

Instrumental and constructivist conceptualizations of ethnicity: implications for Latin American social movements research

Conceptualizaciones instrumentales y constructivistas de la etnicidad: aplicaciones para investigaciones de movimientos sociales en Latinoamérica



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Abstract:

Within the realm of comparative politics, ethnicity has been conceptualized as both a fixed category in which individuals are born, as well as one of multiple identities that can be made politically salient by different actors. The latter perspective corresponds to instrumental and constructivist conceptualizations of ethnicity that seeks first and foremost to answer the question: ‘Under which circumstances will ethnicity activate and affect citizens’ political behavior?’ Since the 1990s, Latin American social movements began to ‘play the ethnic card’, which culminated with the first indigenous candidate ever, to

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win a presidential election in the region in 2005. Applying research designs based on instrumental and constructivist conceptualizations of ethnicity could significantly advance the study of Latin American social movements.

Keywords: Ethnicity – Instrumentalism – Constructivism – Latin America – Research Design.

Resumen:

Dentro del área de estudios de Política Comparada, se ha conceptualizado a la etnicidad como una categoría fija en la cual nacen las personas, pero también como solo una de las múltiples identidades que pueden ser políticamente activadas por diversos actores. Esta última perspectiva corresponde al paradigma instrumental o constructivista, que busca responder la siguiente pregunta: ¿Bajo qué circunstancias se activará la identidad étnica de ciudadanos, de modo tal que afecte su comportamiento político? Desde los '90s que los movimientos sociales en Latinoamérica comenzaron a presentarse como movimientos de origen étnico, lo cual culminó con la elección del primer presidente indígena de la región, en 2005. Diseñar investigaciones, utilizando nociones instrumentales y constructivistas de etnicidad, puede permitir el avance del estudio de los movimientos sociales en la región.

Palabras Clave: Etnicidad – Instrumentalismo – Constructivismo – Latinoamérica – Investigación

‘We, the Quechuas, Aymaras and Guaranties of Bolivia keep hearing from our governments: that we are narcos, that we are anarchists. This uprising of the Bolivian people has been not only about gas and hydrocarbons, but an intersection of many issues: discrimination, marginalization, and most importantly, the failure of neoliberalism’.

(Evo Morales, President of Bolivia)

Throughout the past decades, ethnically-based social movements and political parties have been gaining momentum in Latin America. It’s not that the members of these groups had never been represented in organizations before; it is just that the ethnic “label” had not been employed. Why would those formerly identified as peasants decide to re-group as something else? Might identifying along ethnic lines yield higher payoffs to those mobilizing? ‘Yes’, would be the consensual answer among most current race and ethnicity scholars.

The fluidity of identities that instrumentalist and constructivist approaches conceptualize has allowed researchers to focus on the incentives that actors may have to select one identity over another. Since individuals have several po-

tential identities, the ones that can yield higher political payoffs, they argue, will be chosen to label a certain group. Grouping along ethnic lines would be advantageous in the Latin American political arena in a way it hasn’t been in the past.

In what follows, I will first briefly describe instrumental and constructivist conceptualizations of ethnicity. I will then proceed to illustrate the type of research questions and designs that have resulted from these conceptual frameworks. Finally, I will identify how these paradigms could be fruitfully applied to research examining Latin American social movements.

INSTRUMENTAL AND CONSTRUCTIVIST CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF ETHNICITY

One of the reasons ethnicity has become a concept of increasing scholarly interest in the field of comparative politics, has been the rise of intra-state conflict in post-authoritarian regimes. As stated by Fearon and Laitin, ‘an influential conventional wisdom holds that civil wars proliferated rapidly with the end of the Cold War and that the root cause of many or most of these has been ethnic and religious antagonisms’ (2003, p. 75). That ethnic differences correlate with animosity between groups seems like a plausible argument. This

seems particularly likely in newly democratized nations where previous authoritarian regimes had suppressed dissenting voices and where elections with the potential to divide citizens across ethnic lines had been a rare phenomenon. However, ultimately, the plausibility of the argument depends on what we are referring to when we say 'ethnicity'.

The use of the term intensified in the late 1970s. As noted by Cohen, 'quite suddenly, with little comment or ceremony, ethnicity is a ubiquitous presence. Even a brief glance through titles of books and monographs over the past few years indicates a steadily accelerating acceptance and application of the terms "ethnicity" and "ethnic" to refer to what was before often subsumed under "culture," "cultural," or "tribal" (Cohen 1978, p. 379). However, the concept had been defined many years earlier by Weber (a definition still used today) (Chandra 2006). For him, 'ethnic groups are those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization or migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists' (quoted in Hutchinson and Smith,

1999, p. 35). Other (more recent) widespread definitions include Horowitz's argument, who focuses on members of groups believing in a mythical common ancestry, noting that 'ethnic groups can be placed at various points along the birth-choice continuum. But there is always a significant element of descent' (Horowitz, 1985, p.55)

According to primordialist, definitions of ethnic identities are fixed, immutable. It is assumed that ethnic identities primarily affect both actions and worldviews (Yashar, 2005), and that 'one is invariantly and always perceived as a Serb, a Zulu, or a Chechen' (Lake and Rothchild, 1998, p.5). This translates into research that takes ethnicity as an independent variable or factor of interest, which can affect important outcomes such as the onset of civil conflict.

Scholars who adopt a fixed, primordialist, stance on ethnicity rarely define the concept. When identities are innate and fixed, it is assumed that observers and objects of study utilize similar ethnic classifications, rendering further explanations unnecessary. As noted by Chandra, 'many comparative political scientists do not define the term [ethnicity] before using it' (2006, p. 398).

An alternative approach includes instrumentalist and constructivist approaches to ethnicity.

Although they slightly emphasize different relationships between variables, the research questions they lead to are similar. An instrumental approach will define ethnic identity within a rational choice framework. This enables scholars to theorize regarding when it will be in the best interest of a set of actors to signal to national or international communities that they are part of an ethnic group. This focus on individual actors' decisions, as opposed to biology, it allows assessments regarding expected benefits and costs to be made. As noted by Yashar, 'to explain why individuals choose to act, therefore, they assess the costs and benefits alongside the positive and negative incentives. In other words, one needs to look at individual intentionality and its collective consequences' (Yashar, 2005, p.11).

Constructivism focuses on the central role that shared ideas and norms play in social and political life. The core tenants of constructivism are: '(a) human interaction is shaped primarily by ideational factors, not simply material ones; (b) the most important ideational factors are widely shared or "intersubjective" beliefs, which are not reducible to individuals; and (c) these shared beliefs construct the interests and identities of purposive actors' (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001, p. 393). Applying this framework to ethnic politics centers not

on whether identity matters, but on what an ethnic identity is (if it is inherited, or it is something to be constructed).

Constructivist perspectives highlight that not only an ethnic label is a signal emitted to others, but that it constitutes a costly signal. Although actors have the ability to rationally decide whether to 'play the ethnic card' if they have incentives to do so, this set of possible ethnic identities is limited. As stated by Olzak, 'there are limits to someone claiming to be, say, 'Chinese American', without some reference to valid family ties (Olzak, 2006, p.35). As summed up by Finnemore and Sikkink, 'actors construct or choose these identities from a menu of existing choices. The menu is historically and culturally constructed, but individuals choose rationally from the items that are on the menu at any given point' (2001, p. 411). In this sense, constructivists conceptualize ethnicity as both fluid and situationally bounded (Posner, 2005, p.11)¹.

Instrumental and constructivist perspectives focus on when ethnicity is made politically salient by different actors. These might be

¹ Some have argued that, at a higher level of abstraction, the difference between these classifications might be somewhat blurred. Hale, for instance, argues that 'even primordialists are constructivists' (2008, p.15), as they acknowledge cultural changes and evolution of identities.

politicians in the context of ongoing conflicts or rivalries in an electoral setting, or disenfranchised citizens if they perceive it might help their cause to frame an issue that has ethnic undertones. Ethnicity is thus conceptualized as just one of the many identities that can be made politically salient. Ethnicity is somewhat fluid, but not entirely so, as the set of possible ethnic identities for each actor is finite. A possible micro-foundation, which would facilitate ethnic identity to become politically salient, has been offered by Hale (2008). He emphasizes the role that identifying along ethnic lines can have in reducing uncertainty, as it can help navigate the social world, in part due to its correlation with other factors such as values, and socio-economic indicators in some cases.

Even if certain ethnic cues like skin color do not usually change, Horowitz (1985) argues that specific contextual variables determine if individuals will be categorized according to these cues or other ones. He argues that, even highly visible cues are not necessarily the primordial coding scheme employed by individuals at particular points in time. For instance, 'in seventeenth-century North America, the English were originally called 'Christians', while the African slaves were described as 'heathens' (1985, p.43). Only after 1680, when many slaves were converted to Christianity, eth-

nic distinctions take center stage. Horowitz thus concludes that, 'it is not the attribute that makes the group, but the group and the group differences that make the attribute important' (1985, p.50).

Conceptualizing ethnicity as an identity that can become salient at specific moments in time (as opposed to a fixed trait that is monotonically influential in people's political decisions), means a change in the type of research questions asked. Ethnicity is no longer an independent variable to explain the onset of some other political phenomenon, but a political phenomenon to be studied in itself. This poses certain challenges. As highlighted by Posner, 'from the standpoint of theory building, the discovery that ethnic identities are fluid and situation bound, has been paralyzing. The recognition that ethnic identities may shift from situation to situation has made students of ethnicity hesitant to propose general hypotheses' (2005, p.9).

The fluidity of identity activation has allowed scholars to explain outcomes that were previously regarded merely as outliers. For instance, the correlation between poverty and violence highlighted by Collier (2007), could now be analyzed in more detail. Sen (2008) explains that Calcutta is the poorest city in India but has very low crime rates because local politicians have historically activated class-based

political identities (instead of ethnic ones). Ethnically ‘engineered bloodshed (...) results from the fomenting and cultivation of targeted differences, rather than being just a spontaneous outcome from an inescapable ‘clash’ (2008, p.7).

Research emerging from this instrumentalist/constructivist conceptualization of ethnicity has, for the most part, focused on explaining the effect of institutional settings on determining when ethnic identities will become politically salient. The mechanism at work follows the logic of Tilly’s more general notion of boundary activation. This mechanism ‘consists of a shift in social interactions such that they increasingly (a) organize around a single us-them boundary and (b) differentiate between within-boundary and cross-boundary interactions’ (2003, p.21). This boundary is frequently an ethnic one, and the key variable is not ethnicity per se, but particular institutions that will motivate politicians to make ethnic-based claims and motivate constituents to vote along ethnic lines.

When institutionally activated, ethnicity has important behavioral implications. When ethnicity becomes politically salient, voters will privilege voting for co-ethnic candidates (Horowitz, 1993; Posner, 2005; Chandra, 2007). Ethnicity is considered an ‘informational shortcut’ in incomplete-information environments (as elections certainly

are) due to its inherent ‘stickiness’ (Chandra, 2006). Horowitz notes that, ‘ethnic affiliations provide a sense of security in a divided society, as well as a source of trust, certainty, reciprocal help, and protection against neglect of one’s interests by strangers’ (1993, p.32). This could prove especially consequential in newly democratized countries in which voters do not have many other cues, like political parties, to rely on (Posner, 2005). Citizens in patronage democracies, due to the severity of the informational constraints come election time, would also be particularly susceptible to employ schemes of ethnic categorization (Chandra, 2007).

The behaviors of both politicians and voters frequently become self-reinforcing.

Furthermore, formal institutions may be created as an effect of ethnic politics, ‘over time this equilibrium should also generate additional reinforcing mechanisms that allow it to persist even after the initial informational constraints that gave it birth are lifted. For instance, both voters and politicians have an incentive to create and maintain networks and institutions in order to reduce the transaction costs of communicating demands and delivering benefits’ (Chandra, 2007, p.103).

NEW RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DESIGNS

Large N observational and experimental research designs have been implemented following this conceptual framework. They have been employing subjective measures of ethnic identification in common. For instance, Eifert and his collaborators (2009) find that individuals are more likely to identify along ethnic lines come election time in ten African nations. Using attitudinal items from the Afrobarometer survey project, they find that when asked how they describe themselves, the percentage of people to answer on ethnic terms (as opposed to based on religion, class/occupation, or gender) increases significantly during election periods.

Although constrained by significant data limitations, Posner's (2005) research design includes both objective and subjective measures of ethnic identity. He asks if different institutional settings will affect the ethnic identities that are activated. Specifically, he poses that either linguistic or tribal identities will be activated depending on if a particular election in Zambia is a one-party or a multiparty contest, due to the fact that these elections require different minimum winning coalitions to win. His primordial source of data is not survey-based, but rather objective data in which Zambian government officials

recorded the ethnic composition of different tribes. However, he complements this data with self-reported tribal identities, as well as some survey data he collects.

Habyarimana et al (2007) employ an experimental design to test rival theories regarding the mechanisms connecting ethnic diversity to the limited provision of public goods in Kampala, Uganda. Employing an experimental setup allows them to directly evaluate the relative value of preference-based theories, social network theories, as well as sanctioning theories in a way that would have been impossible to do with natural variance data. Furthermore, they ask participants not only to report the ethnic group they identify with, but also to report what they consider to be the ethnicity of fellow participants in the study. This allows the researchers to test claims regarding the theoretical effect of co-ethnicity in the provision of public goods. Alarming, they find that participants correctly coded the ethnicity of others only 50% of the time. This casts a serious shadow of doubt on previous research that assumes ethnicity is a fixed trait.

Recently scholars have gone a step further, and have begun comparing under which circumstances different types of identities will become salient, incorporating several dimensions into a single study. Borrmann et al. (2015) examine the role

different dimensions of ethnicity have on the entire pathway leading to civil conflicts: initial grievance perception, mobilization of rebels, and government accommodating to rebel demands. Their data include, ‘several linguistic and religious segments per group, it refrains from defining members of a given group as being either linguistic or religious, thereby avoiding ex post facto assessments of the relevant cleavage in a given ethnic conflict’ (Bormann et al., 2015, p.2). This novel setup allows them to find that language cleavages are more likely to lead to ethnic conflict than religious ones.

MOVING FORWARD: APPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH IN LATIN AMERICAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Within the realm of comparative politics, ethnicity has been conceptualized as both a fixed category in which individuals are born, as well as a relatively fluid identity that at times becomes salient, and at other times takes a secondary role with respects to other identifications (like profession, gender, etc.). The consequences of ascribing to one or another definition of ethnicity significantly affects not only the type of research questions that can be possibly asked, but also the way in which these questions are

answered. For those scholars who consider ethnicity to be fixed, the relevant research questions take ethnic distribution as an exogenous variable and generally examine its effect on forms of political participation, as well as how particular institutional settings can diminish an inherent threat of discord or even violence. On the other hand, when ethnic identity can or cannot be politically salient, the question of utmost importance is under which circumstances ethnicity will be activated and affect citizens’ behavior.

It must be noted however, that both fixed and fluid notions of ethnicity have one aspect in common: they draw upon (and contribute to) institutional and behavioral approaches in comparative politics. Even when researchers frame their work within one of these theoretical frames, the effects of the other are implicit. For instance, most of the current work assessing the effects of institutional settings on politization of ethnic identities are relevant, insofar shared ethnicity is assumed to heighten trust and therefore influence voting behavior.

Latin Americanists’ research on ethnicity research has gained momentum in recent decades, and in many ways, is challenging previously-held views about the role of ethnic identities in the political process. Take the groundbreaking work of Madrid for example. He begins by noting

that ethnic identity is particularly ambiguous (and thus especially fluid) in the region. He emphasizes the effects this ambiguity can have on political identification patterns: 'recently, a process of 'reindianization' is taking place in much of Latin America as large numbers of people, including individuals who are only partly of indigenous ancestry, have begun to adopt the indigenous label' (Madrid, 2005, p. 163). For scholars of ethnicity who do not possess a Latin American focus, ethnicity becoming salient enough –to elicit the emergence of ethnic political parties– threatens to deepen societal cleavages, polarization and to increase the likelihood of conflict occurring (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972; Horowitz 1985; Sisk 1996; Riley 2002). Madrid's research suggests this is unlikely to occur in Latin America. On the contrary, since ethnic identity is so fluid in the region, he predicts that non-ethnic parties will continue to retain considerable support, and thus the risk of an 'ever worsening spiral of incendiary communal appeals that lead inexorably to ethnic polarization and conflict' (Madrid 2005, p. 164) is reduced. Instead, Madrid claims that the emergence of ethnic parties in the region can actually help bolster democracy by increasing political participation and improving political representation while reducing the fragmenta-

tion of party systems and electoral volatility.

Another key scholar of ethnicity in Latin American is Van Cott. Her analysis differs from Madrid's as her focus is on how institutional and contextual conditions explain the emergence and success of ethnic political parties in Latin America. It was not until December of 2005 that the region saw the first indigenous candidate ever to win a presidential election. Prior to that time however, 'there were few political parties in Latin America organized around ethnic identity, despite the ethnic diversity in the region. In the rare cases these existed they did not achieve enduring electoral success' (Van Cott, 2005, p.1). This scarce executive representation cannot be explained by a lack of significant indigenous population: in at least five Latin American nations the estimates of indigenous population accounts for at least 12% of the national total. In Bolivia, an estimated 60 to 70% of the population is indigenous. The range for Guatemala lies between 45 and 60%, for Peru between 38 and 40%, for Ecuador between 30 and 38%, and for Mexico between 12 and 14% (Yashar 2005). For Van Cott, indigenous movements gained traction in Latin America in the context of larger re-structuring processes such as severe crises of legitimacy or peace talks to end armed conflict (Van Cott 2001).

She predicts that, in the absence of these key contextual variables, ethnic parties are unlikely to form or succeed.

A third foundational study on the role of ethnicity in Latin American politics is the work of Yashar. She also highlights the importance of institutions, particularly the nation-state. She claims they, 'extend/restrict political citizenship and define national projects, they institutionalize and privilege certain national political identities. In turn, they provide incentives for actors to openly express some political identities over others' (Yashar 2005, p.6). The contemporary motive for ethnic mobilization in the region is pinpointed as a change in the prevailing citizenship regime, linked to liberalization that undermined the autonomy of indigenous groups. However, this strong motive for identifying and mobilizing along ethnic lines will only lead to such a mobilization when groups have the political associational space and social networks –i.e. an underlying capacity to mobilize. She cautions against pinpointing globalization as a cause for the rise of ethnic political mobilization, noting that while globalization has indeed correlated with a surge in ethnic movements in some parts of Latin America, elsewhere it has coincided with other types of mobilization such as labor protests in Europe, and religious

fundamentalism in the Middle East (Yashar 2007).

Going forward, research on social movements in Latin America could build upon these key works, further benefiting from innovations that have emerged from the instrumentalist and constructivist paradigms. It is possible to conceive an integrated research design that includes ethnicity both as a dependent variable to be explained (drawing from instrumentalism and constructivism) as well as an independent factor that can affect other political outcomes. The first step in this two-step process might involve asking if 'playing the ethnic card' increases the likelihood of external support for a given group's grievances (and thus makes it a rational frame to adopt). As we know thanks to Madrid, Van Cott, and Yashar, it is not that members of Latin American groups had never been represented in organizations before; it is just that the ethnic 'label' had not been employed until relatively recently. A natural variance large-N research design could compare time periods/nations/regions in which ethnic frames have been adopted to those in which they haven't, and assess if they have a significant effect on election outcomes or violence among groups. This would help answer why those formerly identified as peasants might decide to re-group as something else, as well as provide an opportunity to

examine whether ethnic identities inherently yield higher payoffs to those mobilizing. The second-step would be to later examine the consequences of employing such a frame on relations with individuals classified as not belonging to the said ethnic group.

Alternatively, an experimental design could examine whether national or international audiences react differently when exposed to group grievances that are identical except for whether an 'ethnic' or an 'economic deprivation' frame is being used for example. Outcome measures could include asking experimental participants if the particular frame they were exposed to, affected whether they would be more likely to support such a group or provide foreign aid assistance. Such a hypothetical experiment could capture the dynamic observed by Yashar with respects to the second generation of ethnic social movements in Bolivia, 'the cocaleros saw the positive reception gained by the Kataristas and started to frame their struggle as one about indigenous rights. They banked on the perception that an ethnic struggle would resonate more powerfully than one for production alone. Hence, they shifted their prior class- based rhetoric to one about indigenous traditions and pride' (Yashar, 2005, p.189-190). The second step of an integrated research design would then examine

the effects of employing an ethnic frame on specific outcomes, such as the onset of inter-group violence, cooperation, or whatever variables found to be significant in the first research phase using observational data. This might look perhaps like the Bormann et al. (2015) study mentioned above.

Recently, formal models have begun incorporating constructivist conceptualizations of ethnicity, and drawing upon empirical findings that highlight the importance of group identification. Sambanis and Shayo's (2013) model predicts 'that intense ethnic conflict makes people care more about their ethnic group relative to other groups, and seek to resemble it more' (2013, p. 319). That is, the table is set to close the feedback loop full circle, utilizing different methodologies to examine under what circumstances ethnicity is more likely to become politically salient (including disaggregating by specific dimensions of ethnicity), the effect identifying along ethnic lines can have on conflict onset and intensity, as well as the reinforcing effect being involved in such a conflict can have on these identifications.

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