republican boundaries of former Yugoslavia, the Croat state and academics tried to foster a clearer separation between the Serb and

Croatian languages by introducing old words into the Croatian language. The creation of the Bosnian language followed the war in the 1990s as well. In Montenegro, the term “mother tongue” tries to bridge between the Montenegrins who feel they are Serbs and speak Serbian and the ones who feel strongly about being and speaking Montenegrin. Scholars have noted the same practice elsewhere in the world. A famous proverb states that “language is a dialect with an army and navy.” Dutch and German languages are very similar to each-other and they were rooted in close dialects. It usually takes the state’s promotion of mass education, as well as mass media and literary populations, to support a formal language that has wider use than local dialects (Hobsbawm 1992).

With the promotion of the principle of self-determination—for each nation its state—in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, nationalism became more deadly and national identity more institutionalized. Though the new states were founded on the idea of one territory for one nation, in reality all of the new states were in fact demographically heterogeneous. Violence and mass expulsion of huge numbers of people changed the European map in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Since identities are constructed through social interaction, constructivists point out how conflict and violence make exclusivist national identities stronger. Indeed, such an insight turns the essentialist implications on their head. Instead of national groups causing conflict, it is the conflict and violence that strengthens national identities.

How much do the above four theories explain regarding nation, conflict and violence? *Essentialism*, despite its popular appeal, fares the worst in explaining both the nation and the violence. The nation does not have an essence, but it is historically created. If ancient hatreds would cause conflict, then how can essentialists explain peaceful relations at various times in history? *Instrumentalism* has also an intuitive appeal since we all can cite strategic politicians that manipulate ethnicity for their own interests. What instrumentalism is not good at explaining is why these leaders choose to play the “ethnic” card only, and why the people follow them. One potential problem with the institutionalist approach is that power sharing has a tendency to “cement” national identities which then make it harder to achieve a unitary state, like in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Constructivists* and *institutionalists* are much better at explaining why violence occurs at the national level. At the same time they are not as good at explaining variations at the local level. In many conflicts, we see towns and villages that are very similar in many aspects, but violence happens in one but not in the other. Answers to local variations of violence could be found in strong inter-ethnic civic associations at the local level that prevent the community riots from happening or spreading (Vashney 2002). Academics still do not have very good answers for explaining such local variations. I personally believe that part of the answer lies in the courageous individuals who engage in peacemaking and peace-building through dialogue, reconciliation, and participating in inclusive local and national institutions.

The emphasis of this *virtual school* on dialogue, reconciliation and institutions also connects to the theoretical influence of constructivism and institutionalism. Through dialogue and reconciliation, people share and relate to each other as parents, students, workers etc, and not just as members of a national group. Institutions also can create bridges for various groups. Just like violence can destroy previous inter-group links, so dialogue, reconciliation and institutions can shape and support new connections for peace.

### Useful link on nationalist literature

Nationalism Project website:

<http://www.nationalismproject.org/>

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### Questions for reflection and discussion

- 1) What does national identity mean to you? How important is it? How do you express or celebrate it? Which of the four theories do you think best explains nationalism or conflict in your country? Why?
- 2) To what extent do you think that essentialism is reflected in the way history is taught in your country?
- 3) Why has the national idea played such a powerful role in pushing other public concerns off the political agenda in former Yugoslavia—Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Croatia—after the 1990s? The puzzle arises, because public opinion polls in all these entities indicate that the mass public cares strongly about social and economic issues such as unemployment, poverty and corruption. Yet, interviews and surveys with elites indicate that they obsess about what is going to happen to the national and sovereignty issues, and they do not seem to have social or economic plans beyond demands for greater autonomy or actual statehood.
- 4) To what extent is civil society a force for peace-building in your local community or region? What can it do to improve peace-building efforts?