

occasional paper no. 6  
world summit for social development

*the search for identity:  
ethnicity, religion and  
political violence*

*by yusuf bangura*



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geneva, november 1994



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## preface

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The World Summit for Social Development, to be held in Copenhagen in March 1995, provides an important opportunity for the world community to focus attention on current social problems and to analyse the dimensions, roots and directions of social trends. In particular, the agenda of the Summit specifies three areas of concern: the reduction of poverty, the generation of productive employment, and the enhancement of social integration. UNRISD work in preparation for the Summit focuses on the last of these: as countries confront the seemingly intractable problems of social conflict, institutional breakdown and mass alienation, the topic of **social integration** has assumed increasing importance in public debate.

The UNRISD Occasional Paper series brought out as part of the Social Summit preparatory process takes up a range of issues relating to social integration. This paper addresses the issue of identity, especially in the context of ethnicity, religion and political violence. It draws on UNRISD research projects on Ethnic Conflict and Development, Ethnic Diversity and Public Policies, and Political Violence and Social Movements.

One of the major dilemmas confronting humanity at the end of the twentieth century is the growing significance of ethnic and religious conflicts at a time when the world is experiencing deeper forms of global interdependence. Confidence that ethnic and religious ties would slacken as countries were exposed to modernization and globalization has not been well founded. Conflicts based on ethno-religious differences have undermined the economic progress and social fabric of a number of countries in recent years, and pose a challenge to the cohesion and tolerance of several relatively stable societies. Indeed, there is hardly a region in the world currently unaffected by problems of ethnicity and religiosity.

This paper examines the complex ways in which ethnicity and religion shape social identities, and how people get mobilized in support of movements based on such cleavages. It also looks at the role of violence in social conflicts, at why certain types of violence are preferred by social movements, and how violence, in turn, structures the identities of group actors and the dynamics of the conflicts. Finally, it examines a range of policy issues relating to the resolution or management of ethnic and religious conflicts, and political violence.

The first part of the paper looks at the formation and dynamics of ethnic identities and conflicts. It reviews two common explanations of ethnic consciousness — ethnicity as an attribute of human nature and as a phenomenon that is socially constructed — and highlights three developments which would seem to have made ethnicity one of the major defining characteristics of social conflicts in the world today. The first is the collapse of communism and the weakening of secular ideology. The ethnic dimensions of many social conflicts have become more visible than in the past, when they were more likely to assume the ideological labels of the major Cold War antagonists. The second development is the erosion of state capacity and legitimacy in a number of developing countries as a result of protracted economic recession and the adoption of painful stabilization programmes. The changing pattern of world migration is the third development. As peoples from the South increasingly seek to settle in the North, reversing previous Northern migration flows to the South, ethnic and racial problems have emerged in the Northern societies which are the new receiving states. Four main types of conflicts are then reviewed in order to understand the dynamics of ethnicity: those that are separatist in nature; those that are concerned with distributing advantages within a single state structure; those that focus on the rights of indigenous peoples; and those that seek to protect the rights of minorities.

The second part of the paper examines the reasons for the growing salience of religious identities and conflicts. It highlights the destabilizing nature of social change in developing countries, which often results in individuals being caught between two worlds — the modern and the traditional — without an effective set of anchoring values. The paper argues that for Western and ex-communist societies higher levels of secularization have tended to generate feelings of anomie among large groups of people, leading to a search for spiritual upliftment. Four types of movements are then discussed to bring out the political significance of religion in most regions of the world: culturalist, community-oriented, syncretistic and fundamentalist.

Part three looks at the nature and dynamics of political violence. It discusses the ambivalent nature of political violence. On the one hand, violence negates the values of human well-being, but, on the other hand, it is seen by some social movements as an important medium for the formation of group identity. The paper reviews three standard explanations of violence — culture, psychological factors and rational choice. It argues that, although the rational choice model is important in the study of violence, it suffers from shortcomings. For example, social movements are not always in control of their violence and thus may not be able to make rational calculations about its use; violence tends to develop its own logic, interests and clientele when it penetrates society and politics. Four different types of political violence are then examined based on the way violence-prone groups are organized, their ideological orientation and preferred methods of violence: legally oriented mass militant actions which can result in limited use of violence, terrorism, revolutionary violence and civil wars.

The final section discusses policy issues. It highlights the links between marginalization, exclusion and political violence, and the need to make the development process all-inclusive and sensitive to the cultural and social needs of people at local levels. The paper examines specific policies relating to the promotion of stable ethnic relations: proportionality and affirmative action, devolution of power, power sharing arrangements, electoral schemes for balanced political representation, and public education and culture. It calls for changes in the orientation and organization of the contemporary state system, including a review of the concept of the “nation state” and its underlying principle of self-determination. It argues that the concept of the “nation state” has largely become an anachronism in the light of the ethnically plural character of states throughout the world. Rather than give support to policies aimed at creating ethnically pure states, much more attention should be given to efforts aimed at reforming existing states, i.e. making them more representative of, and accountable to, the diverse peoples they are supposed to serve. The paper concludes that such reforms would need to be grounded on solid foundations of civic and common citizenship rights.

Yusuf Bangura is co-ordinator at UNRISD of the project on Crisis, Adjustment and Social Change in Africa.

November 1994

Dharam Ghai  
Director

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## identity, solidarity and modernization: an introduction

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This paper<sup>1</sup> seeks to explain how ethnicity and religion shape social identity and social conflict, and how people are mobilized in support of movements based on such cleavages. It also looks at the role of violence in social conflicts, at why some movements use violence to pursue their objectives, and at how such violence, in turn, structures the identities of social actors and the dynamics of the conflicts. Finally, it examines policy issues relating to the resolution of ethnic and religious conflicts and political violence.

The subject of identity is very complex as it encompasses the totality of social experience, much of which is influenced by history. What constitutes the identity of a group is not always easy to determine given differences in the way individuals are socialized during the course of their lives: as members of different families, clans, neighbourhoods, villages, municipalities, professions, social interest groups or transnational organizations. Thus, although the concept may convey a picture of social uniformity, identity is always a contested issue as individuals who are assumed to share common values may be structured in hierarchical or functional ways. This may not correspond to what is held up as a group's identity. When people evoke identity, they are less concerned with the totality of social values than with a primary or core set of values that are assumed to transcend social divisions. Such core values are often based on religion, language, race, colour or an assumed common culture. It is not surprising, therefore, that identity issues are all too often embedded in emotions.

The relationship between identity and social integration is ambiguous. Identity can promote as well as negate integration. All societies need a certain level of cohesion for the maintenance of public order and governmental legitimacy. Apart from policies of economic growth, redistribution and welfare which may influence patterns of social integration, states often rely on symbols, myths and shared beliefs to promote a sense of oneness among their diverse citizens. But most states find it difficult to monopolize or dominate the discourse of identity. They are challenged by groups, sometimes of an ethnic, racial, religious, class or gender nature,

which have their own alternative notions of integration, solidarity and development. Social groups may also compete among themselves in the definition of their respective identities and in their attempts to impose their visions of integration and development on society.

What accounts for the salience of ethnic and religious consciousness and conflicts in an epoch of higher levels of global interconnectedness and modernization? We shall venture some general explanations in this section and pursue more detailed explanations subsequently. Both the **process** and the **medium** of modernization pose problems for millions of people around the world, despite the enormous benefits that modernization has brought to humanity as a whole. To capture the benefits of modernization, societies are expected to break out of the boundaries of ethnicity, embrace a secular nation state identity, develop a rational-scientific view of development and treat individuals as autonomous entities.

The first problem with this way of organizing the world is that groups which are unable or unwilling to follow the dictates of modernization may be condemned to extinction, or what Rodolfo Stavenhagen has called “ethnocide”.<sup>2</sup> Fighting for ethnic survival under such conditions may challenge the modernist project and groups that are associated with its expansion. Second, even when societies accept the logic of modernization, it is obvious that not everybody will be satisfied with the way its benefits are distributed, and some are likely to pay a high price for the progress of others. When benefits and costs seem to correspond to ethnic, racial or religious affinities, people may come to see development in terms of those cleavages. Economic recession and programmes of stabilization and restructuring may, in turn, deepen such cleavages.

Third, the quest for secularization, scientific rationality and individualism represents only one sub-set of human aspirations. Most humans believe in spiritual power, hardly separate their worldly experiences from their religious beliefs, and make decisions about their lives on the basis of information derived from group membership. Thus modernization tends to undermine those other aspects of humanity which are vital for social existence and individual well-being. Indeed, the more a society is exposed to modernization, the more its peoples may yearn for a deeper meaning in life. This can be expressed in various ways, including religious evangelism, ethnic solidarity, racist bigotry or ideological agitation. The most secular and modernist country in the world, the United States, is believed to have about 60 million evangelicals who crave a return to more traditional religious values in governmental and social practices. Fourth, modernization may pose problems for societies whose cultures do not constitute the principal medium through which development takes place. In societies where this is the case, as in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and parts of Latin America, modernization is linked to Westernization. Alternative discourses of power, which may appear irrational on the basis of conventional notions of scientific rationality, may emerge among groups to challenge the modernist project in

such societies. Such groups tend to gain strength the more people are excluded from the benefits of modernization and the more they are convinced that there is a rich cultural alternative to fall back on.

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## part 1: ethnicity

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### the formation of ethnic identities

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Problems associated with modernization provide a context for understanding the spread of particularistic identities and conflicts. However, religious and ethnic identities do not always have the same meaning and are often shaped by more specific forces and circumstances. We need to probe each type separately so that we can better understand their unique features and the main patterns of conflicts they generate. We start with a discussion of ethnic identities.

All countries in the world are multi-ethnic in character. Since all groups of people live in territories over which some state claims jurisdiction, ethnic problems can be seen as part of the historical formation of states and the way different groups are constituted within them. The process of industrialization and state formation in Europe, which took definite forms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, established a tight correspondence between the state and the nation. The idea developed that a sovereign state should be a nation state that protects the common interests of people who believe they share a culture, language and territory. Since not every group could form a state because of obvious problems of size, imperial domination and clashes over territory, groups were subsequently ranked according to whether they were “a nation”, “a nationality”, “a national minority” or “a tribe”. This classification has had a lasting impact upon the way ethnic claims are pursued in the world today.

In the former communist countries of the USSR and Yugoslavia, some of these classifications were used to determine levels of group autonomy and language rights which, in the context of a central party system, became a major source of conflict as groups struggled to redefine or defend them. In Africa, Asia and Latin America, where the modern states were created by European powers, the nation state model was foisted upon societies which often had very large numbers of ethnic groups. The view rapidly gained ground among nationalists that only the state could constitute a nation — not the ethnic groups themselves. This was, of course, likely to lead to problems when a nation that had been created by a state was not what the various ethnic groups would have wished. Thus, the idea of the nation state as the medium for modernization and group relations was flawed at its inception. It was to provide a basis for many

ethnic conflicts as it was disseminated throughout the world and as the crisis of modernization deepened.

## theories of ethnicity

But why should people attach importance to their ethnic identities? Why should they not be comfortable with state-imposed identities or the identities of other groups? One of the oldest explanations, and one which is popular with the public at large, is that people have been the way they are from time immemorial, i.e. defined by language, custom, religion, race and territory. Ethnic consciousness expresses deeply rooted human sentiments. In other words, ethnicity is primordial: people would favour members of their own group if they had to make a choice between outsiders and their fellow group members. Conflict is thus inevitable when a country is inhabited by more than one ethnic group. This explanation identifies a major strand in human behaviour, **nepotism**, that can be activated when groups are already conscious of their identity and feel a need to protect it. However, this concept cannot account for the complexities of ethnic consciousness since it does not explain how such consciousness is formed, how it changes over time, why it varies in intensity among people of the same group, and why people build and defend relationships that cut across ethnic boundaries.

An alternative explanation of why people attach importance to ethnic identities, and one that informs much current analysis of ethnicity, stresses the **constructed** nature of identities. The fact that people share a common language, religion, culture, race or territory does not mean that they live their lives on the basis of such affinities or even that they are conscious of them. Ethnic consciousness needs to be created for it to have an impact on collective consciousness. Concrete social experiences are often important in the construction of such consciousness. Attitudes and behaviour may be affected by the unequal ways groups are structured in society. For instance, in hierarchical societies which may be partly rooted in historical relations of a feudal or racial nature and partly shaped by modern state policies and markets, issues such as social roles, obligations, rights and opportunities may be defined by the location of groups in the social hierarchy. The inferior-superior syndrome that may emerge from such relations may affect group consciousness and form the basis for political action. Examples include black/white relations in South Africa and the United States, Hutu/Tutsi relations in Burundi and Rwanda, the caste system in India, and the position of Indians vis-à-vis the *criollos* and *mestizos* in Guatemala. But groups may also feel disadvantaged or vulnerable in societies where social hierarchies do not follow clear ethnic or racial lines. The economy may allocate roles and opportunities differently; some groups may dominate vital

### the problems of defining ethnic identities

The concepts of "ethnicity", "nation" and "nationality" have several pitfalls. Groups that have already constituted a nation state often associate ethnicity with minority status: immigrant groups are considered the ethnies, not the dominant nationality itself. But it is difficult to determine what constitutes an ethnic group. Ethnic identities, like those of a nation, are assumed to have objective and subjective characteristics. The objective characteristics include language, religion, race, territory and culture. But each of these is subject to interpretation by the subjective preferences of groups. For instance, although language is the most common factor that has been used to distinguish an ethnic group, not all groups which share a common language feel they belong to the same ethnic group: Muslim Bosnians, Croats and Serbs; Hutus and Tutsis. Also, different groups may form one ethnic group through the medium of a foreign language when confronted with a dominant group that seeks to impose its language on the rest of the population: southern Sudanese groups' defence of English against the government's imposition of Arabic; the defence of Arabic by large numbers of Eritrean groups against Ethiopian Amharic even though only a tiny percentage speak Arabic.

Religion also poses a number of problems. Groups which subscribe to a common religion do not always belong to the same ethnic group, and vice versa. Religion, in fact, may unite groups in one period, only for the groups to assert different ethnicities later — for example, Muslims in India, the creation of Pakistan and the subsequent secession of Bangladesh. Muslim Kurds are unhappy with the way they have been treated by Muslim Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Yoruba Muslims in Nigeria emphasize their Yoruba ethnic identity rather than their Islamic identity in their political relations with the predominantly Islamic Hausa-Fulani.

Not every ethnic group possesses a distinct territory. Indeed, before the state of Israel was created in 1948, the Jews were without any territory they could claim as their own, even though many of them were conscious of their ethnicity. The Gypsies of East and Central Europe do not have any fixed territory that can be used to define their ethnicity. The Hutus and Tutsis share a common territory in Burundi and Rwanda. Race is not so clear cut either. Indeed, based on scientific evidence, the concept of race itself is flawed if it is used as a basis for highlighting common genetic properties of people who believe they belong to the same race; race itself is socially constructed and not biologically determined. A "coloured" person in South Africa would be classified as a "black" person in the United States, and the designation may not have much meaning in most other African countries where the racial system that gave rise to the classification does not exist.

Culture is one of the most contested issues in politics. There is hardly any group of people that has a homogenous culture. People are often divided by status, region, occupation, class, gender and generation. In most of Europe before the advent of nationalism, cultural affiliations took on sharp class lines — between serfs and landowners — and the idea of people belonging to one nation was not well entrenched. In societies deeply divided by class such as is the case in England, it is difficult to talk about a common English culture, when basic things like food habits, musical preferences, sports, speech, mannerisms and dress patterns vary considerably between the upper and the working classes.

sectors of an economy or control governmental offices and security organizations in ways that may be considered unacceptable by those excluded. In both sets of cases, individuals may compete over land, business assets, jobs, incomes, political offices, access to education, and language and religious rights. Grievances arising from a combination of these factors may be seen by some individuals as vital to group survival and thus provide a basis for solidarity. But ethnic consciousness can be manipulated by powerful individuals in ways that may not always serve group interests. Middle classes, in particular, tend to mobilize ethnic feelings and patronage in their competition for public resources and offices. When societies become highly mobilized along ethnic lines, it is often difficult for individuals to decide their ethnicity freely: identities may be imposed by the dynamics of such conflicts. However, it is difficult to distinguish between group interests and the manipulation of identity based on self-interest because of the subjective nature of ethnicity.

## ethnicity in a changing world

Three developments would seem to have made ethnicity one of the major defining characteristics of social conflicts in the world today. The first is the collapse of the communist system in Eastern Europe, whose class ideology attempted to suppress ethnic differences among groups, and whose competition with the West for global supremacy converted most conflicts in the world into East-West conflicts. The collapse of this system weakened the role of secular ideology as an organizing principle in global conflicts. The ethnic dimensions of many long-standing conflicts in Africa, Asia and parts of Latin America became much more visible than hitherto: because of the influence of the superpowers, these conflicts had previously been portrayed in ideological or nationalistic rather than ethnic terms.

### ▫ *the collapse of communism*

The collapse of communism also led to the creation of 15 new states in the former USSR, two in Czechoslovakia, and about five in former Yugoslavia, producing two main problems. Some of the groups from the old states, particularly Russians and Serbs, now live outside the official boundaries of their territories. Twenty-five million Russians, for instance, are scattered in the new states of the former Soviet Union, constituting at least a third of the population in Estonia, Kazakhstan and Latvia, and about a quarter in Kirgizstan and Ukraine. While the new states seek to promote a uni-ethnic identity in asserting their independence, the new minorities within those states seek to defend their group rights, which they feel are being undermined by new policies. The second problem is the presence of ethnic groups, which may be small in a national or regional context, as majority or significant populations in territories claimed by larger groups, such as

Albanians in the Kosovo province of Serbia, Armenians in the Nagorno Karabak area of Azerbaijan, and Hungarians in the Serb region of Vojvodino. This is complicated by the existence of nation states which share a similar ethnicity with groups in a conflict area: the states of Albania, Armenia and Hungary are each interested in the problems of Kosovo, Nagorno Karabak and Vojvodino respectively; Greece is concerned about the creation of the new state of Macedonia — a state which shares the same name as that of the northern Greek province bordering it.

▫ *economic crisis in developing countries*

The second development relates to the effects of the economic crisis and erosion of state capacity and legitimacy in many developing countries in the last decade. Many states have found themselves unable to sustain the kinds of overarching values that had supported their efforts at nation building and economic development in previous decades. Such efforts were based on the assumption that ethnic ties would slacken as people were absorbed into the modern economy, and that state intervention in the economy and in the provision of services would encourage most people to identify with and defend modernity. One-party and military dictatorships emerged to regulate ethnic differences within this unitarist framework. Despite a few major ethnic wars and civil disturbances in some countries, these efforts were relatively successful in most countries in maintaining political stability for much of the 1960s and 1970s. The élites of most groups could be accommodated within the expanding bureaucracies and economies. But in the 1980s, economic crisis, the failure of the state to meet its previous social and economic obligations, the implementation of hard-hitting stabilization programmes and pressures for democratization sharpened ethnic cleavages in a number of countries in recent years leading, in some cases, to large-scale civil wars.

▫ *international migration*

The third development concerns changes in the patterns of international migration and the sense of insecurity and phobia this generates among indigenous groups in states receiving migrants. Since the end of the Second World War and the granting of independence to former colonies, global migration has tended to take on a South to North flow rather than the southward flow that was characteristic of previous large-scale European settlements in Africa, the Americas, Australia, New Zealand and parts of Asia. Part of this reverse migration was due to the post-war demand for cheap labour in Europe; large numbers of workers were imported from the colonies and the Mediterranean region. It was also connected to the problems associated with the status of certain groups, such as British Asians, who had been imported by European colonial powers to work in foreign countries, but who, at the dawn of independence, opted to retain their imperial identity and exercise their right to settle in the imperial country. Furthermore, as economic opportunities dried up or became unattractive in

many parts of the South, so individuals from those regions sought to better their lives in the North. In addition, the collapse of the social system in Eastern Europe has increased pressures on a number of people to migrate westwards in search of better livelihoods. Often, immigrants arrived with differences in appearance, culture, language and religion, which native populations saw as threatening to their beliefs, values and notions of what a society should be.

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## the dynamics of ethnic conflicts

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Ethnic differences do not always translate into open conflicts — and some of those that do are not threatening to the social and political order as mutually accepted mechanisms exist to regulate them. Others are not only difficult to manage, but they sometimes turn violent, create widespread instability and lead to loss of life. Although many ethnic conflicts erupt spontaneously, most need political entrepreneurs or mobilizers, a network of organizations and a discourse (or set of principles or ideas) to activate them. Ethnic mobilizers always compete for the loyalties of their putative followers. All individuals in a group may not subscribe to an ethnic cause, either because they value other relationships or their commitment to the conflict is fuzzy. Ethnicity may overlap with social class or status in deeply divided societies where structures of discrimination block social mobility for specific ethnic groups. In most other cases the link between ethnicity and class is not that direct. Instead, ethnicity may be used to mask class interests or prevent social groups in different ethnic formations from organizing along common class lines. Such complexities in ethnic consciousness help to underscore the point that, when a conflict develops, there are often two or more organizations competing, sometimes violently, for the loyalty of an ethnic group.

Four categories of ethnic conflicts can be distinguished, based on a group's objectives, its orientation towards the state and the way it defines the discourse of its struggle. These types of conflicts are those that are separatist in nature; those that are concerned with distributing advantages within a single state structure; those that focus on the rights of indigenous peoples; and those that seek to protect the rights of minorities in societies where one group constitutes the majority population. The majority of ethnic conflicts can be placed into one of these categories, or a combination of them.

## separatist movements

Separatist types of conflicts can take two forms: secession and internal autonomy. What determines a group's preference for one is not always clear — as the cases of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) demonstrate. The peoples of southern Sudan and the Tamils of Sri Lanka face similar types of discrimination from the dominant groups in their two countries — Arabs in the case of the Sudan and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. Southern Sudanese have been fighting against Arabization, Islamization, state control of southern lands and resources and discrimination in public sector jobs. The LTTE has also waged a bitter war against the use of Sinhalese as the official language in Sri Lanka, the adoption of Buddhism as the state religion, and discrimination in educational opportunities, job allocation and government appointments. Yet, despite what would appear to be a more systematic and racist form of domination in the Sudan compared to what obtains in Sri Lanka, the SPLA has been fighting for autonomy and reform of the central state, and not for secession. The LTTE, on the other hand, has been uncompromising in its demand for a separate Tamil state.

A key condition for separatism is the availability of territory that an aggrieved group can claim as its own and defend. Such territory is usually difficult to obtain because it may span several states. "Kurdistan", for example, covers parts of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, and leaders of these states are reluctant to cede territory to the Kurds. Alternatively, the territory may contain some of the peoples of the dominant group from whom an aggrieved group seeks to secede, as is the case with the ongoing conflict between Croats, Muslims and Serbs in Bosnia. Secessionist conflicts resonate with highly charged discourses of "us" versus "them" and a fanatical commitment to achieve the desired separation. But not all separatist conflicts are pursued through armed struggle. Some, like those in Quebec, Scotland and Wales, are waged through constitutional means, and may be moderated by electoral cycles, becoming intense in one period and slack in another. And not all secessionist conflicts lead to separation, as the cases of Biafra in Nigeria, Papua and Bougainville in Papua New Guinea, the Casamance in Senegal and the Basques in Spain demonstrate.

## competition for state resources

Most ethnic conflicts in the world are of the second type, where ethnic groups pursue their claims within an existing state structure. The aim is not to create an alternative state but to either capture the existing state or improve access to it. Frustration of this goal may lead, however, to demands for secession or autonomy. Indeed, several separatist movements start from a position of competition for the existing state and graduate into fully fledged

separatist movements. Conflicts based on competition for the state can be either bi-polar or multi-polar. In bi-polar conflicts there are roughly two groups struggling for control of the state. Examples include Hutus and Tutsis in Burundi and Rwanda, Fijians and Indians in Fiji, Africans and Indians in Guyana and Trinidad, and Chinese and Malays in Malaysia. Under conditions of bi-polarity, the scope for flexibility in bargaining and in the formation of alliances may be highly constrained as each group believes the other has a hegemonic plan which it could easily enact because of the two-way nature of all contests. Conflicts may be moderated where one of the groups accepts a subordinate position in politics in exchange for higher benefits in the economy or in other domains. An example is Malaysia, where the Chinese seem to have ceded political control of the country to the indigenous Malays in exchange for continued Chinese dominance of the economy. Where such accommodation cannot be reached, conflicts can lead to blood baths as has happened in Burundi and Rwanda.

Under conditions of multi-polarity, ethnic groups may not always have permanent enemies, only “permanent” interests, as they may be forced to make alliances in order to achieve their objectives. In a typical multi-ethnic setting, as in Nigeria, for example, domination or exclusion is often achieved by one central group acting in alliance with other groups either on a regional basis or based on other criteria such as religion and loosely defined ideologies. The Igbos of Nigeria lost their war of secession partly because most of the ethnic groups in the oil regions of the east that were to form part of Biafra did not see themselves as part of an eastern coalition. They were contemptuous of secession, which they felt would strengthen Igbo domination of the region. All Nigerian governments since independence have been ethnic coalition governments, although such coalitions have not included every group or have included some groups unequally. It is also possible for multi-polar conflicts to become bi-polar, especially where there are two main ethnic groups around which smaller ones coalesce. Sometimes, bi-polarity can take local forms as two dominant groups fight for control of local lands, services and governments. A number of conflicts in countries with large populations and ethnic groups tend to take this form. In Nigeria, local communal land conflicts intensified in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the creation of new states by the federal government. In Hyderabad and Karachi, Sindhis have been locked in conflict with Urdus, or Mohajirs as they are called, for control of the regional government and economic opportunities in the two Pakistani cities. The Sindhis claim these cities as their own, but they have been dominated by the Urdus since they left India in 1947 to settle in Pakistan as the founders of the new Muslim state.

Patronage plays a key role in the dynamics of both bi-polar and multi-polar conflicts. Political entrepreneurs rely on an ethnic clientele to access resources from the state, and may use such connections to deflect censure of their activities in public life. They nurture support from wide social networks such as church organizations, mosques, shrines, welfare associations, and unions of workers, students and professionals, although the nature of support

may vary in each case. In cases where interest groups are trans-ethnic, unions may refuse to support ethnic-based governments or political parties in their defence of workplace interests. Ethnic entrepreneurs may be able to mobilize individual workers, students and professionals to support their political programmes outside of union structures, however. In Nigeria, workers are more likely to support their unions in industrial disputes with governments or opposition parties, than they are likely to do on issues relating to national politics, where ethnicity becomes a major variable. Where interest groups are uni-ethnic — such as in Fiji, Guyana, Malaysia and Trinidad — unions may simply become extensions of the ethnic political parties or movements. Ethnic mobilizers are generally well versed in the cultures and traditions of their societies, offer services and protection to some of those in need, and pose as the custodians of community interests. Where competition is fluid, the discourse for mobilization may not always be cast in non-negotiable terms as deals may have to be made and alliances redefined. However, the bargaining could be just as violent as in separatist conflicts.

## struggles of indigenous peoples

Conflicts of the third type relate to the rights of indigenous peoples and revolve around land issues and the protection of indigenous cultures and languages. The development of the world market and European migration into foreign lands has had a devastating effect on indigenous peoples in the Americas and Australasia. Many indigenous groups have been exterminated, their lands have been confiscated, and their cultures and languages have been degraded. The majority of those who have survived occupy the lowest stratum of the social structure in the countries where they live. They tend to be poorly educated, less well catered for in the social sector, grossly underrepresented in the political system, and are either landless or possess only insecure tenured rights to land. Some estimates suggest that indigenous groups currently constitute just about 10 per cent of the population in Latin America and that they have been reduced to extremely marginal numbers in Australasia, Canada and the United States. Although they form the majority group in Guatemala, they have been denied political rights and face various kinds of discrimination and state oppression.

The way of life of indigenous peoples is intimately linked to the land. First, as farmers, hunters or gatherers, they need land for their basic survival. Second, land is also important for their cultural, spiritual and psychological well-being. In contemporary times, land that indigenous groups still possess has come under threat from the state and transnational companies as forest and mineral resources become profitable in the world market. The struggles of indigenous groups are primarily, therefore, about land and the preservation of their cultures. They have campaigned to retrieve parts of the

lands they lost historically to Europeans, as is the case in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States, and for the right to govern themselves in those lands as autonomous peoples using their own laws, traditions and institutions. In many countries of Latin America, such as Brazil, Mexico and Nicaragua, indigenous peoples' protests are part of their wider struggles for land redistribution, economic upliftment, civic rights and the protection of forests against the forces of modernization. Recently, forest dwellers in the Amazon region of Brazil, in collaboration with *mestizo* rubber tappers, have been engaged in a struggle to protect their forests against logging companies, corrupt government officials and land speculators; the Miskito Indians have been resisting forced incorporation into the Sandinistas' national development project in Nicaragua; and Indian peasant guerrillas — Zapatistas — in the province of Chiapas have risen up against the Mexican state demanding land and provincial social reforms.

## minority rights

Minority rights conflicts constitute the fourth category; these are of two types. First, some conflicts over minority rights are a consequence of the creation of nation states in Europe, which left a large number of individuals residing in states not bearing the name of their ethnicity or nationality: Hungarians in Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine; Germans in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia; and Russians in the new states that have been created out of the USSR. Several smaller groups that live in existing nation states do not have a parent nationality that has a state: the three million Gypsies scattered across most East European countries; the Basques in Spain and France; Valacs, Cincaris and Arumanians in the Balkans; the Saamis in Norway; the Lapps in Sweden, Finland and northern Russia; and the 41 different ethnic groups that live in present-day Russia. Minority rights struggles focus either on the rights of minority groups to form autonomous governments in the territories where they constitute a majority, or on special measures to protect their culture, language and religion where they do not form a majority, as well as on equal treatment in the allocation of national resources and government offices.

The second type of minority rights conflicts relates to recent migrations to Western Europe. Examples of this type can be observed in Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. In this second type, immigrants do not seek to claim or defend any territorial rights. As in the first type, however, they are concerned with issues of legal status, discriminatory practices in the economy and government policies, the right to practice their culture and religion, and the regulation of ethnic and racial violence. Until very recently, most states were ambivalent towards immigrant populations, especially as the bulk of these were initially brought in as "guest workers" who were expected to return home when the host

population no longer needed their labour. The idea that immigrants are not likely to return to their country of origin and should thus be seen as minority groups with identities of their own has developed only recently. Even so, most states, especially France and Germany, have favoured assimilation of immigrants into the dominant culture as opposed to supporting immigrants' cultural traditions and their right to retain and practice them. This has been a major source of tension between host communities and immigrant groups, particularly Muslim Algerians in France, Muslim Turks in Germany, and Sikhs and Muslim Pakistanis in the United Kingdom, who tend to rely on their cultures to insert themselves into the new societies. Racist-inspired violence has been on the increase in many European cities and anti-immigrant and racist parties are gaining electoral strength in several European countries. However, immigrants are also organizing to fight back and have gained footholds within established political parties and unions through the support of anti-racist movements among the host population as well. Although they have been successful in some areas of local government, it is precisely at those lower levels of government that anti-immigrant parties have also made large inroads.

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## part 2: religion<sup>3</sup>

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### the formation of religious identities

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Religion is an aspect of identity which may have a powerful impact upon politics within a state or region, especially in the context of broader cultural conflict. What is responsible for the growth of religiosity and religious conflicts in many countries? We use the term religion in two related yet distinct ways. First, in a material sense it refers to religious establishments (i.e. institutions and officials) as well as to social groups and movements whose *raison d'être* are to be found within religious concerns. In the spiritual sense, religion pertains to models of social and individual behaviour that help believers to organize their everyday lives. In this sense, religion has to do with the idea of **transcendence**, i.e. supernatural realities; with **sacredness**, i.e. language and practice that organize the world in terms of what is deemed holy; and with **ultimacy**, i.e. the ultimate conditions of existence.

The last 20 years have witnessed a resurgence of the impact of religion upon politics in many regions of the world. Confidence that the growth and spread of urbanization, education, economic development, scientific rationality and social mobility would combine to diminish the socio-political position of religion significantly was not well founded. In much of the Third World, the adoption of modern or Western traits is rather skin deep: Western suits for men rather than traditional dress, the trappings of statehood — flag, constitution, legislature, etc. — a Western *lingua franca*, and so on. The important point is that social change is not even throughout a society; social and political conflicts are likely owing to the patchy adoption of modern practices. Social change destabilizes, creating a dichotomy between those who seek to benefit from wholesale change and those who prefer the *status quo*. New social strata arise, and their position in the new order is ambiguous. Examples include recent rural-urban migrants in African, Latin American, Middle Eastern and other Third World societies who find themselves between two worlds, often without an effective or appropriate set of anchoring values. Such people are particularly open to political appeals based on religious precepts.

Religious beliefs may take on highly political forms through, for instance, their reinforcement of ethnicity and their association with transcendental values that believers think provide society with a sense of direction, cohesion, virtue, pride and stability. In the latter case, religious practices may become fundamentalist in character, reflecting, as Marty and Appleby put it, a “set of strategies, by which beleaguered believers attempt to preserve their distinctive identity as a people or group” in response to a real or imagined attack from those who apparently threaten to draw them into a “syncretistic, areligious, or irreligious cultural milieu”.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes such defensiveness may develop into a political offensive which seeks to alter the prevailing social, political and, on occasion, economic realities of state-society relations. Religion relates to politics in ways which are themselves linked to the particular historical and development trajectories of individual societies, whether traditional or modern. In traditional societies, the relationship between religion and politics is always a close one. Political power is underpinned by religious beliefs and practices, while political concerns permeate to the heart of the religious sphere. In Western and ex-communist societies, high levels of secularization that have been associated with modernization tend to generate feelings of anomie among large groups of people. This may lead to a search for spiritual upliftment, or what Johan Galtung calls “inner travel”,<sup>5</sup> through the medium of religion.

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## the dynamics of religious conflicts

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In order to understand fully what has been happening in recent times in the sphere of religio-political interaction, we have classified religious activities into four categories — culturalist, community-oriented, syncretistic and fundamentalist. Each of the four categories has two factors in common. First, leaders of each utilize religious precepts to present a message of hope and a programme of action to putative followers, which may have a political impact. Second, such religious movements tend to be inherently oppositional in character; their leaders capitalize upon pre-existing dissatisfaction with the *status quo*. It is important to note, however, that the four groups do not all target the governing régime in an overtly politicized manner. Fundamentalist and culturalist groups have as their *raison d’être* an inherent antipathy to existing governments; community-oriented and syncretistic groups, on the other hand, tend to be more diffuse in character, often rural-based and more concerned with self-help issues rather than emphasizing straightforward opposition to government policies.

## culturalist groups

Culturalist groups emerge when a community sharing both religious and ethnic affinities perceives itself as a powerless and repressed minority within a state dominated by outsiders. The mobilization of the opposition group's culture (of which religion is an important part) is directed towards achieving self-control, autonomy or self-government. Examples include Tibetan Buddhists in China; Sikhs in India; Muslim Palestinians in Israel's occupied territories; followers of Louis Farrakan's organization, the Nation of Islam, in the United States; and Bosnian Muslims in ex-Yugoslavia. In each case, the religion followed by the ethnic minority provides part of the ideological basis for action against representatives of a dominant culture — whom the minority perceives as aiming to undermine or to eliminate their minority culture. Culturalist campaigns seek to further one cultural or ethnic group in relation to either state power or that of other groups within the state. The driving force for such movements is a striving for greater autonomy and a larger slice of the political or economic pie in relation to other groups which are perceived to be enjoying more than their fair share.

## community-oriented groups

A notable feature of the development of religious praxis over the last three decades has been the emergence of a popularly driven, community religiosity. Especially visible among poor Third World Roman Catholics, among Eastern European Christians before the fall of communism, and within urban Islamic communities in a number of countries, the development of sets of community-oriented religious beliefs has been a mobilizing ideology of opposition to existing practices. Community-oriented religious movements represent a disaffection with established, hierarchical, institutionalized religious bodies; a desire to find God through personal searching rather than through the mediation of institutions; and a focus on communities' abilities to make beneficial changes to members' lives through the application of group effort. Community-oriented movements emerged as a result of the profound social and economic changes associated with modernization. During the 1980s, as the contradictions of communist rule became increasingly clear in Eastern Europe, younger, radicalized priests pushed senior echelons of the Church hierarchy toward opposition to governmental authoritarianism and human rights violations. In Poland, for example, combative priests strongly identified with society's aspirations to achieve basic political and social freedoms, and took the leading role in the creation and consolidation of representative social movements. The formation of Solidarity in 1980 was strongly influenced by the Pope's visit to Poland in 1979, which coincided with the emergence of a number of Catholic grassroots organizations.

It was an essentially biblical radicalism, often melded with facets of Marxism-Leninism as in the case of Base Christian Communities, which stimulated a number of Catholic priests and Protestant ministers to champion the concerns of the poor in Latin America beginning in the 1960s. Base Christian Communities (BCCs) represented the most concrete sign of the significance of liberation theology. BCCs proliferated in a number of Caribbean and Latin American countries (especially Brazil, Chile, Haiti and Peru) and elsewhere in the Third World, such as the Philippines and in parts of Africa. What both BCCs and Protestant evangelical churches have in common (despite their differences in levels of financial and ideological autonomy, leadership structure and mass membership) is that local self-help groups are formed to improve qualitatively communities' lives at a time when central and local governments are unable to satisfy popular developmental needs.

### syncretic religious groups

Our third category, syncretistic religious movements, is found predominantly among certain rural dwellers in parts of the Third World. Syncretic movements involve a fusion or blending of religions. They feature a number of elements found in more traditional forms of religious association, such as ancestor worship and healing practices. In northern and sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, more or less syncretistic versions of Islam, called sufism, have evolved which meld traditional religious beliefs with Islamic norms. One of the features of contemporary Islamic politics in Pakistan and many African countries, for instance, is the clash between groups wedded to sufist beliefs and those which seek to uphold Arabized/Persian versions of Islam. The conversion to Christianity was seen by many Africans as a necessary step to acquire education and jobs in the modern sector. Centres of missionary activity offered these to induce conversion. Thus, conversion was predominantly instrumental and did not necessarily involve spiritual transformation from traditional to European religious beliefs. As the end of the colonial era approached, some of the ethnic groups which had formally converted to Christianity without severing their ties with traditional beliefs found themselves in positions of relative disadvantage in the new political arrangements which marked the post-colonial era. The Lumpa Church of northern Zambia, the Holy Spirit Church among the Acholi of northern Uganda, the *napramas* led by Manual Antonio in north-east Mozambique are all examples of syncretistic religious movements, rooted partially in Christian beliefs, which found most of their adherents among discrete ethnic groups or within specific regions in the post-colonial period in opposition to governing régimes.

An interesting contemporary example of popular syncretic movements is that of *Olivorismo* in the Dominican Republic. This religious sect, which was

founded by Olivorio Mateo, emerged in the isolated San Juan Valley of the Republic in 1908, following the introduction of large-scale commercial agriculture and rapid socio-economic change. Socio-economic change undermined traditional peasant livelihoods in cattle breeding, forced land prices up, and dispossessed many peasants of their lands. In this context, Olivorio was seen as a prophet and faith healer by the increasingly distressed peasant population. He used local beliefs — a mixture of African traditional religious practices and variants of Christianity — to reach out to the community in its quest for equality, food and land. Even though Olivorismo was condemned by the authorities and Olivorio himself was killed in 1922, a myth has been created that he is still alive and will make a dramatic return to the valley. Large numbers of peasants continue to flock to his shrines awaiting his second coming.

## religious fundamentalism

Fundamentalist religious activities, the fourth type, aim to reform society in accordance with religious tenets; to change the laws, morality, social norms and sometimes the political configurations of their country. They seek to create a “traditionally oriented”, less “Westernized” society. Fundamentalists tend to live in population centres — or are at least closely linked with each other by electronic media. Fundamentalists fight against governments because the latter’s jurisdiction encompasses areas which the former hold as integral to the building of an appropriate society, including education, employment policy (of men rather than women) and morality. Fundamentalists struggle against both “nominal” co-religionists whom they perceive as lax in their religious duties and against members of opposing religions whom they perceive as evil, even satanic. Examples of fundamentalist groups are to be found among followers of Christianity, Islam and Judaism (the Abrahamic “religions of the book”), and, some would argue, among Buddhists and Hindus, too.

The main stimulus of recent fundamentalist movements has been a perception on the part of both leaders and followers that their rulers are performing inadequately and, often, corruptly. Religious fundamentalism is often (but not always: Buddhist and Hindu fundamentalism are exceptions) strongly related to a critical reading of religious texts, and the relating of “God’s words” to believers’ perceptions of reality. The significance of this from a political perspective is that it supplies restive peoples with a “manifesto” of social change leading to a more desirable goal, which their leaders use both to berate their secular rulers and to propose a programme for radical reform of the *status quo*.

Of greatest political import among fundamentalist groups are those embedded in an Islamic context. Some propose (or practice) armed struggle

to wrest power from government, some believe in incrementalist change through the ballot box, others seek to achieve their goals by way of a combination of extra-parliamentary struggle, societal proselytization and governmental lobbying. Despite differences in tactics, Islamic fundamentalist groups share two broad ideas: that politics and religion are inseparable and that *sharia* law must be applied to all Muslims whether voluntarily or by force. Many Islamic fundamentalists believe that Muslims as a group are the focal point of a conspiracy involving Zionists and imperialists whose joint aim is to conquer Muslim lands and resources (especially oil). Militant Islamic groups recruit most of their members from a range of professions and backgrounds; they tend to come from lower-middle or middle class backgrounds. Many live in urban areas with a recent rural past. Islamic fundamentalist groups seek participation in what are essentially closed political and economic systems dominated by an often cohesive political, economic and military élite.

Christian fundamentalists, like their Muslim counterparts, wish to return to the fundamentals of their tradition which they regard as revealed in their holy book. In the United States, there are an estimated 60 million followers of conservative evangelical Christianity out of a total population of 250 million. Such people provided the core support for the “televangelist” Pat Robertson’s unsuccessful 1988 presidential campaign and for Pat Buchanan’s in 1992. In the United States, Christian fundamentalists are politically active in attempting to uphold “traditional values”. They are against manifestations of what they see as excessive secular individualism: abortion-on-demand, the absence of prayer in schools and the teaching of science from a rationalist perspective.

The third “religion of the book”, Judaism, also has its own religious fundamentalists. Politically speaking, the most significant groups are those which use religious ideology in their conflicts with Arabs. For example, Gush Emunim — a militant, conservative religious movement — was founded after the 1978 Camp David agreement between Egypt and Israel which resulted in the handing back of the Sinai desert to Egypt. Gush Emunim and other groups — such as the late Rabbi Meir Kahane’s organization, Kach — argued on religious grounds against returning territory to Egypt. They claimed that the biblical entity Eretz Israel was significantly larger than today’s Israeli state and handing back any territory to Arabs, non-Jews, was tantamount to going against God’s will as revealed in the Bible.

Buddhist and Hindu fundamentalisms (implying cultural chauvinism rather than close adherence to religious texts) are inextricably linked to nationalist goals. Hindu fundamentalism, for instance, was recently ignited by a dramatic incident at the mosque at Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh which was built, according to some Hindus, on the birthplace of the god Rama. Militant Hindus have long sought to build a Hindu temple in place of the mosque. As long ago as 1950, the mosque was closed down by the Indian government. It was destroyed in 1992 by Hindu militants during campaigns that were

orchestrated by the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, both of which are major political groupings in the country.

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## part 3: political violence

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### political violence and identity

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Conflicts based on ethnic and religious identities are often associated with political violence, even though most social movements that are concerned with identity do not advocate violence as a medium of change. One reason for the close identification of political violence with identity is that most violent conflicts in the world today have ethnic or religious dimensions. The end of the Cold War and the demise of the communist alternative have sharply reduced the incidence of conflicts based on secular ideals, but political violence based on identity has often been destructive and uncontrollable. Once political violence becomes part of the dynamics of conflict, it ceases to be simply a dependent variable that has to be explained by reference to larger independent processes and events. In such situations, political violence may alter the meaning, direction and, indeed, the very basis for the resolution of the conflict itself. In this section, we examine the role of political violence in social conflicts.

### the dilemmas of political violence

One of the dilemmas of social life is that even though violence seems to negate the human condition it does sometimes kindle hope for a new and better beginning, and can play a key role in shaping identities, building bonds of solidarity and establishing group boundaries and a sense of self-confidence among groups in conflict. A large number of social movements have grown in strength and have been able to establish social legitimacy and political influence through the medium of violence. The case of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka demonstrates this point very well. When this movement first emerged in Tamil politics as a small militant youth organization in 1972, Tamil opposition to Sinhalese domination of Sri Lankan affairs was conducted primarily through middle class-led parliamentary parties, which sought change through constitutional means. Following a series of riots between the two communities and the failure of the parliamentary parties to wrest concessions from the ruling Sinhalese party, militant Tamil youth succeeded in changing the discourse of

the Tamil struggle to one that emphasized the primacy of violence over constitutional methods. As communal riots escalated, partly provoked by the LTTE to get the Sinhalese state to violate its own laws and moral principles of order, five main guerrilla groups and a dozen or so minor ones emerged to canvass for Tamil independence. The parliamentary parties were discredited as youth flocked in their thousands to join the militant movements. Violence became important in establishing Tamil territorial boundaries in the north and east of the country, in reinforcing the belief that Tamils were different from Sinhalese, and in getting the Tamil population to support the goal of secession.

A similar case of violence assisting the formation of identity and solidarity and facilitating hegemonic goals unfolded in South Africa in the run-up to its first all-race elections of April 1994. The original objective of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), whose leader, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, broke with the African National Congress in the mid-1970s, was to fight the apartheid régime and the ANC from a moderate pan-Africanist platform, using Zulu symbols and traditions. Even though Buthelezi served as chief minister in KwaZulu, he did not fully accept the South African state's bantustan policy, and felt that he could use KwaZulu as a base to advocate an end to apartheid and build up the IFP as a formidable national political force. Zulus constitute about 25 per cent of the African population — the largest ethnic group in the country. More than a third live outside of KwaZulu and are fully integrated into the mainstream of African life in the segregated conditions of South African society. The release of Mandela and the unbanning of the ANC posed a threat to Buthelezi and his party. The ANC very quickly asserted its dominance among the African population, including in the Zulu areas. Violence became a medium for the IFP to check its political decline and to redefine its identity and goals, which had evolved to focus on the establishment of its dominance among the Zulus. This strategy sought to exclude other parties from competing for the definition of the Zulu identity in the new South Africa. It led ultimately to a declaration of self-determination and a demand for the restoration of the historical frontiers of the Zulus. By targeting its violence at the ANC, and provoking the latter's supporters to retaliate, the IFP and its supporters sought to weaken the moral authority of the ANC and present the conflict as a struggle for the survival of the Zulu people.

## theories of political violence

To say that violence aids the formation of identity does not explain, however, why it is used by some movements and not by others, or why the extent or intensity of its use varies among violence-prone groups. There are numerous explanations of why social movements use violence, some of which provide useful insights, but none of which are sufficiently sound to

account fully for the problem. We can group the main explanations under three categories: culture, psychological factors and rational calculations.

▫ *culture*

Two strands of analysis inform the culturalist perspective. The first treats violence as something embedded in the cultural practices of some societies so that when conflicts occur the propensity to use violence comes almost naturally to the parties concerned. In the second, culture becomes an explanatory variable only when a movement draws its inspiration from earlier violent movements. Thus, there is talk about “a Zulu warrior tradition” that the Inkatha Freedom Party is said to symbolize; “a Basque millenarianism” that some people believe the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) seeks to revive; an “Islamic jihadist tradition against infidels” that is assumed to inspire current Muslim fundamentalist movements; and “deep-seated Balkan propensities to violence and fragmentation”, which some commentators believe were merely suppressed when Yugoslavia enjoyed a long period of “cease fire” under communist rule.

But how much does culture explain? How much does it obscure? Most movements, violent and non-violent, reach into the past to retrieve long forgotten heroes, narratives of great battles or events, and myths that portray bravery, courage, honour and power. This is, of course, how movements construct their identities, recruit followers and win support from their communities. But, used in this sense, culture per se does not explain violence since the culture that is supposed to be mobilized is socially constructed to serve contemporary ends. Also, it does not explain how societies which had a violent past have been able to regulate violence in their political discourse. Nor does it say much about the fluctuating nature of violence even in situations where it continues to be widely used.

▫ *psychological factors*

Psychological explanations focus on perverse individual behaviour under conditions of competition and rapid change. The basic argument is that large numbers of people do not benefit from development, face a crisis of identity when they are uprooted from traditional life, or simply find it difficult to satisfy their ambitions when confronted with the pressures of modernity. The result is relative deprivation, which generates feelings of frustration and a desire to express them in aggressive ways. When theorists apply this to violence-prone movements, they assume that the membership of such movements is drawn from individuals with troubled backgrounds who carry their frustrations into the movements. This is useful in explaining why disadvantaged individuals with a propensity to violence get pulled into social movements, but it is less convincing in its assumption that such individuals determine the violent character of those movements. Processes of deprivation and alienation do not always push their victims towards political violence, but towards apathy or random violence; and the leadership of many

violence-prone groups is often drawn from individuals who could secure adequate livelihoods from, or access to, the political systems they challenge. Furthermore, there are several violent movements, such as ETA and Sikh separatists, whose communities seem to be better off than the ruling groups they oppose, or who at least do not suffer from the kinds of relative deprivation that should lead them to embrace violence.

▫ *rational calculations*

The third set of explanations has an instrumentalist and rationalist focus. From this perspective, violence does not have any intrinsic properties or meaning. Like other forms of protest, such as petitions, lobbying, work stoppages and peaceful demonstrations, it is simply an instrument which rational actors use to pursue their goals. It can be used in small or large doses, selectively targeted or randomly distributed, and can be stopped when political goals have been achieved. Understanding violence therefore requires an analysis of the goals of a movement, the methods and strategies it has formulated and the resources it has at its disposition for achieving them. Rational choice explanations are important in the study of political violence. There is hardly any violence-prone movement that glorifies violence as an end in itself. Most seek to abide by the Clausewitzian doctrine of violence as a continuation of politics by other means. In other words, most social movements, including those steeped in revolutionary ideology, or those which carry out random and indiscriminate violence, claim that their violence has a political logic, which they believe is always subordinated to their political strategies and objectives.

The problem, of course, is whether social movements are always in control of their violence and are thus able to make rational calculations about its use. UNRISD case studies and other literature on political violence suggest that this is not always the case: violence tends to develop its own logic, interests and clientele when it penetrates society and politics. The rational instrumentalist model ignores the symbolic significance of violence in shaping social conflicts. It denies, in other words, life and meaning to the act of violence itself. At another level, it ignores the fact that when religiously or ethnically inspired violence enters the social field, it often becomes indistinguishable from other criminal activities relating, for instance, to drug trafficking, the smuggling of precious resources and the pursuit of personal gain or power. Studies of the activities of the LTTE in Sri Lanka and those of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, guerrilla movements in Colombia, the war in southern Sudan, and rebel-inspired violence in Angola, Liberia and Sierra Leone show how vested interests have developed around the use of violence in furthering economic objectives which do not always correspond with the original goals of the movements. This is one of the main reasons why stopping violence in situations where alternative livelihoods are limited has become a Herculean task for governments and social movements alike.

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## the dynamics of political violence

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How is political violence structured? How does it relate to the dynamics of social conflict? Is it possible to discern a pattern in the use of political violence? It takes various forms, and it is difficult to identify social movements with one specific type of political violence. Most violent movements tend to combine several types either simultaneously or in phases, depending upon the strength of societal institutions and the dynamics of the conflict itself. Based on the way groups are organized, their ideology or orientation towards the state, and their preferred methods of violence, four types of political violence can be identified.

### militancy

The first is the limited use of violence by lawfully constituted groups. A number of ethno-religious movements which advocate social change through militant action do not seek to undermine the foundations of a state's legality. Such pressure groups or political parties indeed use existing laws to mobilize support for their cause and to apply pressure on the state. They share common characteristics with more secular movements of an occupational, gender or social nature, such as environmental and civil rights organizations, which conduct their mass campaigns through lawful means. But militant action can lead to violence, some of which an organization may actually condone. This could take the form of spontaneous riots, or violence that is orchestrated by more militant members in the course of a lawful demonstration, picket or sit-in. In this first type, violence is used to demonstrate seriousness and commitment or anger at a state's insensitivity to what a group may regard as reasonable demands. Because such movements do not opt out of the political system, violence is generally not allowed to escalate to the point where the movement begins to lose public sympathy and allies. This kind of violence occurs in all societies. How often it occurs and the extent of the damage it causes may depend upon the level of a society's institutional development. Low institutionalization or consensus may generate a sense of weakness among actors and a propensity to resort to violence as they miscalculate the intentions and capabilities of others. Under such conditions, violence may even be provoked by officials of the state to clamp down on militants.

### terrorism

A second type of political violence is what is often referred to as terrorism. There is no indisputable definition of terrorism, because political violence itself is embedded in emotional, ideological and moral claims. No violence-prone group describes itself as terrorist, however brutal or senseless its violence. All violence strikes terror in victims and society, even if those who perpetrate it are seen as freedom fighters or liberators in some contexts. Describing one type of political violence as terrorist and another type as emancipatory or legal — and therefore legitimate — is obviously subjective. Terrorism often refers to hidden acts of violence which the state, the victims and the society feel unable to control. It is often targeted at state or business sector personnel, institutions and property, and may impact on civilians who are mere bystanders. The aim is to disrupt normal life and force society to reflect upon the claims of the movement. In situations where the state's institutions are strong, terrorism may be a way of weakening the political order. By provoking the state to engage in a crack-down and violate its own laws and principles through excessive use of force — which in the end still may not ensure security — society may be forced to rethink the moral foundations of the state and the fundamentals of the state's policy. Examples include the abolition of apartheid in South Africa, the recognition of Sinn Féin (the political wing of the Irish Republican Army) as a legitimate actor in the Irish dispute, or the granting of Palestinian autonomy in Jericho and Gaza.

Groups that engage in acts of terrorism are often small, tightly organized and secretive, such as the Red Brigades in Italy and the Baader-Meinhoff in Germany. Groups that started as broad-based emancipatory movements may end up as terrorist organizations with little or no social base. The Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in the Basque region of Spain could be said, for instance, to have been transformed from a broad social movement, under Franco's dictatorship, to a small terrorist group when Spain became a liberal democracy. Under the dictatorship, the disparate ambitions of the Basque people seemed to coincide with the key dimensions of ETA's objectives: Basque independence, which struck a chord with the vast majority of Basques; proletarian power, which linked ETA with the workers' movement; and socialist revolution, which derived from a Marxist conviction of a total transformation of Spanish society. For many years during Franco's rule, violence was used with discretion, and was either condoned or supported by Basque society as a necessary form of pressure to end the dictatorship. The transition to democracy, the devolution of substantial power to the Basque region and industrial recession brought a rupture in ETA's relations with its core constituents. The majority of Basque people became more willing to support the moderate parliamentary parties as a way of advancing Basque interests; the workers' movement suffered a serious decline in power and influence as a result of high unemployment, which allowed more moderate elements to dictate union strategy; and many activists abandoned the movement following a series of sectarian and violent fights. Indeed, it was the increasing irrelevance of ETA in the new realities of power and social realignments that transformed the organization into a terrorist outfit. Its

violence became more daring, indiscriminate and frequent as it lost support within the Basque community.

But acts of terrorism are not only restricted to small organizations. They could also be associated with larger movements which pursue a cause that has wide social support. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas, Jewish right-wing groups such as Kahane Chai and Kach, and the Irish Republican Army (IRA), for instance, combine conventional militant forms of protests with acts of terrorism. Indeed, terrorism itself can be an act of state policy, negating the very basis on which the modern state derives its *raison d'être* — its capacity to maintain order and protect the lives of its citizens. There are numerous examples of large-scale violence being unleashed by authoritarian governments on opposition politicians, unionists, pressure groups and, in some cases, private individuals in most regions of the world. Also, state systems may be penetrated by interests with a violent agenda which the legally constituted authority may be unable to control. The most recent demonstration of this is in South Africa, where a government commission on political violence implicated high ranking members of the security forces in much of the indiscriminate violence prior to the elections in April 1994.

## revolutionary violence

A third type of political violence concerns revolutionary insurrectionary movements, which aim to transform society through large-scale mobilization and the capture of state power.<sup>6</sup> Examples range from the Chinese and Russian communist revolutions to the Islamic revolution in Iran. Such movements affirm an essentialist view of violence as a central attribute of the power of the state they seek to overthrow. They thus invest revolutionary violence with an aura of inevitability and respectability. Such violence can take several forms: terrorism, mass militant action, sabotage, guerrilla warfare and conventional war. Revolutionary movements reject the underlying premises and moral principles that guide the discourse of politics in existing states, including the limits or boundaries of power imposed by such discourse. They seek to introduce an alternative or “inversionary” discourse that draws upon the experiences of people who have gone through difficult periods in life but who feel powerless to change their condition. By providing a forum where such experiences are recounted, and transforming such narratives into a logic for revolutionary action, revolutionary insurrectionary movements turn individual helplessness into strength or “symbolic capital” that acts like a collective fund and compensates for their lack of economic power.

The clash of rationalities, or discourses, between official society and insurrectionary movements has inspired a number of scholars to look at

political violence from a perspective that seeks to understand its inner logic and dynamics. Coming under the rubric of “discourse theory”, the aim is to read violence as a story that has meanings, major plots and sub-plots, and different types of characters who are engaged in a discourse both among themselves and with the society they seek to change. Two interrelated perspectives inform understanding of the dynamics of violence as discourse. The first looks at how movements retrieve from the past themes that capture the predicament of a community, such as marginalization, exploitation, dispossession and loss, and then use them to mobilize feelings of obligation, solidarity, support and discipline. The way the past is interpreted provides a basis for action to achieve a desired objective, which may include “the repossession of a lost territory, culture or means of production”, “the restoration of rights, status and power” and “the purification of a polluted soul or social life”. The second perspective concerns how the movement discusses the link between what it has created as its past and the way it seeks to realize it as a future goal. This requires a leader who is well versed in the history, traditions and strategies of popular struggles, a kind of “cosmocrat” who can transform oral traditions into written texts, create myths and convert such myths into logical truths. It also requires an inner group that constantly discusses with the leader the principles, ideas and goals of the movement; in other words, the leader and the group form a “discourse community”. The main point is that such a community uses discourse to justify violence when seeking to enact boundaries between itself and others and in pursuing its overall objective of emancipation.

“Inversionary” discourse serves as a protective shield against the external world, and allows members to stick together and provide their own interpretations of events, turning defeat into success and failure into imminent victory. An interesting contemporary example of such movements is Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) in Peru. This movement arose in a context of rapid change and profound crisis in Peru in which rural society, particularly the Andean region of Ayacucho, was adversely hit. Distorted industrialization, a poorly implemented land reform programme in the late 1960s and a deep economic crisis in the 1970s created a social crisis in much of the Peruvian countryside. Social contradictions sharpened between Lima and the rest of the country, between the coastal areas and the highlands, between the rich industrialists/landowners and the poor, and between the different ethnic groups (the *criollos*, the *mestizos* and the Indians). The retreat of the state from much of the countryside in the 1970s created a power vacuum that various groups, such as landowners, drug traffickers, local power groups, peasant organizations, churches and left-wing parties attempted to fill. Sendero was to emerge from this chaotic social situation to champion the cause of the peasantry using a highly doctrinal Marxist-Leninist-Maoist discourse. Despite its emphasis on peasant emancipation, the movement itself drew much of its support from a *mestizo* provincial university élite — which was unhappy with its subordinate position vis-à-vis the *criollo* power holders — and rural *mestizo*/Indian youths, who felt despised, disoriented and powerless. These youths had been influenced by

Sendero's leader or "cosmocrat", Abimael Guzmán, when they were students at the university where Guzmán taught philosophy. Guzmán and his discourse community or clientele put extraordinary emphasis on the power of ideas, using Marxist classics and Guzmán's philosophical tracts to interpret Peruvian reality and formulate ways of advancing their struggle. By the early 1980s Sendero had emerged as the most important armed movement in Peru's history, dominating much of the rural area of Ayacucho. By 1990, 49 per cent of the national population was officially classified as living under military protection in "emergency zones". Ironically, much of Sendero's violence was targeted at the peasantry that was expected to form the basis for the new order.

Secular revolutionary movements are not alone in using discourse to justify violence. What we have described applies equally to a whole set of religious and ethnic movements that are fighting for emancipation. The Islamic revolution in Iran and the role of Ayatollah Khomeini and his close circle of *mullahs* who pontificated on sacred Islamic texts, laws and traditions fit the picture very well. So do some of the burgeoning fundamentalist religious groups that are now engaged in various forms of urban violence in pursuit of some logical truth about society and morality. Examples from the ethnic side would include the Tamil Tigers and their charismatic leader, Prabhakaran, who succeeded in infusing an ideology of self-destruction in the Tamil struggle for a homeland where they believe they will be at peace with themselves. Cadres commit suicide by taking cyanide to avoid being captured as prisoners; and specially trained fighters take part in high risk missions where they do not expect to come out alive.

## civil war

A fourth type of political violence is fragmented civil war or internal strife. Some of these wars, such as in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Mozambique, Somalia and the Sudan have been carried over from the Cold War era. Others, such as in Bosnia, Georgia, Liberia, Nagorno Karabak, Sierra Leone and Tajikistan, are of more recent origin. The violence that flows from such current conflicts tends to be indiscriminate and can take on extremely vicious and genocidal proportions. It is often devoid of respect for basic international norms of warfare and human rights. One of the principal characteristics of such violence is the localized nature of the discourse that sustains it and the absence of any overarching "mega-discourse". The localization of discourse, which is partly related to the end of the Cold War and the erosion of national values of consensus, has freed local warring parties of the need to justify their behaviour and win international or national support on the basis of established universal principles or ideals. Other characteristics include the tendency for warring groups to divide into a number of small factions, weaknesses in military command structures,

difficulties in controlling and administering territory which in the past enabled warring groups to respect basic norms of civil behaviour, and the random distribution of the instruments of violence. Significantly, the war economy that helped in the past to maintain some order in the prosecution of war has broken down in a number of countries experiencing civil war or strife. Warring factions find it increasingly difficult to have safe havens where they can work out deals with NGOs and international organizations. In the past, such safe havens enabled warring groups to offer protection to NGOs, international relief organizations and refugees in exchange for part of the food that is meant for refugees or displaced persons. With the breakdown of the conventional war economy, armed factions now prey on local populations in search of food, plunder relief convoys and demand payments for protecting personnel of international organizations and NGOs.

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## part 4: policy approaches to identity-based conflicts

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Ethnicity and religious behaviour are forms of consciousness that often represent appropriate responses to the chaotic conditions of modern life. They provide richness to the human condition which the impersonal forces of modernity cannot handle. But it is evident also that most present-day conflicts and wars tend to be fuelled by particularistic values and identities. This calls for an exploration of policy options that could deal with problems of ethnic and religious conflicts as well as political violence. We discuss these policies under two broad areas: socio-economic development and institutional arrangements.

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### socio-economic development

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The first area contains a number of overlapping issues, including one of a systemic nature. At the systemic level, political violence represents a critique of development. Large numbers of people in the developing world have not seen improvements in their lives in recent decades. In some countries, living standards have actually deteriorated to alarming levels. But development is also emerging as a problem in countries where standards of living have been raised well above poverty levels. In Western Europe, technological change is leading to high levels of unemployment, the costs of maintaining social welfare programmes are rising faster than productivity gains, and governments are being elected on platforms of low taxation and, by implication, low public welfare provisioning. More and more individuals thus become functionally irrelevant to the economy and find it increasingly difficult to cope under these conditions.

Policies of economic development need to be sensitive to problems of marginalization, social inequalities and political disequilibrium for development itself to be sustainable. It is interesting to note that most of Europe escaped political violence and ethno-religious and racist conflicts in the decades when their welfare programmes and economies were sound, and governments and society identified with the problems of the weak. Western

Europe in particular used social democracy to contain the “spectre of revolutionary violence”, which instead became a Third World problem, and had to contend only with more limited forms of urban terrorism. This is not to suggest that development that is focused on the disadvantaged will inevitably eliminate violence. Such development may need to be rooted in the cultures and traditions of the people it seeks to uplift for it to be sustainable. Many identity-inspired conflicts in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and parts of the Americas have a lot to do with the spread of modernization through highly contested mediums which vocal and alienated recipients equate with Westernization.

Bearing in mind the need to address the general crisis associated with current patterns of development, more specific policies may be needed for countries that are divided by ethnic and religious cleavages. The main issue here is that of equity. Many ethnic conflicts or grievances can be traced to the way different opportunities accrue to groups in the social economy: discrimination and/or inequalities in jobs, incomes, asset holdings and social services.

The major redistributive policies attempted in most plural societies have been based on **proportionality** and **affirmative action**. The first type seeks to ensure that jobs, political appointments, educational opportunities and public investment programmes are distributed in ways that reflect population ratios. This involves the use of quotas, subsidies and special funds for disadvantaged groups. The second type though similar to the first, seeks primarily to redress imbalances created by discriminatory practices, often of a historical nature. In this case, quotas, subsidies, special funds and other forms of redistributive mechanisms may be used to reach the disadvantaged population, but the aim is not to create ethnic balance. In some countries where ethnic inequalities are sharp — Malaysia, Nigeria, the new South Africa, and Sri Lanka, for example — proportionality and affirmative action may be pursued as a single policy. In countries such as Lebanon, Pakistan and Papua New Guinea, proportionality is emphasized in certain areas of public life, such as cabinet posts and key public sector appointments, but no specific group is targeted for special upliftment. The majority of plural societies leave the question of ethnic balance in public policy to the discretion of office holders and employers, and the issue is often a source of tension and acrimony. Countries that have enacted affirmative action policies include the United States, and to some extent Australia and Canada.

Implementation of policies of affirmative action and proportionality is often fraught with a number of difficulties. Such policies seem to work best when an economy is growing and redistribution does not lead to a sense of economic loss by dominant groups. Malaysia’s redistributive policy in favour of the relatively poor indigenous Malays is believed to have been successful because of the sustained growth of its economy which has allowed the creation of new opportunities for Malays in the state sector, timber businesses and oil industry without unduly hurting the interests of the

Chinese who dominate much of the economy. The Chinese have also been able to circumvent the constraints of quotas in public sector education by exploring private sector opportunities. Where an economy is stagnant or in crisis, richer groups may staunchly oppose redistributive policies. A major contributory factor to the collapse of Yugoslavia was the lopsided nature of its economy and the feeling by the Croats and Slovenes that their own development was being held back by the Federal Credit Fund which was set up to correct regional imbalances under communist rule. As the two most developed regions in the federation, Croatia and Slovenia contributed more to this fund than all the other regions except Serbia, whose contribution was on the average higher than that of Slovenia but lower than that of Croatia, for the period 1985 to 1990. The credit funds were allocated to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Vojvodino. When the economic crisis struck in the late 1980s this redistributive policy came in for sustained attack from the Croats and Slovenes.

Redistributive policies face additional problems of entitlement and monitoring. Favoured groups may come to see such policies as a permanent right rather than a temporary solution. Under such conditions, recipients may not be sufficiently motivated to close the ethnic gap, or may continue to insist upon special treatment even when the gap has been substantially reduced. Such policies are also susceptible to corruption and patronage, especially under conditions of poor administrative infrastructure and monitoring capabilities. Benefits may go to special clients of patrons rather than to needy individuals in disadvantaged communities. In a number of cases, such policies often end up promoting the interests of the middle classes rather than those of the poor, especially when the implementation of the policy is top-down. Privileged groups may continue to use the poverty or ethnic backwardness of others as an argument for maintaining the policies even if the poor do not benefit from them. As social inequalities widen within targeted backward groups, disadvantaged individuals within those groups may become intolerant of “ethnic strangers” within their neighbourhoods. Redistributive policies are essential in bringing about reconciliation, a sense of national belonging and political stability in unequal plural societies, but they will need to be carefully formulated and monitored if they are not to fuel the conflicts they seek to prevent.

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## institutional changes

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The second broad area relates to institutional changes and policies to ensure that groups do not feel alienated from vital political processes that shape their lives. Since many ethnic conflicts revolve around questions of statehood or competition for the control of the state, it would seem logical to rethink the state itself in the light of the plural nature of countries in the world system. This would require examination of three questions: whether the state should continue to be the primary unit for determining a society's core identity and sense of independence; whether the state should continue to be invested with a unitary character in handling increasingly diverse and interdependent populations; and whether appropriate institutions could be developed that would allow diverse groups of people to coexist, interact and, if they so wished, integrate within the same geographical space. The way the last problem is resolved may depend ultimately upon how the first two are treated.

### limitations of the nation state

As we have seen, the idea of the nation state is of recent origin. In the past, people tended to identify with smaller units of a village, municipal or clan type, even when these were part of large empires or loosely organized state systems. In contemporary times, global transactions in business, politics, security, culture and social affairs have undermined much of the effectiveness of the nation state. Yet the feeling persists that the state is the ultimate symbol of a group's sense of freedom and the foundation for its progress. The basis for this feeling can be traced to the very concept of "self-determination" — a sacred symbol that was developed by European politicians and activists for judging group maturity and civilization and for participation in the conduct of international affairs. The implication of this concept is that groups which do not assert this right are not mature or civilized enough and therefore cannot act freely in world affairs. Those who claim and are given this right have complete sovereignty over their collective lives and their leaders can treat their subjects the way they wish without interference from outsiders.

But, based on just the indicator of language identity, the world's peoples number in several thousands. Furthermore, migration and intermarriage have made even local communities less homogenous than they were in the past. It is simply impossible that all groups will be able to exercise the right to statehood without plunging the world into endless conflicts and wars and

denying the rights of those who do not wish to be confined to the identity of one specific state. The establishment of a nation state is unlikely to be a panacea for identity problems; and denying it in one case and granting it in another, whatever the criteria that are used, simply complicates the problem. The creation of Pakistan to serve Muslims in the old India opened up new identity problems between the Baluchis, the Bengalis, the Punjabis, the Pushtos, the Sindhis, the Urdus, etc. When the Bengalis seceded and created Bangladesh, new problems emerged in the new state between the majority Bengalis and the minority Urdu-speaking Biharis and the peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tract; and conflicts deepened in Pakistan itself between the Punjabis, the Sindhis, the Urdus and a large number of smaller groups. Yugoslavia is undergoing a bloody civil war to create ethnically pure states when it is very clear that this is never going to be possible. The patchy look of the Owen-Vance canton plan for Bosnia alone shows how difficult it is to pursue such a goal. The examples are endless, but the point has been made. The concept of the nation state, including its underlying principle of self-determination, needs a fundamental rethink.

### a case for states with plural identities

Much of the responsibility for proving that a particular society discriminates against some of its members has been put on those who seek self-determination. The state, which is often the culprit of the problem, escapes responsibility and can continue to plead sovereignty and the sanctity of its borders under international law even when it engages in unlawful and unjust acts against its peoples. The changes necessary to stabilize ethnic conflicts and relations require a reorientation and reorganization of the character of the contemporary state system. There are indications that this is already happening in international discourses which have produced a number of treaties and conventions on the rights and obligations of states in the treatment of their various peoples. Part of this has been made possible by pressures exerted on state actors by aggrieved groups and individuals; and the principle of the right to self-determination has helped to galvanize action in this direction. States need to grant much autonomy, rights and freedoms to the various groups and individuals that constitute their society, and the state itself needs to embody the varied identities of such groups in its relations with society and the international community. There is no reason, for instance, why international and regional organizations should be institutions of nation states and not of the various peoples and interest groups that exist in the world or in specific regions.

## representation and participation

We can now attempt to answer the third question which is concerned with ensuring that groups have a sense of representation and participation in the political life of their society. Four key policies can be identified based on the experiences of countries that have tried to move in this direction: the devolution of power; power sharing arrangements; electoral systems that seek to reflect the plural character of the population; and cultural policies that promote harmonious relations. The devolution of power can take a federal or confederal form and can influence the sharing of responsibilities at all levels of society, including those at the grassroots. It has the advantage of shifting some of the conflicts from the centre to regional or local areas and of allowing the centre to play the role of impartial referee in local or regional disputes. This is much easier to accomplish where groups have a territorial identity. It may be difficult in such areas as Burundi, Northern Ireland and Rwanda where contending groups tend to share a common territory. In countries where ethnic groups are many and of unequal size and territorial spread, such as India, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea and Russia, such a policy may lead to new disputes as every exercise in the devolution of power to mini-states may create new minorities and calls for more states. Such systems are also very expensive to run given the layers of government required to make devolution effective. If not carefully handled and supported by a set of universal civil rights provisions which guarantee equal rights in settlements, employment, education and cultural practices to all citizens, devolution may lead to “ethnic cleansing” and internecine local conflicts. Devolution is likely to be effective when intra-group and non-ethnic conflicts gain prominence at local levels. The classic model of “successful” decentralization of power in plural societies is the Swiss canton confederal system.

Power sharing arrangements, in which all groups are represented in government, have the advantage of ensuring stability and of getting the parties that would otherwise be locked in conflict to understand each other’s interests and develop a system of trust in governing the country. Such arrangements have the additional advantage of establishing consensus on the management of the instruments of violence as all parties may be represented in the key institutions that deal with issues of security. The ideal power sharing arrangement is consociationalism. In this arrangement, ethnic claims of all groups are recognized, but these are presented as interests rather than as non-negotiable principles; ethnic groups are free to bargain with each other in forming a grand alliance to govern the country; élites who represent these groups share out key political offices, and in some cases rotate the leadership of the government itself. This system works best when there are few groups (but at least three) of roughly comparable size. The rotational principle may be difficult to apply if there are many groups (say, 20-50), unless élites take a long-term and selfless view of politics and are ready to forfeit their leadership claims to future élites of their communities. Post

sharing under such conditions may also not be a cordial affair as the grand alliance may come under pressure from unofficially constructed alliances in the competition for the limited number of government posts. This is one reason why power sharing arrangements tend to take on an informal character in many plural societies and why they also create much bitterness among losers. Power sharing arrangements have the additional problem of creating a dictatorship of élites: those who get in first may try to block others from getting in or from advocating alternatives that would undermine their own hold on power. In some cases, such as Lebanon, power sharing arrangements through national pacts that allocate offices to specific groups often involve considerable horse trading, the empowerment of single individuals as patrons and weak party organizations. Under conditions of war, such systems can facilitate the rise of private armies which may be loyal to key politicians. The Lebanese model of power sharing worked fairly well for about 30 years before it was overwhelmed by civil war in the 1970s. Switzerland provides a good example of an effective power sharing arrangement that includes the rotational principle. Malaysia has a bargaining system based on a grand alliance of Chinese, Indians and Malays, in which the Malays play a dominant role. A more recent enactment of the power sharing model is the five-year government of national unity in South Africa, in which cabinet posts are distributed on a proportional basis to parties that have gained at least 5 per cent of the popular vote.

Power sharing arrangements need sound electoral systems in order for people to be able to choose representatives that reflect the plural character of their society. Such systems usually include the following: special voting procedures, the most commonly used being proportional representation, with or without a list system; rules governing the formation of political parties that, as in the Nigerian case, may discourage parties from being formed on overtly ethnic/religious lines (since a certain proportion of the officials of all parties may have to come from several ethnic groups and presidential or gubernatorial winners may be required to poll a certain percentage of cross-national votes to form a government); different weights given to constituency boundaries to compensate groups that are likely to be less represented in legislatures because of their small numbers or the fragmented way they are distributed across a country. If carefully worked out, electoral arrangements can help to promote moderation, the formation of cross-ethnic alliances or reciprocities and effective systems of proportional representation. They are insufficient, however, on their own as instruments for the promotion of stability and democracy in plural societies if policies that support the growth of civil rights, accountability and transparency are not vigorously pursued.

A healthy system of ethnic relations also needs a sound policy on public education and culture. Many conflicts are sustained by stereotypes, myths or prejudices that have been fed into discourse at household, neighbourhood or national levels. Such myths may be based on feelings of superiority; or on beliefs that ethnic groups are fundamentally different and therefore cannot

solve their differences through peaceful means; or on assumptions that some groups are inherently aggressive and have a hidden hegemonic agenda; or that some groups are lazy, unreliable, parasitic or distrustful of outsiders. Stereotypes generate feelings of fear and hatred which may entrench ethnic boundaries and weaken the reins of moderation when conflicts break out. Many plural societies have tried to institute national programmes of education with a common curriculum to encourage the growth of a national world view, establish special unity schools that admit pupils from a cross-section of ethnic groups, and develop national youth service programmes that oblige participants to serve in regions other than their own. At the local level, many ethnic groups have various mechanisms for dealing with cultural differences which help to check conflict. Specific ethnic groups, clans or families may share common jokes about each other. Such “joking ethnic relations” which entrust special status to foreign members in special ceremonies are often useful in funeral arrangements, marriages, medical and religious rites and the installation of chiefs. They can also guarantee freedom of passage to travellers in unfamiliar territories. Individuals from different ethnicities who share joking relations can tease or swear at each other in public. Humour helps to tame differences and allows for some level of co-operation and mutual understanding between groups. There is a lot that can be achieved in ethnic relations through policies that seek to deconstruct myths, stereotypes and prejudices by the creative use of public discourse, humour and education.

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## conclusion

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This discussion demonstrates that no single policy is sufficient to address the problems of social order, political stability and participation in ethnically plural societies. At the same time, no ethnically plural society is likely to avoid using the policies of devolution and power sharing in the long run if it is to enjoy political stability and an acceptable level of social cohesion. However, such policies may have to reflect the historical experiences and social structures of individual societies and have to be based on solid foundations of civic and common citizenship rights. A policy that is based exclusively on ethnic group rights is likely to freeze relations between groups, promote ethnic chauvinism, entrench group privileges, punish individuals who seek to straddle or transcend group politics, and frustrate social interactions based on individual interests.

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## notes

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1. The manuscripts prepared under the UNRISD projects on Ethnic Conflict and Development, Ethnic Diversity and Public Policies, and Political Violence and Social Movements, as well as a large amount of secondary data in published books and journals, form the basis for this paper. Some of these books and manuscripts are listed in the bibliography. A specially commissioned paper, written by Jeff Haynes, is the main input to part 2. It is also listed in the bibliography.
2. Stavenhagen, 1990.
3. This section is adapted from Haynes, 1994.
4. Marty and Appleby, 1993, p.3.
5. Quoted from his intervention at the UNRISD 30th anniversary seminar "The Crisis of Social Development in the 1990s: Preparing for the World Social Summit" (Geneva, July 1993).
6. This classification is based on Apter, 1994.