The Power of the Past:
A Contribution to a Cognitive Sociology of Ethnic Conflict*

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The aim of this article is to demonstrate the ways in which the past matters for ethnic conflict in the present. More specifically, by presenting a sociocognitive approach to the problem, this article sets out to specify macro-micro bridging mechanisms that explain why a history of prior conflict is likely to increase the likelihood that new conflicts will erupt. People's inclination toward simplified and/or invalid (but often useful) inductive reasoning in the form of analogism, and their innate disposition for ordering events in teleological narratives—to which causality is typically attributed— will be of particular interest for this article. The article will also emphasize the ways in which collective memory sites become activated in such belief formation processes. For instance, the memory biases inherent in analogical reasoning often lead people to overestimate the likelihood of future conflict, which may lead them to mobilize in order to defend themselves, and/or to take preemptive action in ways that foment conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The globe continues to be rent by interethnic conflict at the opening of the new millennium. Ethnic conflict is, of course, a broad and heterogeneous phenomenon ranging from avoidance (Black 1993) to relatively mild forms of bullying to manifest violence and even genocide. Yet despite the great phenomenological differences between various forms of ethnic conflict, there are common underlying mechanisms. Although this article will be biased toward examples of large-scale conflict, the aim is to present theoretical arguments that are equally relevant for understanding small-scale conflicts.

However, as it is such a broad and heterogeneous phenomenon, ethnic conflict defies simple explanation. It is also beyond the scope of this article to present a full explanation of the phenomenon. Instead, the aim is restricted in discussing one specific aspect of ethnic conflict, namely, the role of the past (in particular a history of past conflicts) for ethnic conflict in the present. I am not the first to claim that the past plays a role for the eruption of ethnic conflict in the present (see, e.g., Kaplan 1993). However, earlier arguments have mostly been intuitive and have lacked an elaborated theoretical specification of *how* the past matters for ethnic conflict in the present. Most important, they have failed to bridge the macro-micro divide. The argument that two or more specific ethnic groups are involved in ethnic conflict because they have a history of past conflicts is certainly insufficient, unless mechanisms are presented that in credible ways link the macro-level past to the micro-level reality that constitutes—and "produced"—the present conflict (cf. Hedström and Swedberg 1998).

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In order to bridge this macro-micro divide, we need a theory of action. This article will assume that individual action can be explained by people's desires, beliefs, and opportunities (see Hedström 2005). It is also my contention that a full explanation of ethnic conflict would have to take all these aspects into account. However, in this article I will focus only on beliefs and belief formation. More specifically, by focusing on two specific sociocognitive mechanisms—analogism and narrativization—I will argue that cognitive sociology, as I conceive of it, can make an important contribution to our understanding of belief formation processes, and that it may also provide such a macro-micro link (cf. DiMaggio 2002:275). Cognitive sociology has the strength of dealing with universal patterns of cognition that provide us with an extensive tool-kit of cognitive mechanisms. It also posits that cognition is largely a social activity that provides us with mechanisms for understanding social influence and group-specific uniformities in belief formation. Only this combination, I would argue, permits us to understand *how* people think as well as *what* they think (DiMaggio 2002).

Hence, a position holding that cognition plays an important role in the understanding of social action should not be seen as a plea for an atomistic approach. Individuals are socially situated, thinking and feeling beings with personal biographies who live under certain material and historical conditions. The conceptual schemes, knowledge, and information that shape people's view of the world are socially mediated and always shared to some extent. Only by specifying the situations in which people are embedded may we assess the reasons for their beliefs and actions and understand group-specific uniformities in belief formation. In this article, the concept of culture will be central to this understanding.[1] Following Swidler, culture should in this article be understood as "the publicly available symbolic forms through which people experience meaning" (1986:273). Such symbolic forms include language, rituals, ceremonies, narratives, art forms, various institutionalized practices, and so on. Culture, so conceived, offers a tool-kit of symbolic forms that people draw upon. Although some of these tools are relatively universal, others are unique to specific cultures.[2] Of particular importance for this article will be collective memory sites—such as archives, history books, and commemorative rituals—which may direct people's memories and beliefs in certain directions by pointing out what past events are considered important;[3] as well as established myths and narrative forms that may influence the extent to which information received from others—including elite propaganda—is resonant.

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[1] Cf. DiMaggio (1997:269), who has argued that it is in "schematic cognition [that] we find the mechanisms by which culture shapes and bias thought" (see also 1997:272).

[2] It should be emphasized, however, that most people do not live in one culture, but are parts of several, partly overlapping cultures. Nations, regions, social classes, and families—as well as ethnic groups—may espouse cultures according to this definition.

[3] In the literature on collective memory, "individual memory," "social memory," and "collective memory" are often confused. It is true that only individuals, and not collectives, actually remember in the strict sense. However, this does not mean that memory is "completely personal" and nonsocial (as Gedi and Elam 1996:34 suggest). On the contrary, memory and remembering are imbued with social influence. On the other hand, it is also misleading to suggest that "there are no such thing as individual memory ... Memory is social" (Schudson 1995:346). Memory is often individual *and* social. Instead, the position taken in this article is that we all have some autobiographical memories that we do not share with others (which nonetheless may be social in some sense; not the least because they are mediated through language), but that we also have many memories that we share with some other people (belonging to our social circles) but not with others (see Zerubavel 1996:284). In this sense, it may be more appropriate to speak of *intersubjective* rather than collective memories (cf. Misztal 2003:11). However, there are collective "sites" of memories (archives, history books, commemorative rituals, etc.) that people draw upon, and that direct people's memory in certain directions. For the sake of simplicity, these collective sites will be called collective memories in this article.

However, culture is far from the only social factor that specifies people's social embeddedness. People are also interlinked in social networks and belong to—or are deemed to belong to—various social categories. Interpersonal relations provided by social networks are important as they are simultaneously channels of information, sources of social pressure, and sources of social support, and are thus likely to influence people's beliefs and actions in fundamental ways (see Katz 1957). Social networks show strong tendencies to homophily in the sense that they tend to be homogeneous regarding social category belonging, not the least with regard to ethnicity (e.g., McPherson et al. 2001).

Social category belonging, in turn, is important foremost because it is a vector of social identity formation and because it influences the ways in which information is validated (Rydgren 2008). A social category may be defined as a group of people that recognizes their common characteristics and that bystanders recognize as sharing these specific characteristics (Tilly 1978:62; White 1965:4). A social category is thus both ascribed and self-understood, and although its distinguishing characteristics can be real enough, social categorization ultimately depends on people's perceptions, interpretations, and cognition (cf. Brubaker et al. 2004). We all belong to a multitude of different social categories (based on gender, occupation, class, religion, ethnicity, life styles, etc.). Social categories crystallized "around markers that have systematic implications for people's welfare" (Hechter 2000:98), or that are at least believed to have such implications, can be assumed to be of higher salience than other social categories and are thus more important for social identity formation (cf. Tajfel 1981; Hogg and Abrams 1988). The salience of ethnic categorization, then, is likely to depend on the extent to which the allocation of resources and rights—and risks— hinge on ethnic category belonging. Although contingent on situation-specific factors, ethnic categorization is thus often of high and relatively enduring salience and often constitutes a basis for social (group) identity.

In the following I will, with Barth (1998:13–14), talk about a group of people as an *ethnic group* to "the extent that actors use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and others for purposes of interaction." As this definition implies, ethnic categories can be of varying degrees of *groupness* (cf. Brubaker 2005). In situations in which the salience of ethnic categories increases vis-à-vis other social categories, more people will define themselves in ethnic terms, and ethnicity will become more important for their beliefs and actions. Moreover, in terms of social relations, ethnic groups can be of different degrees of closure, that is, of connectedness to individuals belonging to other ethnic groups. Situations in which ethnic groups are decoupled from one another imply a high degree of groupness.

The article will be structured as follows. In the first section I will outline the basic tenets of the sociocognitive approach. In the next two sections I will discuss, respectively, analogism and narrativization. The final two sections will be dedicated to discussing the relevance of this theoretical approach for understanding ethnic conflict. In the conclusion, finally, I will discuss the settings in which the mechanisms of analogism and narrativization are most likely to be operative and in which situations a history of past interethnic conflicts is most likely to contribute to the eruption of new conflicts.

THE SOCIOCOGNITIVE APPROACH

In contrast to rationalistic micro theories, the sociocognitive framework does not assume rational actors, but is based on the assumption that individuals are motivated

by an "effort after meaning" (Bartlett 1995:44) or that they strive to obtain cognitive closure. Not being able to understand what is happening in one's surround, including what is likely to happen in the immediate future, results in negative emotions, such as stress and frustration, something that most people try to avoid. This attempt to create meaning is mostly unconscious: adults almost never approach objects and events as if they were *sui generis* configurations, but rather perceive and conceive of them through the lens of preexisting systems of schematized knowledge (i.e., beliefs, theories, propositions, and schemas) (Tversky and Kahneman 1982a:117).

Categorization is one important part of this system of schematized knowledge. A category could, in this context, be defined as the "totality of information that perceivers have in mind about particular classes of individuals" (Macrea and Bodenhausen 2000:96).Once such a particular category has been mobilized in meeting an object, event, situation, or person, further perception of the object will partly be dictated by the characteristics of the category (Kahneman and Tversky 1982).

Moreover, preexisting systems of schematized knowledge not only influence the ways in which people categorize, but also the ways in which they make inferences. This will be discussed in greater detail below. What has been called *logical a priori* (Rydgren 2004)—especially people's inclination toward simplified and/or invalid (but often useful) inductive reasoning in the form of analogism, and their innate disposition for ordering events in teleological narratives, to which causality typically are attributed—will be of particular interest for this article. Whereas the latter mechanism is commonly used to understand the present—by linking it to the past through historic sequences—the former is commonly used to predict the future.

These beliefs, theories, and schemas are acquired through a range of different channels, such as socialization in childhood, education, the media, and all kinds of social interactions in everyday life (Nisbett and Ross 1980:119). Although some schematic cognitive structures are fairly universal, and others are highly personal and thus idiosyncratic, many emanate from group cultures, which to a significant degree make them intersubjective (see DiMaggio 1997:273). As mentioned above, this article will, in particular, try to demonstrate how knowledge structures emanating from sites or stocks of collective memory become activated in people's belief-formation processes.

At the same time, individuals are assumed to be cognitive misers, that is, motivated by a drive to save time and cognitive energy. This often leads them to use cognitive strategies without much reflection—frequently, strategies that are readily available and have proved useful in the past. This more or less unconscious reliance on different cognitive strategies generally serves people well in everyday life, when they typically confront situations that are repetitive, and thus have the chance to continuously adjust their preexisting systems of schematized knowledge. Confusion and breakdown in the effort after meaning are most likely in so-called black-box situations, that is, in situations of uncertainty (Boudon 1989) when people face new situations that their standard cognitive strategies fail to handle (whether understanding present situations or predicting future ones). In such black-box situations people are likely either to use schematized knowledge structures that have proved valid in other situations, or to rely on others. As a result, dubious knowledge structures, including myths and rumors, are more likely to become activated in black-box situations.[4]

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[4] This argument is congruent with empirical research that shows that "judgment becomes more stereotypic under cognitive load" (Macrea and Bodenhausen 2000:105).

However, people's navigation through black-box situations is not haphazard, but influenced by social factors. Whom one relies on in black-box situations, for instance, largely depends on whom one trusts and whom one views as authoritative. In order to understand trust and authority, in turn, we have to turn to the factors that define people's social embeddedness, as was discussed in the introduction. We may assume that trust is more common within ethnic categories than across ethnic categories, which implies that people in black-box situations are more likely to rely on co-ethnics than on individuals belonging to other ethnic categories. The reason for this assumption is that trust is based on predictions about the future based on a person's actions in the past. And since knowledge of individuals' past behavior is structured by a person's network—that is, one knows more about people one interacts with or who interact with people one knows—and as ego-networks tend toward ethnic homophily, most people have greater knowledge about co-ethnics than about individuals belonging to other ethnic groups. As a result, intra-group trust tends to be more common than intergroup trust (see Fearon and Laitin 1996). Moreover, we tend to view information coming from certain sources and actors as more authoritative than others. Kruglanski (1989) has termed these sources and actors *epistemic authorities*. People have greater confidence in information coming from epistemic authorities, and are more likely to adopt beliefs espoused by epistemic authorities, whose authority often derives from his or her social role, which is often associated with a position of power. Elite actors, such as political, intellectual, and religious leaders, are typical examples of epistemic authorities (see Bar-Tal 1990:71). However, people are also more likely to view somebody belonging to the same social category as themselves as an epistemic authority (Hardin and Higgins 1996:65; Raviv et al. 1993:132). Also this implies that people in black-box situations are more likely to rely on co-ethnics than on individuals belonging to other ethnic groups. To what extent this will occur depends on the salience of ethnicity vis-à-vis other social category belongings and, related, the degree of closure of ethnic groups.

However, people not only try to grasp what is going on around them, but also to understand the own self: Who I am? Where do I come from? and What will happen to me in the future? are all crucial questions. As will be further discussed below, much research suggests that cognitive strategies for understanding the social surround are strongly influenced by these particular questions. We may, for example, assume that individuals are motivated to think well of themselves. This may make them update and modify their autobiographical memories in order to make them congruent with the selves they have become in the present (Berger 1963; Rubin 1986), partly as a way of reducing cognitive dissonance (cf. Festinger 1957). Moreover, as has been argued by proponents of social identity theory, because the self is partly a social self, based on a sense of social identity, and because social identity is partly based on social category belonging, we may also assume that people generally evaluate their in-group membership positively as a way of achieving a positive self-evaluation—sometimes by actively denigrating out-groups to which the in-group is compared (Tajfel 1981).

ANALOGISM

We have an analogism when we draw the conclusion from

1. the fact that Object A has the Properties *p* and *q*
2. and the observation that Object B has the Property *p*
3. that object B also has Property *q*.

Although it is obvious that this type of reasoning can never be valid from a logical point of view, it is one of the most important and common mechanisms underpinning beliefs, and it can often be a very useful one (Holyoak and Thagard 1999:7). The psychological power of analogism is its ability to reduce the felt uncertainty in black-box situations by helping individuals to make apparent sense of what is going on—and what to expect in the near future—but often also by pointing out solutions for dealing with specific problems. Hence, analogism has both a diagnostic and a prognostic function (cf. Benford and Snow 2000).

Yet, precisely this psychological power of analogism may make it a threat both to logic and to empiricism. Indeed, as Fischer (1970:259) has demonstrated, many "bad ideas have had a long life because of a good (effective) analogy." There are a variety of fallacies associated with analogism, of which only a few will be mentioned here; namely, selection bias, simplification, overreliance, and the fundamental attribution error.

First, we have the problem of selection bias. For the first step of the analogism, that is, historical events with which to compare the present, people tend to select events that are easily available to memory (cf. Khong 1992:35). In the terminology of Tversky and Kahneman (1982b), people use the *availability heuristic*. The availability heuristic is often useful because people tend to remember significant events better than insignificant ones. However, there are a variety of factors affecting availability that may lead to bias. For one thing, studies have shown that vivid information is better remembered and is more accessible than pallid information (Nisbett and Ross 1980:44–45). Events that are unique and unexpected and that provoke emotional reactions are more easily remembered than other events (Paez et al. 1997:150). This implies that common routine events—which, although dull, are representative of a certain period—are forgotten whereas unique events—which although spectacular are likely to be highly unrepresentative—are easily remembered.

A particular type of pallid information, which people consequently tend to overlook, is null information about potential events that did not occur. For most of us, events that take place are more concrete and immediately real than the non-occurrence of potential events. This is of consequence for understanding ethnic conflicts, since periods of ethnic conflict are more vivid, and hence more likely to be remembered and to enter into analogical reasoning, than are periods of peace. This holds particularly true for traumatic events, which often conjure up vivid and intrusive memories (see Misztal 2003:142; cf. Alexander et al. 2004).

Events that enter into memory are typically filtered in a twofold way. In the present, events that are given great media coverage are more easily remembered than those that do not pass the news hole. In the logic of the mass media, this implies that events that contain a certain degree of drama, that is, events "to which we can readily assign beginnings, middles, and ends" (Schudson 1992:56), get more immediate notice, and are more easily remembered, than other events. Moreover, events deemed vivid are often part of a mnemonic community's (Zerubavel 2003) sites of collective memory, and are indeed often perceived as vivid just because they are subject to commemoration and are integrated into school curricula, and so on. To commemorate a particular event is to constitute it as "an objective fact of the world," to mark it out as a true historical event; as a significant event (Frijda 1997:111; cf. Zerubavel 2003:29). Similarly, commemoration also has a legitimizing function, by signaling to people that it is legitimate to remember an event, and that no stigma is attached to talking in public about this particular event—at least not when it is talked about in a particular way.

Both of these filtering mechanisms imply that the selection of historic events for analogical reasoning is open to elite influence. Elites often use analogisms in their propaganda in order to direct people's belief-formation processes. Whether out of sheer self-interest as a means of maximizing power, or as a result of ideologically based conviction, elites often select analogies that provide a usable past as viewed from their present position. Hence, a focus on analogism or on sociocognitive mechanisms in general does not necessary imply a bottom-up perspective on ethnic conflicts. Instead, it could be argued that people's beliefs and attitudes are not always fully articulated until they are confronted with the already made explicit lines of thought presented by elites (cf. Bourdieu 1984:459–60). As Schuman and Reiger (1992:316) have argued, most "people do not spontaneously dwell on historical analogies when attempting to understand a present problem. Instead, analogies to past events are often made salient by those who attempt to shape support for a particular policy." Yet, a too pronounced top-down perspective (e.g., Denitch 1994:62; Gagnon 1994:132) fails to address the crucial question why some of the offered analogisms receive popular support—that is, are seen as credible and plausible and are being acted upon—whereas others are not. As noted by Merton (1968:572–73), propaganda must be sufficiently attuned to people's preconceptions, and be in line with their emotional disposition and/or interests, if it is not to fall flat. It must be resonant, and the extent to which it will be so largely depends on how well it harmonizes with culturally shared symbolic forms (see also Schwartz 1991:222; Irwin-Zarecka 1994:71). Moreover, we often see a frame struggle over which analogies to use to interpret a particular event, or to predict a particular future (see Khong 1992)— frames that also offer different prognostic solutions and imply different strategies for action. Which analogies achieve the widest impact is likely to depend not only on (epistemic) authority and domination and resources, however important such factors are, but also on the fact that some analogies stick much more effectively in people's minds. However, when analyzing the role of the past for ethnic conflicts, we should bear in mind that such frame struggles can be severely constrained in societies in which opponents are suppressed and the state has a monopoly on the production of knowledge, including the mass media.

Second, memories selected for analogism tend to be highly simplified and sometimes inaccurate. To begin with, the very fact that memories are stored in some conceptual form implies a simplification compared to the full representation of the event as it actually occurred (Fentress and Wickham 1992:32). Like other cognitive schemas, analogism imposes itself upon the new information, often filling in missing data, while ambiguous and discrepant information is denigrated or ignored (see Khong 1992:38). Over time, memories are likely to become simplified and condensed as details—in particular subtle connections—are reduced or lost (Bartlett 1995; Belli and Schuman 1996:423). In Maurice Halbwachs's (1992:183) words, "we distort the past, because we wish to introduce greater coherence." Moreover, it has often been observed that memories—which are intrinsically social in character—adapt themselves to socially shared stereotypes and conventions and that memories converge to "what is common in the group" (Allport and Postman 1947:60) in which the remembering takes place. Because of the tendency toward ethnic homophily, such convergence is likely to be stronger within ethnic categories than between ethnic categories. Finally, psychological and social psychological research has convincingly shown that memories are often inaccurate, often grossly so, and that this is also the case for vivid, "subjectively compelling memories" (Schacter 1995:22), including emotionally traumatic ones (Schacter 1995:27).

Third, analogical inferences are at best probabilistic and always unacceptable from a logical point of view. Because analogism is often applied to nonrepetitive events, which makes it difficult for people to falsify them within the realms of everyday epistemology, people tend to rely on analogisms more uncritically than they should. Similarly, as Fischer (1970:247) has shown, people often make the erroneous inference "from the fact that A and B are similar in some respects to the false conclusion that they are the same in all respects." This inference is not only erroneous and indeed contrary to the idea of analogism—which by its very nature is a "similarity between two or more things which are in other respect unlike" (Fischer 1970:247)—but also constitutes the cognitive foundation of beliefs in historical determinism, namely, that history repeats itself and is bound to conform to historical laws.

Fourth, as a result of people's innate tendency to evaluate their in-group membership positively, they tend to select analogies that deny in-group responsibility for negative events (often by attributing blame to the out-group), while taking credit for positive events. More generally, it is common to underestimate the influence of situational or structural factors and to overestimate the influence of actors and their intentions. This tendency, which is commonly referred to as the *fundamental attribution error* (Ross 1977), may promote scapegoating and underpin beliefs in conspiracies.

NARRATIVIZATION

Another powerful sociocognitive mechanism for bringing order to experience is *narrativization*. The concept of narrativization is used to describe the way complex personal experience is reduced by arranging it in an order of interconnected sequences. In order to satisfy their desire for cognitive closure, people tend to mentally transform the flow of more or less unstructured events into relatively coherent narratives (Zerubavel 2003:13): the inability to integrate an event into an intelligible narrative is likely to cause confusion and frustration (Somers 1994:617). This process is sometimes conscious, but mostly not. In fact, cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner (1996:130) has argued that this process of narrativization is "central to being human," and others have talked about humans as essentially "story-telling animals" when it comes to understanding one's own actions and those of others (i.e., MacIntyre 1984; see also Crossley 2003:291; Danto 1985:xiii).

The process of narrativization also leads to substantial simplification: very few events are singled out, while most are disregarded as irrelevant or meaningless or even as nonevents. The events deemed significant will be ordered chronologically so that they make sense in relation to one another. This is often referred to as *emplotment* (Ricoeur 1990). As a result, narratives are essentially teleological in form and ascribe causality (and often morality) to events by turning prior events into causes of subsequent events (Bartlett 1995:145; Cronon 1992:1370; Íñiguez et al. 1997:237). Through the process of narrativization people tend to turn "descriptions into a fixed chain of cause and effect leading up to the present" (Íñiguez et al. 1997:237). Thus, to some degree the selection of events often depends on their fit in the narrative. As a result, narrativization often causes memory distortions; something that has been commonly observed in studies of autobiographical memory (see, e.g., Zerubavel 2003:53).

The process of narrativization is permeated with social influence. First, which events people are likely to remember—and thus incorporate in their narratives—depends largely on social processes, such as commemoration. Moreover, narratives exist both in people's heads—as cognitive tools and as autobiographical memory—and

as cultural forms and artifacts "out there," *sui generis*. In order to make sense of events, actions, and situations, people not only create their own narratives, but are likely to draw upon the existent "stock of stories" (MacIntyre 1984)—whether from science, religion, political ideology, myths, or rumors. We may assume that this tendency is particularly pronounced in black-box situations. This is, of course, also an opening for elite influence in ways similar to those discussed above. Moreover, narrativization occurs in a social context and often together with significant others; narratives often originate from situations in which people tell significant others what they have experienced, or in which people talk about what they have experienced together. Because of ethnic homophily—that is, that people's significant others are likely, more often than not, to belong to the same ethnic category—these processes may result in uniformities in narratives within ethnic groups and differences between ethnic groups.

In addition, black-box situations may favor highly simplified narratives: in frame struggles over how to influence people's conceptions of the past, actors who present narratives that are particularly tightly constructed, with no loose ends or other ambiguities, may be especially successful in black-box situations. This is because they are more efficient in reducing felt uncertainty. Yet, as was discussed above, they will only be successful to the extent that they resonate with people's preconceptions, with their real or imagined experiences, and with their emotional dispositions and/or interests.

Moreover, people's tendency to think well of themselves and the group(s) to which they belong, and to glorify their own past, is likely to cause distortion in their particular narratives. As narrators, people not only recount but also justify (Bruner 1990:121). Events are carefully selected to omit events that do not fit the positive social self-image (Baumeister and Hastings 1997:280). Yet, the way one particular ethnic group presents the past, in order to create a positive social self-image, often collides with the way other ethnic groups try to glorify their past. This often leads to frame struggles, or *mnemonic battles* (Zerubavel 2003), both over *what* events should be remembered and thus what events should be forgotten, and over *how* these events should be remembered, over "the 'correct' way to interpret the past" (Zerubavel 1996:295).

Such mnemonic battles are often over the starting point the narrative of the past should have (Zerubavel 1996, 2003). The starting point is decisive for the teleological structure of the narrative, for its attribution of causality, including spelling out who is to blame for a conflict (the difference between "they attacked us" and "they attacked us, so we struck back"), and who is legitimately entitled to a contested geographical area ("we were here first, so it is legitimately ours"). As will be further discussed below, when two ethnic groups claim priority to—and hence ownership of—the same place, conflict in some form is more or less inevitable. The risk of conflict is enhanced by the fact that such starting points are often commemorated (Zerubavel 1995:7).

Similarly, ethnic groups are especially prone to celebrate and commemorate turning points that set off a *trajectory of progress* (Zerubavel 2003). However, the same event that is celebrated as a positive turning point by one group may constitute a turning point that sets off a *trajectory of decline* for another group. In such cases, conflicts are likely to be common and protracted, at least when these groups share geographic space. One example of such a contested turning point is the founding of the state of Israel. For the Jews this was a turning point that marked the end of a long period of decline and the beginning of a trajectory of progress; for the Palestinians the same event marked the beginning of a trajectory of decline. Hence, while the dominant Israeli-Jewish narrative "speaks of an ancient but persecuted people returning to their

ancestral homeland from which they have been expelled," the dominant Palestinian narrative "speaks of a people dispossessed by an illegitimate invader" (Biton and Salomon 2006:169). In such a situation, of which there are numerous similar examples, commemorations are likely to be turned into contested rituals that keep wounds from past conflicts festering, particularly if the commemoration is recurrent. Moreover, to the extent that ethnic out-groups are perceived as causally responsible for events that constitute a turning point that sets off a trajectory of decline for the in-group, blame stories are likely to prosper and intergroup hostility might be particularly hard to overcome.

Second, people are likely to find narrative *forms* they are used to, that is, that are part of their everyday reality, part of the tool-kit offered by their particular cultural setting, particularly compelling. Many narratives employed for understanding the past can be deconstructed into a few basic characteristics, involving direction (progress or decline), distribution of turning points, and main actors (how many; conflict/cooperative). Based on different combinations of these characteristics it is often possible to identify a relatively limited number of archetypal narratives that may function as master narratives, or "schematic narrative templates" (Wertsch 2002:62) for specific narratives. Although many of these archetypal master narratives are relatively universal, some of them are—for various historical reasons—more common in certain cultural settings than in others (Wertsch 2002:62). Nonetheless, we may assume that people often find narratives based on the culturally dominant master narrative(s) more compelling than other specific narratives. By having a stronger *narrative fidelity* (Fisher 1984), such specific narratives are more culturally resonant (Benford and Snow 2000).

Bertrand Russell (1972:ch. 9) famously demonstrated that Saint Augustine's philosophical interpretation of the Bible, which has had an immense influence on people in the Christian world, has the same narrative form as historical-philosophical Marxism, in particular Marxism in its popular form. They share the same master narrative. Thus, they are both based on a dichotomous struggle in which the elect (or proletarians) are destined to reach paradise (or communism) when the Second Coming (or revolution) comes. Moreover, in both cases the Church (or Communist Party) has a crucial role to play in spreading the words of the Messiah (or Marx) (Russell 1972:364). Essential to both narratives is the turning point of status reversal, whereby the "last shall become the first." Hence, for Russell (1972:363) it is no surprise that they share the same power to appeal to "the oppressed and unfortunate" of the world; they are based on the same plotline. As will be further discussed below, ethnonationalism is, to a varying degree, based on the same master narrative and thus has the same popular appeal.

RELEVANCE FOR ETHNIC CONFLICTS: ANALOGISM

In showing the relevance of the discussion above for understanding ethnic conflict, I will provide examples from a very large-scale conflict, the war in former Yugoslavia. However, the mechanisms discussed in this article would be suitable for understanding small-scale, highly localized conflicts as well.[5] Moreover, neither small-scale nor large-scale conflicts solely involve analogisms based on large-scale historic events (as is the

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[5] My ambition is not to explain the Yugoslavian case, which is too complex to be explained by sociocognitive mechanisms alone. The sole purpose is to provide examples of how a few important mechanisms have operated in an actual case.

case in the example below). On the contrary, we may assume that belief formation processes are often very local in character in that they focus on things that are likely to happen—or that have happened—to *the self.*

Nevertheless, here is one example of analogism, widespread prior to the war, that played a significant role in the interethnic war in former Yugoslavia:

1. When Croatia was a sovereign state (*p*) in the 1940s, Serbs were mass-murdered (*q*).
2. Since Croatia is on its way to become a sovereign state again (*p*), in the 1990s,
3. Serbs have good reasons to fear mass murder (*q*).

In this and similar analogisms, present-day Croatia, and in particular the Croatia likely to emerge in the near future—and in fact, Croats in general—were compared to the Croatia governed by the proto-Fascist Ustaša. At the same time, corresponding analogisms that compared present-day Serbs with the Četniks of the 1940s circulated widely in Croatia.

There were few logical reasons to choose the 1940s as the reference point as the first step in the analogism. Contrary to the impression given by authors like Kaplan (1993), relations between Croats and Serbs have more often been characterized by peace than by open conflict over the past 100 years. Yet as discussed above, personal as well as collective memory is biased toward remembering vivid information—with the result that dramatic events, such as war and conflict, are more easily remembered than long periods of peace. Hence, in societies with a history of prior conflicts, analogisms often lead people to overestimate the likelihood of future conflicts. This is particularly likely when prior conflicts are still in living memory (as was the case in Yugoslavia) and when personal traumas related to the conflict are still recalled. In such cases, memories are likely to become especially vivid and intrusive (see, e.g., Wertch 2002:40).

In fact, although most such analogies were originally promoted by elites, they seem to have received considerable popular support (see MacDonald 2002; Silber and Little 1997). There are several reasons for this. In Yugoslavia, elites not only disseminated propaganda through media channels, they also used the centralized educational system. In analyzing all history textbooks used in Serbia between 1974 and 2000—all of which were directly issued by the Ministry of Education and used by all eighth graders—Pavasovic (2006) found that an abrupt change in how history was narrated occurred in 1988, when messages glorifying Communism and "brotherhood and unity," which dominated earlier editions, were replaced by strident nationalism. One change in particular was notable. Whereas earlier textbooks had carefully emphasized that ordinary Croats could not be blamed for the Ustaša terror, the Independent State of Croatia was equated with Ustaša and concentration camps in the 1988 edition (Pavasovic 2006:12). As Pavasovic noted, it is reasonable to assume that textbooks are particularly effective in disseminating propaganda. Textbooks and teachers are typically seen as epistemic authorities, and young students tend to receive textbook knowledge uncritically, as objective truth. Hence, for at least some people such analogisms were taught at school, or they at least resonated with their school knowledge.

Moreover, friendship networks became increasingly ethnically homogeneous as a result of nationalist mobilization—that is, the closure of ethnic groups increased as ethnicity became increasingly salient vis-à-vis other social categories, which changed the structure of the social-reality testing that people engaged in. People are involved

in social-reality testing when they validate knowledge and beliefs, in particular beliefs that lack objective referents, or that have objective referents of which people are unaware (i.e., when they find themselves in black-box situations), by comparing them to the beliefs held by significant others. The more their beliefs harmonize with those of significant others, the more valid or appropriate they are judged to be (see Festinger 1954).[6] According to several of the people from former Yugoslavia who were interviewed by Oberschall (2000), friendship relations across ethnic boundaries became strained as politics became increasingly contentious: "Either one avoided discussing public affairs and politics with a friend in order to remain friends, or one stopped being friends, and turned for discussion of such matters to a fellow ethnic with whom agreement was likely" (Oberschall 2000:993). In any case, the result was that propaganda stories were less frequently checked against the opinions of significant others across ethnic boundaries, which, it is assumed, led to a situation in which ethnocentric beliefs were accepted more uncritically.[7]

Thus, although there were few logical reasons to choose, or even to accept, the 1940s as a reference point, there were sociocognitive reasons—as well as additional, compelling psychological reasons. More specifically, conflict is often activated by fear of the future, by fear of losing economic or other status (Gould 2003), or by the fear of losing one's life (Lake and Rothchild 1996). Many black-box situations bring with them not only confusion but also fear. A situation such as the one in Yugoslavia, when the existing state was starting to break apart, constitutes an acute black-box situation for many people. And in order to predict future scenarios, Yugoslavs turned to the past—to the belief that history was on the verge of repeating itself—or at least they more readily accepted elite propaganda that used the past for nationalistic aims.

We may also assume that when people feel fear, many of them find compelling psychological reasons to be risk aversive. Better to prepare oneself for the worst so one has the chance to defend oneself. The logic in Blaise Pascal's (1995) famous argument for why people should believe in God is not far different from the logic used by individuals in such black-box situations. Many find psychologically compelling reasons to believe propaganda and rumors about threats to their lives; not believing such stories, if they turned out to be true, would have devastating consequences, by far outweighing the consequences of believing the stories if they turned out to be false. Indeed, even if the probability is small that the stories would turn out to be correct, it would seem subjectively more rational to believe them than not to believe them (cf. Weingast 1998). And in societies with a history of serious ethnic conflicts, people will most probably feel stronger reasons to believe such stories than in societies lacking prior conflicts. Nonetheless, this may lead to certain hypersensitivity and to a belief in the necessity of preemptive action.

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[6] In fact, in cases in which people discover that their beliefs harmonize with those held by most others in the group, they tend to become highly confident in their own rightness and they seldom change their opinion (Bar-Tal 2000; Hogg and Abrams 1988). There are good reasons to assume that social-reality testing is particularly important in the case of beliefs about the past. For such beliefs there are often very few objective referents with which to verify the beliefs directly, which is why we may assume that social comparison and reality testing become even more common in these cases.

[7] There are some indications that ethnic groups were relatively decoupled from one another even before the beginning of the conflict. Although significant rates of intermarriage between ethnic groups were observed in Yugoslavia during the late 1980s (Botev 1994), and although available demographic data cannot be broken down to the city/village level, several studies strongly suggests that intermarriage mainly took place in big cities like Sarajevo (Bougarel 1996; Allock 2000). In rural villages and small towns, intermarriage seems to have been rare, and friendship networks were largely ethnically homogeneous (see Bringa 1996 for ethnographic observations supporting this impression; cf. Eriksen 2001).

Moreover, the fit of the analogism may sharpen as events unfold (as happened in the Yugoslav case) by making the reference class narrower and, thus, the analogism more plausible. For example, it probably seemed more accurate to compare the new Croatia with the Ustaša of the 1940s when the new republic chose similar national symbols, including the same flag, as the old Ustaša regime. In the same way, events acted out by Milosovic, such as reviving the double-headed white eagle symbol that had been used by the Četniks during World War II (Kaufman 2001:181), strengthened the belief that the analogy comparing present-day Serbia with the Četniks made sense and constituted a valid way of predicting future scenarios.

However, not only factual events, but also rumors—which may be defined as "unauthenticated bits of information ... bereft of secure standards of evidence" (Di-Fonzo and Bordia 2002:785)—are likely to strengthen the probability of such analogies. As has been long known, rumors are likely to prosper in black-box situations (Allport and Postman 1947), "where developments especially relevant to people's existence lie largely outside their own control" (Festinger et al. 1948:483). Rumors are particularly likely to circulate when a conflict has already started, and may thus be an important mechanism by which small-scale conflicts escalate into large-scale ones. Even during the early stages of ethnic conflict, the salience of ethnicity is likely to increase dramatically vis-à-vis other social category belongings because it has increasingly acute implication for people's welfare, and the cost of interacting with ethnic out-group members, or of remaining a passive bystander, is likely to increase as well. As a result, social relations are likely to become increasingly ethnified, and ethnic groups are likely to become increasingly decoupled from one another. Such situations do not only influence the social-reality testing that people are engaged in, as was discussed above, but are also likely to result in a situation in which people receive little information of any kind from ethnic out-group members. During such periods, rumors, which may involve stories about instances of murder, rape, and mutilation committed on co-ethnics by out-group members (see Horowitz 2001:76–79 for empirical examples), are more likely to stay unchecked and thus more likely to strengthen the belief that the out-group is likely to commit in the present the same real or invented atrocities they inflicted in the the past. This, of course, may fuel the belief in the necessity of preemptive strategies as well as beliefs in the moral righteousness of *striking back*.

Finally, analogisms that not only connect past and present by pointing out properties that are common to both, but that also provide a sense of continuity by connecting "past and present via historical sequence" are likely to become particularly powerful (Knapp 1989:130). Whether such a historical sequence is true or only believed to be true, it satisfies people's curiosity about their origin and might even be perceived by people as a causal chain that explains their present social selves. One such analogism that played a crucial role in the events leading up to the interethnic war in Yugoslavia was the one likening the situation in Kosovo with the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 against the Ottoman Turks. According to this analogism, the freedom of Serbs and Serbia was threatened by expansionary aggression by Muslims (Ottoman Turks then, Kosovar Albanians now). The last time the threat led to centuries of Muslim domination over Serbia; hence, the stakes are so important that Serbs must defend themselves by all possible means. The reason this particular analogism became so salient was partly that Serb leaders seized the opportunity to commemorate the 600th anniversary of the battle, in 1989, in ways that fomented nationalistic feelings (Calhoun 1997:60). I will return to this example below, as well

as to the importance of such founding myths generally, when I discuss the power of narrativization.[8]

RELEVANCE FOR ETHNIC CONFLICTS: NARRATIVIZATION

Founding myths or myths of ethnic descent, which focus on genealogical ancestry, are of essential importance to most ethnic groups and are a crucial ingredient in ethnocentrism and ethnic nationalism. Founding myths stress historical continuity by emphasizing the real or invented roots of an ethnic group. By providing a teleological narrative, they trace and also claim to prove a link to the founder or founders of the ethnic group that inhabited the particular geographic space over which the group claims rightful ownership today (see Smith 1999a:58). In addition to legitimizing claims of priority, and hence ownership, over geographical areas, such founding myths also fulfill the function of "demarcating the group's distinct identity vis-à-vis others," by emphasizing a great divide between in-group and out-group (Zerubavel 1995:7; see also Lowenthal 1994:47). Moreover, a sense of common descent may also foster a sense of commonality, of sharing a common present (Zerubavel 2003:63).

Founding myths are based on what Ernst Cassirer (1946, 1955) termed mythical time. Unlike historical time, mythical time is characterized by its reliance on an *absolute past*, which "neither requires nor is susceptible of any further explanation." In this respect, the mythical past "has no 'why': it is the why of things" (Cassirer 1955:106). History, on the other hand, "dissolves being into the never-ending sequence of becoming, in which no point is singled out but every point indicates the way to one further back, so that regression into the past becomes a *regressus in infinitum*" (Cassirer 1955:106). Thus, an idea of a mythical origin makes possible a nonempirical justification of claims of ownership over particular geographical space, as well as of specific aspects of human existence that often define ethnic groups by distinguishing them from outsiders, such as usages, customs, and social norms. Moreover, precisely because mythical accounts of the past bypass infinite regression, they may be particularly effective in reducing felt uncertainty in black-box situations.

The absolute past of founding myths often takes the form of a Golden Past, which is typically based on embellished if not invented memories of a time of high culture, pure virtues, and total harmony. By contrasting the golden past with contemporary decline or decadence, such founding myths help articulate a quest for renaissance (Smith 1999b:264). In fact, much of the psychological power of such ethno-nationalist narratives consists in the promise of a turning point toward a better future, a time of status reversal when the group will recapture what is rightfully its. We may assume that such promises appear especially appealing to people who not only find themselves in black-box situations, but also share feelings of *ressentiment* (Scheler 1998). According to Scheler, individuals who feel impotent (i.e., unable to satisfy their wants), who are excluded from society, and/or for whom the disparity between ambition and reality has become acute, are more likely to feel *ressentiment*. As a result, we may assume that ethno-nationalist narratives that promise ethnic

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[8] Analogism may also play an important role in the diffusion of ethnic conflict from one area to another. However, this kind of analogism is typically based on present or nearly contemporaneous events. Nevertheless, such analogisms operate in the following manner: (1) since A is an oppressed ethnic group (*p*) that improved its situation by engaging in contentious activity against the dominant ethnic group, or against the state (*q*), (2) our ethnic group, which is also oppressed (*p*), (3) would also gain from engaging in similar activity (*q*). According to Beissinger (2002), this analogism was an important mechanism in the diffusion of contentious mobilization that led to the collapse of the Soviet state.

renaissance and status reversal are particularly likely to find a susceptible audience in situations that breed widespread *ressentiment*.

As indicated above, many ethno-nationalist narratives derive their psychological power from being based on the same master narrative as culturally dominant narratives for understanding the past and future trajectory of societal life: popular conceptions of Christianity and Marxism. This might be particularly relevant for understanding the sudden reemergence of ethno-nationalism in former Communist countries, especially in those in which religion has played a strong role, such as former Yugoslavia. The propaganda that preceded the war in former Yugoslavia was based on themes of how the Serb or Croat ethnic group or nation had fallen from grace—principally because of evil forces external to the in-group—and thus had to be redeemed (MacDonald 2002:26). The asserted time for this imminent and decisive turning point, which would inaugurate a progress trajectory for the group or nation, and thus promise status reversal, explains much of the force of this propaganda.

Let us once more return to the analogism that compared the situation in Kosovo with the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 against the Ottoman Turks. The psychological power of this analogism derived in large part from its reference to one of the principal Serbian founding myths, the martyrdom of Price Lazar and the Serbian people. The loss to the Ottoman Turks not only marked the beginning of a long trajectory of decline, but also distinguished the Serbian people as chosen and special (MacDonald 2002:70). As a result, the Battle of Kosovo was an absolute past for the Serbs, and thus a natural starting point in the mnemonic battle over who—the Serbs or the Albanians—could claim priority to, and legitimate ownership of, Kosovo in the 1980s and 1990s. As the Albanians naturally chose another starting point, which served their claim of priority better (cf. Zerubavel 2003:100), this mnemonic battle was difficult to overcome and contributed to the eruption of interethnic conflict.

CONCLUSION

History does not repeat itself out of necessity. Such historical determinism is theoretically untenable and blocks rather than promotes our understanding of sociopolitical events. It was thus neither very productive nor very sophisticated of the U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher to claim that the Bosnia war was nothing but a matter of ancient hatred and that there was nothing the West could do about it (Calhoun 1997:61). Yet, as has been argued in this article, that does not mean that "ancient hatred," or more specifically, a history of prior conflict, does not matter for ethnic conflict in the present. Quite the contrary, a history of prior conflict is likely to increase the likelihood of eruptions of new conflict. By presenting a sociocognitive approach to the problem, I have specified mechanisms that explain why this is the case. Two of them, in particular, are worth repeating.

First, the memory biases inherent in analogical reasoning often lead people to overestimate the likelihood of future conflict, which may lead them to mobilize in order to defend themselves and/or to take preemptive actions in ways that actually foment conflict. This is particularly likely in black-box situations in which rumors and propaganda prosper. We may also assume that rumors and propaganda directed against ethnic out-groups are more influential in situations in which ethnic groups are decoupled from one another in terms of social network belonging. Second, the strong drive to present one's social self in positive terms, which often leads people to glorify their past, frequently collides with other groups' efforts to do the same. Commemorations of victories keep memories of prior conflict salient and

festering to the extent that the events being commemorated constituted defeats for the out-group.

Hence, this article emphasizes the risk that conflict may perpetuate itself, that some areas may become victims of vicious circles of interethnic conflict. This is, of course, only partly true. Individuals are not puppets of structural circumstances, but have a considerable leeway to influence, and sometimes change, these circumstances. It should also be emphasized that the mechanisms discussed in this article are probabilistic, not deterministic: the key argument is that a history of past conflicts increases the *likelihood* that new conflicts will erupt, not that they *will* erupt automatically. Numerous other factors contribute to ethnic conflict, most of which fall outside of the sociocognitive perspective that is the focus of this article. However, we may reasonably assume that the mechanisms discussed in this article are more likely to be operative in certain situations than in others. I do not aim to present an exhaustive list of conditions; however, based on the discussion in this article, I would suggest that this likelihood may be assumed to be greater in the following settings.

1. In situations of acute uncertainty, in which people are living through unsettled times (Swidler 1986). Such acute uncertainty may be caused by dramatic transformation processes, in which established cognitive frameworks fail to help people to understand what is going on and to predict what will happen in the immediate future. We may assume that such black-box situations may be particularly aggravated when both the political system and the state are breaking apart.

2. In situations in which people find strong (subjective) reasons to fear aggression from ethnic out-groups, and/or when people's status and material position is believed to be seriously threatened as a result of ethnic out-group activity. Again, the breakdown of a state is likely to create such situations, especially when people fear being left unprotected by a "just," ethnically neutral military power—either because the military power collapses or because it sides with the ethnic out-group(s) (Posen 1993). Another factor that may create such a situation is the redrawing of state borders, which may suddenly turn a former majority into a minority. This was what happened to the Serbs in Croatia, for instance. Under certain conditions, demographic change may have similar effects.

3. In situations in which there is little contact between different ethnic groups, either because they have been segregated from one another for a long time, or because a burgeoning nationalist mobilization leads to a polarized situation in which the personal cost of interaction across ethnic boundaries increases sharply. In such situations people's social-reality testing tends to be strongly intra-ethnic, and people will receive little information from people belonging to other ethnic groups. As a result, there are few opportunities to check one's beliefs against the opinions of out-group members, which is likely to make people accept ethnocentric beliefs more uncritically. Polarization is also likely to make ethnicity increasingly salient vis-à-vis other social categories and thus more important for social (group) identity formation.

4. In situations that for other reasons lack a diversity of public opinions. In authoritarian, strongly centralized political systems in which a narrow elite controls the mass media, the educational system, and so on, there is little alternative information available. As a result, elite propaganda will be considerably more effective in influencing people's beliefs in black-box situations.

5. In areas that until recently were dominated by a strong "grand" narrative, such as Marxism or Christianity. In such situations, the ethno-nationalist narrative is likely to have stronger cultural resonance, and to harmonize better with people's preconceptions and thus be adopted as a substitute.

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