

UNDERSTANDING MULTIETHNIC POLITICS

Ethnic Conflicts Explained by Ethnic Nepotism

Tatu Vanhanen

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Reviewed by Louis Andrews

Why are ethnic conflicts so common? Why do conflicts of interest in multiethnic societies almost invariably become ethnic conflicts? Why are such conflicts apparently universal and without regard to socioeconomic development level? Can a theory be developed that can answer these questions? Can this theory provide methods that can reduce or eliminate ethnic conflict?

These questions concerning ethnic conflicts are just some of those that Tatu Vanhanen, emeritus professor of political science at the University of Helsinki, takes up in a detailed study reported in his book, *Ethnic Conflicts Explained by Ethnic Nepotism*.

Vanhanen analyzes ethnic conflict in 148 nations and looks for “regularities,” or patterns, among them using the same set of indices he has adopted in previous studies. These indices are discussed below. When it comes to ethnic conflict, Vanhanen notes that research is extensive, but theory rare. For years scholars have churned out articles and books on race, ethnicity, and ethnic conflict. Yet unlike other areas of sociological research, theory concerning ethnic conflict has been almost entirely neglected. When theory has been proposed in this egalitarian era, it has almost invariably been cultural, and often applied to blame ethnic conflict on social inequities and discrimination, primarily by the majority group. Often such theories don’t pass muster, since the goal of the proponents is to transfer power and wealth from the haves to the have-nots to satisfy personal and group ideological ends.

Vanhanen explains how unlikely it is that cultural theories will prove to be valid, since ethnic conflicts are universal regardless of culture. Given this universal aspect, he derives his political theories from biology. First, he argues that there is a Darwinian struggle for resources that is at the heart of political conflicts everywhere. Since we live in a world of scarcity and at the same time desire offspring, we are biologically programmed to advance our own survival (actually the survival of our distinctive genes) over the genes of others. As a result, conflict exists in all human societies and is both necessary and universal. Second, he adopts Pierre L. van den Berghe's concept of "ethnic nepotism," or the desire to favor kin over nonkin, as the basis for ethnic and racial favoritism. Since members of a specific ethnicity are more closely related than nonmembers, the theory of inclusive fitness, or kin selection,¹ dictates that kin will be favored over nonkin, which supports the idea of ethnic nepotism. Vanhanen does not limit the term "ethnic group" only to what we traditionally consider ethnic or racial groups, but includes all inbreeding groups, even religious and linguistic ones that can become "ethnic" in nature over time.

In addition to Darwin and van den Berghe, Vanhanen also draws on the work of several other scholars, including Jan and Brigitta S. Tullberg, from whom he adopts the idea that reciprocity may be key in reducing ethnic conflict. From J. Philippe Rushton he draws upon genetic similarity theory. Vanhanen writes:

It seems to me that these two theories complement each other. Ethnic nepotism explains why people tend to favor kin over nonkin [cf. his spelling to reviewer's, p. 1]; Rushton's genetic similarity theory tries to explain how they recognize genetic similarity in non-relatives.

He notes:

Our behavioral predisposition to ethnic nepotism evolved in the struggle for existence because it was rational and useful. It is reasonable to assume that ethnic nepotism is equally shared by all human populations. Consequently, all human populations and ethnic groups have an approximately equal tendency to resort to ethnic nepotism in interest conflicts. It explains the otherwise strange fact that ethnic interest conflicts appear in so many countries where people belong to clearly different ethnic groups, and that ethnic interest conflicts have emerged within all cultural regions and at all levels of socioeconomic development. It would be difficult to imagine any cultural explanation of ethnic conflicts that could explain the appearance of these conflicts across all cultural boundaries.

Vanhanen develops three hypotheses that he tests in his worldwide study of 148 countries.

1. In all human societies where significant ethnic divisions exist, they lead to ethnic interest conflicts.
2. The greater the ethnic division, "the more political and other interest conflicts tend to become canalized along ethnic lines."

3. The level of conflict is lower where political institutions are based on reciprocity.

His methodology is to subject the 148 countries to several indices that he developed and used in other studies to test these hypotheses. First is the Index of Ethnic Heterogeneity (EH). Here Vanhanen assumes that race is more important than linguistic, tribal, or national divisions, since “divisions based on race or color are genetically the deepest ones because they are tens of thousands of years old.” The EH index is based upon a scale that ranges from 0 to 200. In Europe, for example, Portugal is rated at 2, while Bosnia-Herzegovina comes in at 112 as the only European country with an EH greater than ninety.

Next is the Index of Ethnic Conflict (EC). This also rests on a scale of 0–200 and takes into consideration both violent and institutional conflicts. The author derives institutional ethnic conflict data from the existence of ethnic organizations since it “is reasonable to assume that the establishment of ethnic organizations indicates the existence of ethnic tension and interest conflicts based on ethnic divisions.” Vanhanen divides the world into four areas, with the following results based on the correlation between EH and EC.

Area	Countries	EH < 11	EC < 11	Diff	EH > 10	EC > 10	Diff
Europe	38	11	10	-1	27	28	1
WHemisphere	24	7	8	1	17	16	-1
Asia/Oceania	42	3	6	3	39	36	-3
Africa	44	3	4	1	41	40	-1
Totals:	148	24	28		124	120	

The Index of Democratization (ID), used in an earlier study by Vanhanen, is based on data from 1993 and is used to test his third hypothesis. Since a number of scholars have argued that democratization is the key to conflict reduction, not only between nations but also within nations, this would form a particularly important part of the study.

Vanhanen predicted that any country with an EH over 10 would experience significant ethnic conflict. His study to a large extent confirmed that. Of the 124 countries with an EH greater than ten, 118 experienced significant ethnic conflict, while only two of those with an EH of ten or less did. He found that his Index of Ethnic Heterogeneity was very strongly correlated (0.726) with the Index of Ethnic Conflict and even more so (0.857) with the institutionalized ethnic conflict component of the Index. The Index of Democratization could explain only about 10% of ethnic conflict. Conflict was created by the mere existence of ethnic diversity, not by governmental style or policies. In extreme instances such as in an authoritarian or totalitarian state, government might suppress conflict, but if controls were weakened it would reappear. Yugoslavia and the countries of the former Soviet Union are good examples.

I have to conclude, on the basis of empirical evidence, that the level of ethnic conflicts seems to be nearly independent for the degree of democratization. Ethnic conflicts have emerged at all levels of democracy.

Further, he notes that “ethnic nepotism leads to ethnic interest conflicts in all societies independently from their level of socioeconomic development or from the degree of democracy because all human populations share the same behavioral predisposition to ethnic nepotism.”

Using GNP figures for the year 1994 for the 148 countries, Vanhanen concludes:

Relatively weak negative correlations indicate that the level of modernization or socioeconomic development does not provide a satisfactory explanation for the variation of ethnic conflicts. Ethnic conflicts seem to be only slightly less common in rich and socioeconomically developed countries than in less developed countries. This means that it would be unrealistic to expect the disappearance of ethnic conflicts at higher levels of socioeconomic development. Thus the results. . . support, at least indirectly, the assumption that ethnic nepotism belongs to human nature and that it is independent from the level of socioeconomic development (modernization) and also from the degree of democratization.

So where are we headed? Decreased birth rates among the European-derived peoples and wide-scale immigration into their countries of nonwhite, non-European populations means that ethnic conflict for the West will not just persist, but increase in the years to come. How then can a different future be assured? The Tullbergs have proposed partition or separation in a widely discussed paper, “Separation or Unity? A Model for Solving Ethnic conflicts,” in the September 1997 issue of *Politics and the Life Sciences*. Vanhanen acknowledges that in some situations this might be the best policy. In other instances he believes intermarriage might be a solution, but a long look at Brazil and similar countries would seem to make that less likely a road toward racial peace. Finally he argues that our evolved disposition toward reciprocity can reduce ethnic conflicts if groups are granted equality, but his is not the typical leftist or egalitarian approach concerning equality. Vanhanen writes:

I think that it is important to take these characteristics of human nature into account when attempts are made to adapt social structures and political institutions to the requirements of ethnic nepotism. Because every ethnic group wants to survive and at least to manage its own affairs, if it is not capable of subjugating other groups, it would be advisable to give them sufficient autonomy, and to leave them room to pursue their interests in national politics on the basis of equality. If ethnic groups occupy separate territories, it might be useful to establish federal structures even in relatively small countries. Federalism is in harmony with our disposition to territorial behavior.

As Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, the founder of human ethology, has put it:

In multi-ethnic states, federalistic structures allow different ethnic groups self-government within certain bounds and in cooperation with the other groups sharing a superordinate interest on the basis of reciprocity. This can work as long as such a social contract implies that differential reproduction at the cost of the other is avoided. . . .

This is a marvelous book and one recommended for the library of every person or institution interested in causes and prevention of ethnic conflict. It might have been improved, however, by including two additional theories of group dynamics, as well as some acknowledgement of inherent group differences on an individualist–collectivist scale.

Kevin MacDonald has written three books and several articles on Jewish-gentile conflict. He relies heavily on social identity theory (SIT), which is explained in detail in chapter one of the second book of his trilogy, *Separation and Its Discontents: Toward an Evolutionary Theory of Anti-Semitism*. This theory, as well as the one that follows, is really a cultural one with a basis in evolutionary biology. The eight most pertinent points of the theory in relation to ethnic conflict as discussed here are taken directly from MacDonald.

1. The social characterization process results in discontinuities such that people exaggerate the similarities of individuals within each category.
2. Social identity research indicates that the stereotypic behavior and attitudes of the ingroup are positively valued while outgroup behavior and attitudes are negatively valued.
3. The result of these categorization processes is group behavior that involves discrimination against the outgroup and in favor of the ingroup; beliefs in the superiority of the ingroup and inferiority of the outgroup; and positive affective preference for the ingroup and negative affect directed toward the outgroup.
4. These tendencies towards ingroup cohesiveness and devaluations of the outgroup are exacerbated by real conflicts of interest.
5. Competition between groups is not a necessary condition for the development of ingroup biases.
6. People tend to manipulate their social identity in ways that provide positive self-evaluations.
7. People readily adopt a group mentality and engage in collective behavior of an often irrational, intensely emotional sort.
8. There is no requirement that beliefs regarding either the ingroup or the outgroup may be true.

Although neither Vanhanen nor MacDonald addresses it, I believe that Optimum Distinctiveness Theory (ODT), a subset of SIT developed by Marilyn B. Brewer, past president of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, is also important in understanding ethnic conflict. It not only explains the heightened racial-ethnic awareness of small groups in a mixed environment, but also to some extent the relative lack of racial consciousness we currently see

among whites in the United States and Europe. This current characteristic is described most succinctly by Sam Francis's well-known aphorism that "whites exist objectively, but not subjectively." Brewer notes:

Social identification and group loyalty will be strongest for groups that are optimally distinct, i.e., those that are large enough to satisfy an individual's need for belonging and inclusion and small enough to satisfy the need for distinctiveness and differentiation. Groups that are in the numerical minority are more likely to be optimally distinct because they offer both a sense of being similar to fellow minority group members and a sense of being different from members of the majority group; minority group members are therefore more likely to exhibit strong ingroup identity and loyalty. The greater sense of belonging found among minority group members may explain the benefits derived from participation in racial/ethnic student organizations and minority support programs. Membership in the majority group of whites, on the other hand, is too inclusive an identity to stimulate feelings of belonging.

In other words, groups must be small enough to maintain distinctiveness. If they become too large or too inclusive, they will tend to fractionalize and splinter. In addition, selfish behaviors will predominate and individualism will replace group interests. If a sufficiently distinctive social group can be maintained, then the collective self will dominate the individual self.

There is an old saying that the victor writes the history. But more important is that the victor creates the new mythology that justifies that history. Today the Western World is consumed with two ideas of that new mythology: human racial-ethnic equality and individualism. This mythology has been promoted by Democrats and Republicans; Christians, Jews, and secular humanists; liberals and conservatives; and in the case of individualism especially, by libertarians.

The concept of individualism has been used to counter efforts by minority ethnic groups to promote group interests. That is, for integration to be successful all ethnic group interests must be subordinated to the greater values of individualism. Thus the saying, "by the content of their character, not by the color of their skin." Unfortunately for the individualist position, as Frank Salter has noted:

When competition is limited to individuals and families and does not involve ethnies, individuals can behave in ways that approximate the optimal (individual) utility maximization modeled by econometricians. But in multi-ethnic states individual economic rationality is maladaptive when it leads to loss of relative ethnic fitness and ethnic stratification, as is common in multicultural societies.

Both the promoters of this individualism and those multiculturalists who defend minority ethnic interests insist on equal outcomes as the proof of whether or not minority groups are oppressed. But, of course, this policy of using equal outcomes as a rational guide means that the "character" (i.e. behavior and IQ) of ethnic groups must be the same. Otherwise there is no way

to judge the policy's effectiveness. If otherwise healthy twelve- and twenty-year-olds are given the same test, their failure to perform identically is not indicative of the quality of the education policy.

Despite the claims of individualist ideologues and antiracists, all ethnic and racial groups behave, at least to some extent, *as groups*. Vanhanen points out that ethnic nepotism is natural, normal, and exists in all groups in all societies, even when the individual is unaware of it. So in the typical interethnic conflict in the West, the minority group member blames it on racism, while the majority group member rejects majority membership and says we should consider everyone as individuals.

As the black legal scholar Lani Guinier once noted, "Talking about race for people of color. . . is the natural thing to do. . . for whites, talking about race is uncomfortable." Blacks understand that they share many interests in common with other blacks as well as some with whites. Whites used to understand that they also shared many interests in common with other whites as well as some with blacks. They, like blacks, used to understand that sometimes *group interests differ*. But after fifty years of egalitarian propaganda in which everyone is merely an individual and race doesn't matter, whites have become true believers, whereas blacks know better. Therein lies the problem.

As Vanhanen notes, ethnic conflict resolution in a free multiethnic society requires reciprocity between groups, but in our case whites recognize only one group: blacks. Building a viable community requires that whites think of themselves as a group, just as blacks do. Only then can reciprocity work, and conflicts be resolved.

Cries of racism by blacks are self-serving weapons, just as are cries by whites that we should ignore race. Such noise from both sides is natural, and successful resolution requires that they be ignored.

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END NOTES

1. Though most people, including Vanhanen, treat inclusive fitness and kin selection as identical, the originator of the theory of inclusive fitness argued that it was a more general term than that of kin selection. See Hamilton (2001).

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