The Evolution of Political Knowledge: Democracy, Autonomy, and Conflict in Comparative and International Politics

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Columbus
Leonard Binder has given us a massive, detailed study of various accounts of ethnic identification and conflict. He gives all the accounts a hard time, very often arguing that, among other faults, they are internally inconsistent with their own ostensible principles. More specifically, he says that the account of James Fearon and David Laitin (1996) is a brilliant model irrelevant to anything that ever happened. Donald Horowitz (1985) gives us a purely speculative psychological account. And I give a logically inconsistent argument—a particularly brutal charge. I will not attempt to comment on all of Binder’s arguments, many of which are compelling. I will focus on his remarks on my rational choice account (Hardin 1995) of identification and the implications of that account for ethnic conflict and even violence. In that account, to summarize ruthlessly, collective results emerge from individual actions that are motivated by self-interest (or benefits to oneself) and not by concern with the collective result. Binder gives a generally accurate summary of my views, but his conclusive comments against those views is inconsistent.

In sum, Binder’s argument against the rational choice account of ethnic loyalty involves a fallacy of composition in the sense described below. We commit such a fallacy when we assume that the attributes of an aggregate body are the same as the attributes of the individuals who make up the aggregate body. This is the very fallacy that the logic of collective action and that many other rational choice explanations belie. In general, a rational choice account of any collective outcome or action must show that the collective results follow from individually rational or self-interested actions by the members of the relevant collectivity. Such an explanation need not show that the outcome of collective action is rational in any collective sense, but only that it results from actions that are individually rational. Indeed, much of the force of many rational choice explanations comes from their showing that individually rational actions produce seemingly irrational collective results.

To the question when did rational choice theory begin, one might sensibly suggest that it came to full recognition in the Scottish Enlightenment. The realization that institutions, norms, and many other things are often the unintended collective consequences of individual actions undertaken for very different reasons than the creation or even maintenance of those institutions, etc., is a straightforwardly rational choice argument about how actions can be individually justified even though their collective results may not be intended or even foreseen and may even be deplored. Adam Smith’s argument of the invisible hand is that people acting in their own interest and with no concern for the general structure of market institutions produce a market that induces stable prices that are essentially impervious to individual choices and that were no part of the intentions of the buyers and sellers.

A very large number of recent contributions to rational choice theory have also been claims of unintended consequences. To take a well-known and easy example, Anthony Downs’s median voter model is entirely an unintended consequence of the individually rational choices of candidates and voters (given that they vote). We can justifiably quarrel about whether the model is right empirically, but it is a quintessentially rational choice model and it claims that this collectively stable result follows for reasons that motivate none of the actors, who merely seek their own interests.

There are three main issues that arise in Binder’s account: power, collective versus individual rationality, and the normative bases of actions. There is also, for a rational choice account, a prior concern with the knowledge that actors have, including the knowledge that de facto gives them identifications of various kinds. I think this last issue is commonly overlooked in discussions of ethnic conflict. It is simply assumed that people have ethnic identities that motivate them. The vocabulary is itself misleading here. Identities do not clearly motivate people, although many people act from their identities. I think it better to say that what we want to do is to understand identification with some group, and from that identification we then try to explain actions that are seemingly on behalf of the group. We can give a rational account—a street-level epistemology—of the knowledge base of an individual and then use this in the explanation of the individual’s behavior. It is a sometime slippage in political science to analyze behaviors without a prior analysis of the knowledge and commitment bases for individual action and, if we have any concern with it at all, merely to infer the knowledge from the actions.

Power

Power can be analyzed in many contexts. Here the relevant issue is the power of a group, often especially a spontaneously organized group, as opposed to, for example, a hierarchically, formally organized army (Hardin 1995, chap. 2). In the latter the motivations of the participants can be entirely about the relatively precise array of instant rewards or sanctions they will receive for following or not following orders. In a spontaneously organized group, there might similarly be a set of rewards and sanctions to motivate actions. Often, however, these will
be relatively specific to the goals of the group. An army might readily switch sides at the command of its leaders. A spontaneously organized ethnic group that is hostile to some other ethnic group cannot be refocused onto a new object at the will of its putative leaders. The actual object of mobilization will matter to the individuals. (This fact can lead us to conclude, perhaps too quickly, that the individual members of the group are acting because of their normative commitment to the goal of the group. I address this issue further below.)

As suggested by the examples of the army and the spontaneously organized ethnic group, for a collectivity, power can take two very different forms. Let us call these coordination and exchange power. Exchange power comes from the amassment of resources such as weapons, organizations, paid actors, and so forth. These resources come from the economy and its production of wealth that can be spent on such resources, especially resources of materiel and manpower. Ethnic groups often deploy some exchange power when they act against other groups. But often the more important form of power for a spontaneously organized group is coordination power, which is simply the coordination of a large number of people to act in concert. The violence in Northern Ireland has been based primarily on exchange power with very few people deployed in acting for the cause. The number of active IRA members at their peak has been estimated at between five hundred and six hundred (Taylor 1999, 363). The grim violence a decade ago in Rwanda was based primarily on the coordination of very large numbers of Hutus to kill hundreds of thousands of Tutsis and Hutu sympathizers—almost entirely in face-to-face combat with primitive weapons such as machetes and gasoline, that were almost surely acquired for noncombat purposes. If we wish to explain these and other such conflicts, we must attend to such strategic differences in the ways they are organized.

Coordination creates a convention—an institution, a norm, or power—and that convention then promotes further coordination and also exchange. Although it may sound circular, this explanation is valid. As noted earlier, the problem of collective action cannot sensibly be resolved in the seemingly similar circular manner of supposing we should act collectively in order to resolve our problem of collective action. That just is our problem of collective action. But coordination can come about without intent, without overcoming contrary incentives. It can just happen. And if it just happens the same way a few times the result may be a forceful convention that then governs future behavior by giving us specific incentives for action.

**Individual versus Collective Rationality**

The beginning of a rational choice explanation of behavior is the—perhaps charitable—assumption that the relevant individual behavior is not irrational. If we strive to keep this assumption alive, we are more likely to be successful in un-

derstanding the behavior. There are two moves that commonly violate this assumption. One is the fallacy of composition and the other is the tendency to see the rationality of actions as defined solely by the results of the actions.

In the first of these moves, it is false to deduce individual interests from collective interests. According to the logic of collective action (Olson 1965; Hardin 1982), although it may be in the interest of my group—in the sense that it is in the interest of you and me and everyone else in our group—that some collective benefit be provided to us, it may not be in the interest of any of us individually to contribute toward its provision. The assumption that collective and individual interests coincide in such a case is a fallacy of composition. In general, in these discussions it is important to recognize that the notion of interests commonly does not transfer from individuals to groups of individuals without change in its meaning.

Much of the literature on ethnic conflict makes the reverse move of explicitly or implicitly inferring individual irrationality from collective irrationality. The latter term is commonly murky, but here we can take it to mean simply that virtually everyone in the collective would prefer that everyone had acted in a different way. Suppose, for example, that if almost everyone in our group is throwing stones at an out-group, each of us might join in; but that each of us would also prefer that none of us throw stones at the out-group—perhaps because we will provoke the state into suppressing us. In this case, we could say our group is acting irrationally even though it might be wrong to say that any of the members of the group are acting irrationally.

In the second of these moves, for the case of ethnic identification much of the concern with collective action and the rationality of individuals in not free riding is sidestepped because the problem is not one of the logic of collective action. Rather, it is a matter of coordination, as in the account of coordination power above. If this is so, then any claim for what it is rational for individuals to do is not to be inferred from the collective results of their individual actions. Binder says that, “From the perspective of Rational Choice Theory and Game Theory, ethnic groups are like any other group and, therefore, subject to the logic of collective action which postulates that efforts to achieve collective action will succeed only to the extent that the free rider problem can be overcome.” The logic of collective action has the game theoretic structure of the prisoner’s dilemma. In that game, I would rather not cooperate no matter what others do. Coordination on a collective identity, however, has the strategic structure of coordination. Hence, if others coordinate on identifying actively with our group, I wish also to coordinate with them.

There are often people at the margin of any such group whose loyalty is torn because they could benefit from leaving the group as, for example, a teenager from a poor ghetto might be able to prosper better by moving into the economy of the dominant society and suffering the disdain of others in the ghetto (Hardin
1995, 83). At the fringe of any exclusionary ethnic group there might be individuals who would benefit in such ways from broad cosmopolitan rather than narrow group identification (Hardin 1995, 74–75).

Normative Foundations

Binder criticizes what he takes to be the normative foundations of my analysis. Actually, I rigorously try to separate normative from explanatory issues. We need normative standards if we wish to stand aside and pass judgment on any of the participants in ethnic conflicts. But we might be able to explain their actions without any reference to normative commitments on the part of those participants. Indeed, we may even be able to explain the rise of norms and of the normative commitments of members of a group from their internal, individual-level interests. We cannot, however, generally say that either successful collective action or successful coordination is good in principle. Some collective actions have good effects, some have bad effects; and some coordinations have good effects, some have bad effects.

A standard normative move in this realm is the communitarian jump from the fact of some shared identification to the goodness of community and collective identity. One does not have to be a hard-nosed Humean to think any such move of inferring an “ought” from an “is” is glibly unfounded and wrong. I wish to understand why collective identification happens and then separately to assess whether it has normative appeal in any particular case. I think it has no normative appeal per se, although there can be communities that are good for people, just as there can be communities that are bad for people, either for the members or outsiders. The Ku Klux Klan must have had local units that were highly communitarian and beneficial in some ways to their members even while they were brutally harmful to others. Some communal groups may be harmful for their own members because they close off opportunities, especially for their children.

There are at least two broad classes of norms: universalistic norms and norms of exclusion (Hardin 1995, chaps. 4 and 5). The former include such norms as that of truth telling or generosity. The latter include such norms as group-specific norms of loyalty or conformity to a particular group. Such norms commonly include sanctions against those of the relevant group who violate the norm. If my group has a strong norm of hostility to some out-group, I might be severely sanctioned—for example, through shunning—if I fraternize with members of the out-group, as in the sad history of Romeo and Juliet. It might seem that universalistic norms would generally be good, although they can be awful. Norms of exclusion tend toward hostility, although they need not be hostile.

A central difference in the natures of these classes of norms is that some of the universalistic norms—those that apply to actions toward virtually all people—depend on normative commitments per se. Norms of exclusion are very different. One’s attendance to a norm of exclusion typically can be reinforced by one’s own interests. My commitment to my group and its norms, for example, can be reinforced by the comfort I get from being with members of the group and the discomfort and even grievous loss I would suffer if I were shunned by or excluded from the group. The exclusion that keeps others out of my group is a ready sanction to bad behavior within the group. If my group undertakes some action, including even such strong action as to attack another group, I may decide whether to join in that action primarily from considering how the group will react to my failure to join its action. If this is how norms of exclusion are enforced, it is very difficult to argue that they are inherently moral—as one might argue for a universalistic norm of, say, being beneficial in certain circumstances. Being “beneficent” to the members of one’s own group when it is hostile to members of some out-group is a form of group solipsism and is not strictly moral on any standard moral theory, from deontological to consequentialist theories, because these theories are universalistic in their application.

Street-Level Epistemology

While we are being charitable toward the people whose behavior we wish to explain, it is wise to take into account the specific knowledge they have. If my causal knowledge says that a certain action will benefit others, my taking that action makes good moral or even rational sense to me. If my knowledge is mistaken, it would be odd to say that my action was therefore irrational or immoral. Only if we could say it is irrational of me to have that particular bit of knowledge rather than some other bit could we say that my action is irrational or immoral.

As an easy example of the application of this argument for what we may call street-level epistemology, consider the knowledge base of typical voters in the United States (Hardin 2002). They know very little about the issues affected by their votes. They may even often vote against their own interests. We could uncharitably say they are therefore irrational, or we could try to explain their mistaken views. A principal explanation of their views is that seeking and mastering good political information is a very costly activity. Because voting yields little or no benefit to the voter, it makes little sense for the voter to invest heavily in better knowledge that, after all, the voter cannot put to effective use.

Binder says that my argument that ethnicity is constructed via such a street-level epistemology “demonstrates the absurdity of ethnic solidarity, not its rationality,” because the knowledge of the typical ethnic group member might be very poorly grounded. This is a far more complex claim than it might superficially seem to be. It seems to assume some notion of the group-level rationality
of ethnic solidarity. My argument is, however, an effort to explain the actions of the individuals, which is to say, to show how they might be rational. If, as in the discussion of collective versus individual rationality above, it is possible for a group to be irrational even while the individuals are acting rationally, then it could make sense to say that ethnic solidarity, as a group-level phenomenon, is absurd. But it does not make sense in any other way.

For many actual individuals, it makes eminently rational sense to behave in ways that reinforce ethnic solidarity. Hence, any individual’s sense of solidarity with an ethnic group can be rational, not absurd. If what we mean by ethnic solidarity is the aggregation of individual commitments to the ethnic group, then such solidarity is not absurd. As an individual in an ethnic group watching my group’s problems and even losses from acting collectively, I might well wish the group could get all of us to behave differently, but I may not be able to induce any change in others’ behavior and, given their behavior, I may find it fully in my interest to go along with their behavior myself.

That is often the price of coordination on a suboptimal pattern of behavior. For example, the English today coordinate on driving on the left although, if they could wish themselves into a different pattern, they might prefer to coordinate on driving on the right along with most of Europe. The cost of a change in their convention is, arguably, far too great in comparison to the benefits they would get to justify a change. Olaf Palme and many Swedes thought otherwise for Sweden in 1967, and Sweden changed its convention to coordinate on driving right instead of left (Hardin 1988, 51–53). That change proved to be beneficial in that the Swedish highway-fatality rate declined substantially after the change. That was what Palme expected, because many of the fatal accidents involved tourists, especially Germans, whose home convention was driving on the right and who sometimes fell into usual habits while driving on the open highways in Sweden.

Similarly, if my ethnic group is mobilized around a political program that is not very beneficial to that group, I may be, like the drivers of England, stuck with our coordination and might even be best served by acting according to it, thereby reinforcing it. Hence, it is false to say, as Binder does, that “games of coordination are usually supposed to produce the same level of total payoffs whichever equilibrium is chosen. . . .” There can be defective or inefficient coordination equilibriums. For example, some people think the QWERTY keyboard is a defective equilibrium, just as Palme thought Sweden’s driving convention before he changed it was a defective equilibrium.

**Concluding Remarks**

Binder says that I say “Hobbes was wrong in believing that the central problem of political order . . . was a general prisoner’s dilemma. It is a coordination game.” On the contrary, I argue that it is modern interpreters of Hobbes who make the mistake of defining our central problem as a gigantic prisoner’s dilemma (I say explicitly that this is “a misreading of Hobbes” [Hardin 1995, 38]) when, in Hobbes’s account, creation and maintenance of a state and, through it, social order is clearly a coordination problem. For Hobbes, what we have to do to establish beneficial social order is to coordinate on one form of government or another, or on one monarch or another. It does not follow that a polity’s successful coordination on order under a particular government—such as that of Mobutu or the Shah of Iran—makes that government “as good as any alternative.” No one under Mobutu needed to believe that Mobutu’s continuance in power was the best of all governments in order to have reason not to try to rebel against him.

When we are in an inferior coordination equilibrium, what we must compare our state to is not only an alternative coordination equilibrium that would be better for us, but rather to the sum of the benefits of being in the better state and the costs of actually moving to it, especially if the latter requires revolution. Because Hobbes generally assumed that even reformist opposition would likely lead to rebellion and devastating disorder, he supposed that almost any extant regime is good enough not to rebel against it. This is not to say that any extant regime is the best of all regimes in principle.

Binder says, wrongly, that I suppose exchange power is historically prior to coordination power. On the contrary, I speculate that coordination power is prior, although there is not a compelling historical record to show this (Hardin 1995, 35). It seems likely to be prior because it does not require substantial resources or wealth of the kind that derives from exchange. The examples above of Rwanda and Northern Ireland might be taken as emblematic of the historical or developmental priority of coordination, which can happen long before there is much wealth to use in exchange. The impoverished Rwandan Hutus were astonishingly devastating in a very short period of time despite the use of very primitive weapons that existed in the first instance as tools, not weapons. They accomplished their mayhem with massive coordination and almost no resources. The number of active Hutu participants in the Rwandan genocide presumably numbered in the tens of thousands, maybe more than a hundred thousand. The northern Irish Catholic and Protestant “armies” include very few people and their awful power comes from high-tech weapons that were designed solely for killing people.

This is an important issue for ethnic solidarity and mobilization, because these often happen without extensive resources and they are built out of mere coordination of substantial numbers of people. Very often, their destructive actions take the form of spontaneous riots. Groups’ capacity to exclude out-group members and to sanction miscreants in their own groups primarily come from
nothing more than personal stances, not from the use of weapons or substantial economic or bureaucratic resources. As I say (Hardin 1995, 35, 38), Hobbes’s view is that order (from coordination) precedes production (for exchange). Indeed, that is why we so badly want order in the first instance: to enable us to prosper through production and exchange.

The issues here are manifold and often complex. I do not do them justice here and probably have not done them justice in One for All. I wrote that book because I thought the logic of collective action is a correct theory (Olson 1965; Hardin 1982) even though there has been a lot of collective activity in our time, especially by ethnic groups. Sometimes, that activity is at extremely high risk to the participants. My general view, noted above, is that we should always start by being charitable to those whose behavior we are trying to explain. In particular, we should not explain away their behavior as merely irrational. And we should not attribute bizarre beliefs to them—at least not without serious justification (some people do seem to have bizarre beliefs). Therefore, we should try to understand the strategic incentives they face from their perspective and we should try to understand the knowledge base from which they act. These principles yield a very straightforward account of ethnic identification; and action on behalf of an ethnic group by its members can readily be explained as coordination that is individually rational, not as irrational collective action.

Notes

1. I thank Richard Sisson and Edward Mansfield for encouraging me to present and write upward this comment, and Leonard Binder and other participants in the panel at the APSA meeting in San Francisco at which we first presented our arguments. I also thank Carolina Curvale and Huan Wang for research assistance.

2. In a long footnote, Binder says that the core of functional explanation is the absence of intentionality. On that view, Adam Smith’s invisible hand explanation is a functional explanation as are many of the most important findings in rational choice theory.

COMMENTS

Explaining Ethnic Phenomena: A Response to Leonard Binder

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I am grateful to Leonard Binder for providing such a substantial and careful review of Ethnic Groups in Conflict. Although his essay does much more than review the works of any single person—it articulates his own approach as well—I shall eschew a general commentary here. Rather, I intend merely to redress some omissions in his characterization of my work and correct what I regard as some mischaracterizations as well.

Sources of Conflict

Binder says that I am concerned to show that ethnic conflict behavior is “irrational.” This is not true, with two exceptions that I will deal with at the end of this response. All ethnic conflict is not rational, but most of it is not irrational either—not by a long shot.

The traditions I was writing against were the twin determinisms: cultural and economic. Cultural determinism was associated with M. G. Smith’s plural-society school and its followers. Economic determinists were single-mindedly inclined to reduce every aspect of ethnic conflict behavior to the pursuit of material reward. This I was—and am—convinced is wrong, and I set about to devise a framework that could integrate claims for material rewards with claims for nonmaterial rewards as components of ethnic conflict. That is the dichotomy that pervades the parts of the book Binder is talking about, not a dichotomy between rational and irrational.

When it comes to the objects of conflict, I was at great pains to show that nonmaterial rewards do not exemplify irrational behavior. Group members, I suggested, aim, among other things, at collective self-esteem. Such a proposition is hardly controversial in social psychology after the repeatedly replicated experiments of Henri Tajfel and his colleagues, in which people were shown to prefer outcomes that maximized intergroup differentials in rewards, even if it cost them something in the actual rewards accorded to their in-group. They were looking for relative advantage in the valuation of groups.

I went on to argue that the reason groups aim at collective self-esteem and its political affirmation is that individuals derive quite a lot of their own individual self-esteem from that of the groups to which they belong. Indeed, they derive