Theorising the International Escalation of 'Ethnic' Conflict

The Social Ontology of Ethnicity, Executive Choice, and the Bridge Between*

Martin Austvoll

CSCW – Centre for the Study of Civil War

PRIO – International Peace Research Institute, Oslo

martina@prio.no

Abstract

This paper develops propositions on how to theorise the mechanisms linking three particular phenomena: 1) organised civil violence, framed by perpetrators and victims as being 'ethnic', 2) the involvement of groups in such violence having putative ethnic kin in a neighbouring country, and 3) the choice by the executive in kin countries to escalate the neighbouring civil violence by intervening militarily in support of a conflict party. The 'first actors' in this analysis are the members of the executive in the intervening state. In developing a causal narrative connecting transnational ethnic ties with the choice to intervene, this paper seeks to take account of the socially constructed nature of ethnic identity, and the extent to which the politicisation of ethnic identity is endogenous to organised political violence. In order to link processes of construction with mechanisms of choice, the paper argues that social-theoretic 'bridge building' is a useful analytical tool – 'bridge building' being an approach that typically combines rationalist and conventional constructivist modes of social explanation to build more complete theories of political outcomes.

IN A CONTINUING EFFORT to explain the international escalation of 'ethnic' civil wars, this paper develops propositions on how to theorise the mechanisms linking three particular phenomena: organised civil violence, framed by perpetrators and victims as being 'ethnic', the involvement of groups in such violence having putative ethnic kin in a neighbouring country, and the choice by the executive in kin countries to escalate the neighbouring civil violence by intervening militarily in support of a conflict party. The question, in short, is 'what are the dynamics linking transnational ethnic affinities to third-party interventions in civil wars?' In order to approach some ideal for theory building, this paper explores the following puzzle. Ethnic identity and the extent to which it is imbued with political meaning are socially constructed. This is the social ontology of ethnicity. Furthermore, politicised ethnicity is endogenous to political violence. These statements are not controversial as ontological claims. On the other hand, however, there are a number of studies, often grounded in rational choice and quantitative methods, that treat ethnic groups as if they were a constant, material mass, that exogenise politicised ethnicity, and that still generate interesting findings. The question is how to build theory in such a way as to inch as close as possible to the ontological nature of ethnicity, while at the same time retaining the advantages of holding politicised ethnicity constant.

The puzzle raises several related, but not directly analogous issues: the question of exogenisation versus endogenisation, the question of rationalism versus constructivism, and – in the language of the present workshop – the question of the appropriate place in theory for 'first actors' and the social structures in which they are embedded. The location of first actors as units of analysis in this paper is in the executive of the intervening state. They are the individuals at the helm of a potential intervener that transform a contentious concern with a neighbouring civil war into violent intervention. While not losing sight of the significance of executive choice, this paper seeks to take account of its social embeddedness. More particularly, the paper aims to account for the political meaning of ethnic identities. A possible answer to the puzzle, I suggest, is to apply a form of social-theoretic 'bridge building', an approach to analysis that typically combines rationalist and conventional constructivist modes of social explanation in order to build more complete theories of political outcomes.

In order to arrive at this conclusion, the paper proceeds as follows. In a first section I lay out the puzzle in some more detail, and discuss some concepts that may order the remainder of the analysis. In a second section I introduce 'bridge building'

as a possible approach to theory building, and discuss some of the ways it has been practiced in prior research. How may bridge building be applied when theorising the international escalation of 'ethnic' conflict? In order to grapple with this question, a third section applies a 'double interpretation' (Zürn & Checkel 2005) to Mahmood Mamdani's (2001) account of the 1990 invasion/intervention in Rwanda by the Uganda-based Rwanda Patriotic Front, an event with a strong transnational 'ethnic' component. The interpretation is 'double' in the sense that I tell the same story twice, once from the perspective of constructivism, once from the perspective of rational choice. The exercise illustrates the potential for complimentarity between the perspectives, and indicates where bridge building in this particular empirical domain may begin. In a fourth section I discuss the value added, the costs, and some of the operational challenges for bridge building, and conclude.

The puzzle

How does one reconcile the social ontology of ethnicity and the endogeneity of politicised ethnicity to political violence with the fact that studies that exogenise politicised ethnicity and ostensibly disregard its social ontology still generate plausible findings with respect to their theories? In thinking about this question, I consider its constituent parts – first the social ontology of ethnicity. Fearon & Laitin (2000) explain this quite lucidly. Beginning from the premise that an 'identity' in generic terms is a social category, they argue that 'social categories are sets of people given a label … and distinguished by two main features: (1) rules of membership that decide who is and is not a member of the category; and (2) content, that is, sets of characteristics … thought to be typical of members of the category' (Fearon & Laitin 2000: 848). 'Ethnic identities', they note, 'are understood to be defined mainly by descent rules of group membership and content typically composed of cultural attributes, such as religion, language, customs, and shared historical myths' (Fearon & Laitin 2000: 848). Ethnic identities, as any social category defined by membership rules and content, are produced by 'human action and speech' (Fearon & Laitin 2000: 848). In other words, ethnic identities are 'real' by human agreement and practice. An individual can have a particular ethnic identity because other members of the category recognise and treat that individual as if she has that particular ethnic identity (Kasfir 1979: 370). As such, ethnic identity is socially constructed. To make a statement about an ethnic identity, however, is not to make a claim about its political meaning. In order to link ethnic categories to political violence one has to either

explain or assume the politicisation of ethnic categories, that is the extent to which ethnic identity is an organising principle in contentious politics. Analysis is complicated by the fact that the political mobilisation of ethnic categories not only is socially constructed, but that some of the mechanisms behind such mobilisation are endogenous to political violence.

The social ontology of ethnic identity makes it subject to change over time (Fearon & Laitin 2000: 848; Laitin & Posner 2001: 14). Time dependence also characterises the political salience of ethnic identities (Laitin & Posner 2001: 15; Smith 1986: 68). The extent to which ethnic categories have political meaning, the extent to which they are the 'focus and subject of political action and political community' (Smith 1986: 69), are historically and situationally contingent. Thus Kasfir (1979: 365), in a reflection over the fluid and intermittent nature of ethnic identities, argues that ethnic loyalties compete with other loyalties as the foundation of political action. It follows that ethnic identity not always is politicised. In Kasfir's terms, an ethnic identity that becomes the foundation of political action is no longer the signifier of an ethnic *category*, it now denotes an ethnic *group* (Kasfir 1979: 373). Such a transformation occurs when 'social solidarity' is created in response to a 'situation' (Kasfir 1979: 373). 'Situations' by which ethnic groups are constituted include political violence (Fearon & Laitin 2000: 853; Gagnon 2004; Laitin & Posner 2001: 15). Gagnon (2004), for example, demonstrates how violence was used by Milosevic and his allies to destroy the physical and psychological ethnic map of Yugoslavia, and to create a discourse of ethnicity that left ethnic identity as the primary focus for political action. Politicised ethnicity, in short, is endogenous to political violence. While differences between ethnic groups are used to explain violent outcomes, the imputation of political meaning to ethnic categories is itself in need of explanation. Given such insights, much work on 'ethnic' violence may be critiqued for assuming *ex ante* that ethnicity is exogenous (Chandra 2001: 9).

Yet the observation remains that many studies that exogenise ethnicity, that assume ethnic groups to be politically relevant, unchanging and monolithic units, continue to generate interesting findings. Examples include Carment & James (2000), Cederman & Girardin (*forthcoming*), Ellingsen (2000), Fearon (2003), Gartzke & Gleditsch (2006), Posner (2004), and Østby (2005). Cederman & Girardin (*forthcoming*) is a case in point. In their theoretically well-founded and empirically supported critique of the 'ethno-linguistic fractionalisation' index (ELF), Cederman & Girardin (*forthcoming*) construct an alternative index of 'ethno-nationalist exclusion' that

performs very well in regression analyses of the onset of civil war. Their findings suggest that countries with a greater level of ethno-nationalist exclusion are more likely to experience civil violence. Based on the simple logic that large ethnic groups that are excluded from governmental power both have the opportunity and the willingness to challenge the imbalance, their index is operationalised as a positive function of the demographic size of 'marginalised ethnic groups', categorised and calculated based on Fearon's (2003) list of ethnic groups by country (Cederman & Girardin *forthcoming*). Fearon's list is premised on the possibility that one set of politically relevant ethnic groups can be compiled, and is based on demographic data from one point in time, the early to mid-1990s (Fearon 2003: 204). Research based on such data therefore exogenises and fixes politicised ethnicity by implication. Thus Cederman & Girardin (*forthcoming*) base their study on ontologically questionable assumption, yet their carefully theorised index still predicts civil war as expected.

I share Cederman & Girardin's experience in my own work (Austvoll 2006). In a cross-national study of the effects of transnational ethnic affinities on the likelihood of interventions in civil wars, I argue and demonstrate that states that are home to an ethnic group with kin groups involved in civil wars elsewhere are more likely to intervene in those civil wars than states with no ethnic ties. I also show that one may predict whether interventions will favour government or rebels based on the power structures involving ethnic groups in intervener and target state. Operationally, the study is based on the same list of ethnic groups (Fearon 2003) as Cederman & Girardin (*forthcoming*). That means that I too exogenise and hold constant politicised ethnicity, but still generate arguably interesting results. The difference between this and similar studies, and constructivist research that endogenises politicised ethnicity, is well illustrated by contrasting my own implicit (Austvoll 2006) and Gagnon's (2004) explicit account of Serbian involvement in Bosnia 1992-1995.

Austvoll (2006) is based on a cross-national dataset of civil wars and interventions 1944-1994 assembled by Regan (1996). In a table of 138 intrastate conflicts and a total of 196 interventions (Regan 1996: 344), the Yugoslavian intervention in Bosnia constitutes one data point. The structure of Regan's data and my supplementary variables on transnational ethnic groups tell the following implicit story. Bosnia, an independent state, experienced a rebellion by its Serbian minority 1992-1995 (Regan 1996: 357). Yugoslavia, having a Serbian group in power whose kin was at war with the dominant Bosnian Muslims, therefore intervened in favour of the Bosnian Serbs (Austvoll 2006). As a story structured in one data point it

fares well, yet the Regan/Austvoll version appears quite misleading when compared with Gagnon's case study of the 1990s' Balkan wars having the stated ambition to account for the social ontology and endogenous nature of politicised ethnicity (Gagnon 2004: 13). Yugoslavia did not, Gagnon (2004) argues, intervene in a civil war with roots in an independent Bosnia. The violence observed in Bosnia between the spring of 1992 and the end of 1995 was a purposeful policy, initiated and sustained by Belgrade, and imposed on ethnically mixed Bosnian communities from outside of those communities (Gagnon 2004: 112). By having its henchmen target Croat and Muslim civilians within Bosnia, by disseminating propaganda based on a discourse of 'ethnic violence', by spawning a spiral of violence as victims organised themselves along ethnic lines to retaliate, by thus generating conditions that retroactively proved its claims of Bosnian Muslim aggression, Belgrade generated a civil war in which its continued involvement could be portrayed as intervention. Gagnon's (2004) argument, in short, is that Milosevic and the remaining Serbian conservatives initiated violence in the other Yugoslav republics intended to destroy the federation by violently 'constructing' homogenous politicised ethnic communities from an originally heterogeneous matter, in order to consolidate their own power within Serbia. That is quite a contrast to the implications of the Regan/Austvoll data point. The comparison is useful because it captures the puzzle in one single example. It highlights the contrast between research that is true to the social ontology and endogeneity of politicised ethnicity and studies that assume them away. The exercise also recognises the strengths of both approaches. Gagnon's (2004) account is no doubt closest to the political and social processes driving violence framed as 'ethnic' in Bosnia 1992-1995. On the other hand, Regan (1996) and Austvoll's (2006) data structure enables a fruitful statistical comparison across a large number of cases, and although the study exogenises and holds constant politicised ethnicity, it still captures a set of circumstances that conform to reality: violence in Bosnia between groups affiliated with the Serbian minority and the Muslim majority, the dominant position of Serbians within Yugoslavia, and the sustained involvement of Yugoslavia in political violence within Bosnia, in support of groups affiliated with the Bosnian Serbs.

Construction versus reification

A way out of the apparent paradox is to distinguish between what is generally accepted as being ontologically valid, and the analytical moves made to theorise the

politics of ethnicity. The distinction is captured in the concepts of 'construction' and 'reification' (Cederman 2002), and they can either describe ontological claims or a set of assumptions for purposes of analysis. 'Construction' as an ontological claim is exemplified by Fearon & Laitin's (2000) argument that ethnic identity is socially constructed. 'Construction' as a set of assumptions for purposes of analysis is seen in such work as Gagnon (2004) and Somer (2005) that apply methods and modes of social explanation to get as close to the social ontology of ethnicity as possible. An alternative analytical move, another set of assumptions for purposes of analysis, is to 'reify' ethnic categories or ethnic groups. 'Reification' refers to the analytical practice of treating ethnic categories or ethnic groups as 'given entities that are held constant throughout the analysis' (Cederman 2002: 412). The extent to which 'reification' is a reasonable assumption, the extent to which it is congruent with 'reification' as an ontological claim, is an empirical question. It need not be wholly implausible. Mamdani (2001), for example, describes how Rwandan Tutsi refugees in Uganda developed a political diaspora through which ethnic identity was the primary focus for political action, and that '[came] to constitute a significant armed and political force' (Mamdani 2001: 159) – a form of self-reification, if you will. Another indication of the incidental fruitfulness of analytical reification is the strong results of the several studies that exogenise politicised ethnicity.

Now that the meaning of analytical reification is established, the practice of exogenising ethnicity may be absolved from accusations of primordialism. When studies such as Cederman & Girardin (*forthcoming*), Fearon (2003), and Gartzke & Gleditsch (2006) reify ethnic groups, they do so as an analytical move, not as an ontological commitment. Given that there is some agreement about the ontological status of the basic phenomena of interest, the different approaches have potential for common ground. Given also that analytical reification sometimes is a good approximation of reality, both sorts of empirically driven theory-building – the one that 'constructs' and the one that 'reifies' – have notable advantages. Finding some way to join forces, to combine the advantages of construction and reification and the insights of social constructivism and rational choice, is Cederman's (2002) project, as he exposes the lacuna of 'models that embed both calculative and norm-driven behaviors in a macro-historical framework with explicit representations of endogenized collective identities' (Cederman 2002: 422). An answer to Cederman's call may be to apply the insights derived from social-theoretic bridge building in other empirical domains. In order to approach the theorising of transnational 'ethnic'

politics without making too many assumption, it is useful to return to first principles – the *ethnie* and the line across.

The ethnie and the line

My analytical starting point with regard to the dynamics of transnational ethnicity, without making any assumptions about the political meaning of either ethnicity or transnationalism, is the *ethnie* and the line across (Fig. 1). The *ethnie* is the apolitical, or prepolitical, culture-community. It is the ethnic *category* that has yet to become the 'focus and subject of political action and political community' (Smith 1986: 69). The *ethnie* is a set of individuals, a component of whose identity meet common rules of membership and conceptions of content (Fearon & Laitin 2000: 848), but that are not politically mobilised. The *transnational ethnie*, in turn, is by definition divided by a
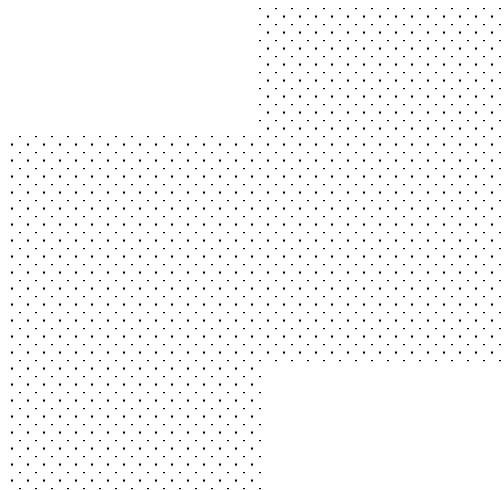

Figure 1:   First principles – the prepolitical transnational *ethnie* and the line across: individuals belonging to the same *ethnie* are divided by a vertical line that is drawn, but is yet to have material consequences.

line in the form of an international border (Nye & Keohane 1970: xii). I use the term 'line' instead of 'border' in order to emphasise its constructed nature, and like the *ethnie*, divorce it from any presumptions about political meaning. By beginning with the line, one may explain its transition (analytical and historical) from a mental to a material construct with very practical consequences. One may trace how lines vary in their effects on the *ethnie*, whole and divided, as lines shift with regard to the *ethnie*

when they are drawn, redrawn, and as members of the *ethnie* migrate, or otherwise change in numbers. One may observe and analyse the meaning of lines as they vary in permeability and strength, and as they have implications for either part of the *ethnie* of different sovereignties, legal and political practices, national identities, and homogenising projects. Much like the *ethnie* can be constructed or reified, so can the line. The *ethnie* and the line as first principles are appropriate for a project that aims to problematise transnational politicised ethnicity. In order to advance further towards the necessary theoretical and operational tools, it is time to introduce social-theoretic bridge building.

Bridge building

The emergence of bridge building in International Relations is often credited to Emanuel Adler (1997), who in a programmatic statement on the virtues of constructivism argued that it held potential to occupy a 'middle ground' between rationalist and interpretive approaches. In Adler's conception, 'constructivism is the view that *the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world*' (Adler 1997: 322, italics in original). Such interpretations generate the 'human action and speech' that are constitutive of ethnic identities (Fearon & Laitin 2000: 848). Central to constructivism is the notion of 'intersubjectivity'. Ethnic identities and their political meaning are intersubjective constructs. As Adler emphasises, 'intersubjective meanings are not simply the aggregation of the beliefs of individuals who jointly experience and interpret the world. Rather, they exist as collective knowledge "that is shared by all who are competent to engage in or recognize the appropriate performance of a social practice or range of practices"' (Adler 1997: 327). The persistence of intersubjective reality, such as ethnic identities, is due to 'social communication' (Adler 1997: 327). They are facts, simply put, by virtue of human agreement (Adler 1997: 328; Fearon & Laitin 2000: 848; Kasfir 1979: 370).

Constructivism lends itself to bridge building because it not only is 'interested in understanding how the *material*, subjective, and intersubjective worlds interact in the social construction of reality', it also has a focus beyond how 'structures constitute agents' identities and interests' as it 'seeks to explain how *individual agents* socially construct these structures in the first place' (Adler 1997: 330, italics in original). The opening of a place for individual agents suggests that the approach of rational choice may have much to offer. Rational choice may be broadly defined as a

'methodological approach that explains both individual and collective (social) outcomes in terms of *individual goal-seeking under constraints*' (Snidal 2002: 74, italics in original). In short, preferences are exogenised, and individuals choose the course of action that they believe will maximise their benefits and minimise their costs.

Mindful of the advantages of both constructivism and rationalism, their potential for complimentarity in approximating social processes, and based on a social-theoretic pragmatism that views rationalism and constructivism as analytical tools and not as ontological commitments (Fearon & Wendt 2002: 52), bridge building is an approach that typically combines rationalist and conventional constructivist modes of social explanation to build more complete theories of political outcomes. In that sense, it is an application of a 'positivist epistemology that advocates methodological pluralism' (Zürn & Checkel 2005: 1046). Bridge building has a focus on mechanisms (Zürn & Checkel 2005: 1046), which 'operate at an analytical level below that of a more encompassing theory; they increase the theory's credibility by rendering more fine-grained explanations. Mechanisms connect things; they are "recurrent processes linking specified initial conditions and a specific outcome"' (Checkel 2005b: 808). In practice, bridge building has been fruitfully applied within frameworks of 'domains of application' and 'temporal sequencing' (Jupille et al. 2003: 19).

The domains of application approach involves identifying which aspects or areas of social or political processes that best are captured by either rationalist or constructivist explanations, and specifying the scope conditions for when either mechanism is at play. The aim is to develop an additive theory that provides more complete explanation than its constituent parts (Jupille et al. 2003: 21). The temporal sequencing approach involves viewing political processes as a series of temporally dependent steps where rationalist and constructivist explanations alternate to illuminate each step (Jupille et al. 2003: 22). A theory that initially explains the social construction of preferences, and then uses those preferences to motivate instrumental action, would be a form of temporal sequencing.

Summary

Thus far, I have presented a puzzle posed by the literature on ethnicity and political violence, and discussed some ordering concepts and approaches to theory-building that could turn difference into strength. The puzzle revolves around an apparent paradox: the social ontology of ethnic identity, the endogeneity of politicised

ethnicity to political violence, yet the theoretically plausible findings of many studies that exogenise and reify ethnic groups. Some ordering concepts are useful when dealing with the puzzle: 'construction' and 'reification' – either as ontological claims or, significantly, as analytical moves. In order to theorise the politics of transnational ethnicity, then, an analytical starting point with minimal presumptions about the political meaning of constituent parts is the *ethnie* and the line across. An approach to theory building that could turn difference into strength is 'bridge building' between constructivism and rational choice, in ways that allow for both 'construction' and 'reification', and in ways that explain how the *ethnie* and the line are imbued with political meaning and then have consequences for political violence. Whether the approach to bridge building of 'domains of application', most lately practiced in a study of international institutions and socialisation in Europe (Checkel 2005a), or 'temporal sequencing', for instance used to theorise changing human rights practices (Risse et al. 1999), are appropriate for theorising the international escalation of 'ethnic' conflict, is a question that must be answered with reference to relevant case knowledge.

In order to explore the promise of bridge building, and seek some answer to the 'how to' question, I apply a 'double interpretation' (Zürn & Checkel 2005) to Mahmood Mamdani's (2001) account of the 1990 invasion/intervention in Rwanda by the Uganda-based Rwanda Patriotic Front. My method, inspired by Zürn & Checkel's (2005) analysis of various studies of European institutions and socialisation (Checkel 2005a), is to take Mamdani's account *as is*, and tell his story twice, once from a purely constructivist perspective and once from the perspective of rational choice. The double interpretation is intended to expose the extent to which constructivism and rationalism are complimentary in this particular empirical domain, and help locate the points at which bridge building is most useful. At best, the double interpretation will also generate some concrete propositions on how to go about bridging *this* rationalist-constructivist divide.

A double interpretation of Mahmood Mamdani's (2001) *When Victims Become Killers*

Mamdani's ultimate concern is explaining the 1994 genocide of Tutsi in Rwanda. The historical record is harrowing. In a hundred days between March and July 1994, organised from above and with participation and initiative from below, between 500,000 and 1 million Tutsi were killed, along with 10,000 to 50,000 Hutu (Mamdani

2001: 5). The genocide was low-tech and labour intensive. The killing was hard work. Herein lies Mamdani's moral dilemma – the extent to which the agenda from above had to resonate with perspectives from below (7), the fact that the genocide had popular participation and initiative (8), the fact that the killing required and acquired hundred thousands of killers (6). A central element in Mamdani's explanation is the inclusion of a regional dimension. The genocide can only be grasped, he argues, by referring to events and developments with roots outside Rwanda. One such key event in the sequence leading to the 1994 genocide was the October 1990 invasion of Rwanda by the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), constituted of long-time Tutsi refugees in Uganda, and prompted by a citizenship crisis within Uganda (36).

It is the October 1990 invasion of Rwanda by the Rwanda Patriotic Front – from hereon 'the RPF invasion' – that is my ultimate concern. Being a significant part of the dynamic leading to genocide, the RPF invasion had itself antecedents in common with the genocide. One may object to the choice of the RPF invasion as case on the grounds that it was not an escalation of civil war in Rwanda. The RPF invasion occurred at a time of internal reform in Rwanda, not repression (159), and was itself a cause of civil war. However, although it is not technically an example of the class of phenomena I am most interested in – interventions in civil wars caused by transnational ethnic affinities – the RPF invasion holds important lessons about the dynamics of transnational ethnicity, regional contexts of violence, and not least the interplay between constructivist and rationalist causal mechanisms.

Before setting out on the double interpretation of Mamdani's account of the RPF invasion, I briefly note the central elements of its background. The RPF consisted primarily of Tutsi refugees in Uganda. Political developments in Rwanda had generated flows of Tutsi refugees to Uganda in successive waves, from the 1959 revolution during which the Tutsi elite was displaced from positions of power, to a political crisis in 1972-73 which culminated in a coup and the ushering in of the Second Republic (160, 138). By 1990 there was an estimated 200,000 Tutsi refugees in Uganda (164). With time, the refugees in Uganda constituted a Banyarwanda (Rwandan) political diaspora, and the first political refugee organisation, the Rwandese Alliance for National Unity (RANU), emerged in Kampala 1980 (166). In such forums, the return of refugees to Rwanda was openly discussed (166). With the changing tides of Ugandan politics, and the emergence of a bush war against the Obote II regime, driven by the Yoweri Museveni-led National Resistance Army (NRA), Tutsi refugees joined the movement in rising numbers (168). When the NRA

seized power in Uganda in 1986, about a quarter of its 16,000-strong force was composed of Banyarwanda, mainly Tutsi (170). Although a return to Rwanda had been discussed among the Banyarwanda refugees, opinion at the time of the NRA take-over was in favour of naturalisation within Uganda. Banyarwanda opinion remained in favour of naturalisation, even with the re-emergence of discrimination based on ethnic identity, until 1990 when a 3-day parliamentary session inscribed in law that the Banyarwanda would be excluded from citizen entitlement in the new political order (182). Banyarwanda who had been leaders in the NRA were excluded from any positions they might have had in the army and the state, and refugee opinion shifted decisively against naturalisation, and in favour of an armed return to Rwanda (182). The RPF then invaded Rwanda in October 1990. The RPF was materially aided by the Ugandan state on the condition that there be no return (183). Uganda was used as a rear base while the RPF continued to push into Rwanda (182-183).

Such, in brief, was the set of events leading to the RPF invasion. Having attempted to be non-committal about the specific mechanisms linking these events, I will in the following present the double interpretation of Mamdani's account, first the constructivist reading, then the rationalist perspective.

The constructivist reading

A constructivist interpretation of the developments leading to the RPF invasion revolves around the sequential construction and re-constitution of Tutsi politicized identity. In Mamdani's conceptual world, political action is made possible by 'political identity' (Mamdani 2001: 21). To the extent that 'political identity' is congruent with 'cultural identity', his concept of political identity is closely analogous to the concept of politicised *ethnie*. It refers to the circumstance where an *ethnie*, an ethnic category, is imbued with political meaning, where ethnic identity provides the perimeters for collective political action, where – in short – ethnicity is a primary political cleavage. In post-colonial Rwanda, 'Tutsi' and 'Hutu' marked the primary political cleavage. In a constructivist reading of Mamdani, the most important task is to trace the meaning of 'Tutsi' as a political identity. Arguably, the meaning of 'Tutsi' went through six more or less distinguishable phases that may be traced through the colonial and post-colonial era, through Rwanda and Uganda, all of which are integral to explaining the RPF invasion.

In a first construction of Tutsi political identity, the colonial state created by discourse, by law, and by practice a 'contradictory middle ground' between coloniser and colonised, the indigenous and the nonindigenous, inhabited by the Tutsi – that of the 'subject race' (27-28). The key to understanding this is to separate the dimensions of race and subject. The concept of race provided the colonies with the legal basis for group discrimination (24). The racial distinction was between the indigenous and the nonindigenous. In order to acquire a layer of the colonized population – the subjects – to act as instruments for the colonial administration, the colonizers constructed a subject population elevated above the mass of subjects by race. They were the *nonindigenous* subjects, the subject race. Although the Tutsi originated within Africa, they were constructed by colonial Rwanda as nonindigenous, as aliens, and could therefore be favoured by the law. The subject race was a construct of intersubjective reality. The colonial meaning of 'Tutsi' as a political identity was created by human agreement, yet it had material consequences. As a subject race the Tutsi were the instruments and beneficiaries of colonialism (27). That was the colonial legacy. The Tutsi were privileged, but they were constructed as alien.

The colonial construction of Tutsi as an alien race shaped the Tutsi experience leading to the RPF invasion. In a second phase of Tutsi political identity, the 1959 Rwandan revolution reproduced, but inverted the racial divide. The revolution championed a racialised Hutu nationalism that justified and made possible the dismantling of Tutsi power and the first wave of Tutsi refugees (32-33). The Tutsi were, after all, constructed to be foreigners.

A third phase in the meaning of 'Tutsi' as a political identity began as waves of refugees settled in Uganda. Memories, migration, Ugandan popular prejudice, official discrimination, and law coalesced to constitute the Tutsi identity of 'refugee'. The mechanisms were quite simple. Tutsi refugees were placed in camps living under a commandant, in circumstances dividing them from Ugandan society (164). Uganda offered no naturalisation. Shifting governments perpetuated the refugee identity by considering also the children of the original Tutsi migrants as refugees (165). As Mamdani puts it, 'a refugee self-consciousness developed first and foremost in response to anti-refugee prejudice promoted by the state and shared by many in the society at large. This is also why the mainly Tutsi refugees in Uganda came to think of themselves as Banyarwanda (Rwandese), and not as Tutsi' (165). The change from Tutsi to Banyarwanda identity is indicative of the social context-contingent,

intersubjective processes in play. By speech, by action, by human agreement, and by dynamic interpretations of the material world, the Banyarwanda refugees came to constitute a 'political diaspora' (162). The meaning of 'refugee' and 'political diaspora' as Tutsi political identities is worth pondering, for they made the RPF invasion possible. The notions of *refugee* and *diaspora* hold implications of *displacement*, or at least the state of being removed from some *homeland*. Integral to such a notion – such an identity – is the possibility of return to one's point of origin. Return can be imagined, and can therefore be realised. Perpetuating the refugee identity is therefore the same as maintaining the possibility of return. Little wonder, then, that political refugee organisations such as the RANU openly discussed the possibility of a return to Rwanda (166), and that its reincarnation, the RPF, continued to do so until return was realised in the form of armed invasion (175).

The colonial construction of Tutsi as a privileged nonindigenous race in relation to the underprivileged indigenous Hutu, and the postcolonial inversion of their power relationship reproduced and maintained a dichotomy of identities that generated the circumstances under which waves of Tutsi refugees left Rwanda. The construction and consolidation of the Tutsi identity as refugee in Uganda, in turn, maintained the possibility of return that in 1990 came to fruition. These three phases of the meaning of 'Tutsi' as a political identity carry the bulk of explanatory power for the RPF invasion. Tutsi political identity went through three subsequent phases. First, the Tutsi refugees in Uganda were 'orphaned' as the Rwandan 1973 Second Republic re-constituted the Tutsi *within* Rwanda from nonindigenous race to indigenous ethnic group, while refusing to ethnitise the Tutsi diaspora (156, 138). Second, the National Resistance Army (NRA) of Yoweri Museveni sought during its campaign to find an alternative to state-sponsored discrimination of Banyarwanda refugees based on their nonindigeneity (170). NRA's alternative was to base entitlement on the principle of residency, which would have benefited most Banyarwanda refugees, having lived in Uganda for long, or even having been born there. NRA's discourse and practice of resident entitlement held re-constitutive potential, but was not long-lived or intense enough for the meaning of 'Tutsi' as a political identity to change. The possibility of return remained structured in the refugee identity, and rose prominently to the surface as the Banyarwanda refugees in a last phase, constituted by practice and law in the time after Museveni's 1986 seizure of power, faced the reality that in Uganda, once a refugee, one was always a refugee (182).

The constructivist interpretation of the RPF invasion is significant because it can account for the meaning of 'Tutsi' as a political identity. The RPF invasion cannot be explained without reference to Tutsi identity because successive construction and re-constitution of Tutsi identity made the RPF invasion possible. The Tutsi were a case in which the very *possibility* of action was part of identity as an intersubjective reality, first as subject (alien) race, then as refugee. The rationalist concept of 'preferences' is not even a crude analogue. Identity made particular courses of action imaginable and certain preferences possible. The constructivist interpretation does not provide a complete explanation of the RPF invasion, however. Core events and choices are missing. The first actors in the RPF must have made a *decision* to invade. In order to explain that I turn to rational choice.

The rationalist perspective

A rationalist interpretation of Mamdani's account of the RPF invasion depends to a great extent on exogenising and reifying identity in the analysis. The emphasis is on events rather than social processes. I have subdivided the rationalist interpretation of the RPF invasion into five elements: the choice by Tutsi to flee from Rwanda during the decades following the 1959 revolution, the politicisation of 'refugee' as an identity and the extent to which it was a function of choice, the decision by rising numbers of Banyarwanda to join Museveni's NRA, the exclusion of Banyarwanda refugees from citizen entitlement following Museveni's take-over of power in Uganda, and finally the choice by the RPF to invade Rwanda in October 1990.

The choice by a surging mass of Tutsi to flee from Rwanda in the decades following the 1959 revolution was a rational response to worsening conditions in Rwanda. Assuming that individuals seek security and better economic opportunities, and given that their racialised Tutsi identity increasingly excluded them from either, the costs of staying and the expected benefits from leaving combined to make the option of flight relatively attractive. First following 1959, and then after 1964, Tutsi were removed by force from the political arena (Mamdani 2001: 132, 134) and targeted for repression. Prior to the 1973 coup, the black-listing and exclusion of Tutsi, beginning at the National University and expanding to other sectors of Rwandan society, served to reemphasise the precarious situation for Tutsi in Rwanda. Relocation seemed attractive. Flight was rational.

Once in Uganda, the politicisation of the refugee community, the self-reification – so to speak – of the Tutsi refugees, was not solely a function of social

construction. Individual conscious choice also played a part, as the encounter with popular prejudices and official discrimination constrained alternative foci of political organisation. Faced with such exclusionary measures as the Obote I government's 'Control of Alien Refugees Act' that subjected the Banyarwanda to arbitrary questioning and detention (167), and the expulsion of thousands of Banyarwanda from public employment as Obote ordered all un-skilled foreigners removed (167), it was only rational for the Banyarwanda to turn inwards to themselves for political community. A component of choice was therefore present in the formation of 'refugee' as a political identity. In the constructivist interpretation, the identities of 'refugee' or 'political diaspora' were not only imbued with particular implications for political cleavages in Uganda, they were also conceived to hold within them, as integral to these particular political identities, the possibility of return to Rwanda. A crude, but valid rationalist analogue is return as an 'option', return as an 'alternative strategy' made more attractive by the constraints on Banyarwanda welfare in Uganda. Hence, both the political organisation around refugee identity, and its formulation of options for action, have elements of rational choice.

So does the recruitment of Banyarwanda refugees to Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) and the bush war against the Obote II regime (168). It is important to explain this recruitment because the RPF was formed of personnel originally recruited, trained, and organised within the NRA. The choice by Banyarwanda to join the NRA and its war can easily be explained in rationalist terms. One important factor, favoured by political economists, was the lack of alternative income opportunities (Collier & Hoeffler 2004). Volunteering for the NRA was also a rational flight from the massive state-organised repression of Banyarwanda by the Obote II regime (Mamdani 2001: 168), and a rational (and successful) strategy to get rid of the source of repression. Not least, and given that the Banyarwanda still entertained hopes of making a home for themselves in Uganda (174, 175), joining Museveni's war effort was instrumental to implementing his alternative to a politics of indigeneity (170). Successive Ugandan governments since 1959 had discriminated against the Banyarwanda refugees on the basis of their nonindigenous standing within Uganda, the same basis on which they originally were squeezed out of Rwanda. The NRA guerrillas defined an alternative politics, turning on the distinction between resident and non-resident (170). By making the historical fact of migration 'politically superfluous' (171), and by beginning to implement their alternative politics, the NRA represented for the Banyarwanda the

promise of citizen entitlement, the prospect of making Uganda 'home'. Supporting that movement was rational given the Banyarwanda preference for naturalisation in Uganda.

That these hopes were eventually dashed triggered RPF's choice to invade Rwanda by armed force, and thus return. The Banyarwanda – the mainly Tutsi refugees – were finally excluded from citizen entitlement when the Ugandan parliament in 1990 enshrined in law that the refugees would be ruled out as beneficiaries of land reform. Museveni thus turned his back on his alternative to the politics of indigeneity – a rational response, a strategic adaptation to the political costs otherwise incurred on him by the opposition. NRA leaders from the refugee community that had taken up central positions in the army and state after Museveni's 1986 seizure of power were expendable, and they were expended. The option of a return to Rwanda, for long considered by the Banyarwanda refugees, now became the option with the greatest expected benefits. One of the founders of RANU-cum-RPF articulated the rationality behind this: 'the NRA experience was a catalyst in mobilizing the Banyarwanda in NRA. As far as 1983, our position was that people should join the struggle in Uganda voluntarily. It was worthwhile. It was not a deliberate effort to organize an army inside an army. The discrimination and harassment puzzled them, made them look for alternatives. They turned to senior RANU members, like Baingana. The discrimination did mobilize quite a few for us' (175).

Finally, as refugee opinion, be it commoner or leader, had shifted decisively against naturalisation and for armed return to Rwanda as a consequence of the 1990 law (182), the resulting RPF invasion was sustained by incentives and aid from Uganda. The Ugandan government declared on the day of the invasion that Rwandese leaving the NRA to attack Rwanda would be considered deserters, punishable by death (183) – no trivial incentive to keep the RPF pushing into Rwanda. The RPF was also aided materially by the Ugandan state, and on the precondition that there be no return, was allowed to use Uganda as its rear base (183). The circumstances immediately preceding and surrounding the RPF invasion fit neatly within a logic of rational choice. By excluding options for the Banyarwanda within Uganda, and by creating incentives for RPF's continued invasion of Rwanda, Museveni minimised his political costs by exporting his citizenship crisis to Rwanda. Responding to the severely constrained opportunities in their host country, Uganda's

material support, and the expected benefits of return, the first actors of the RPF chose to invade Rwanda.

An attempt at synthesis

The double interpretation generates two insights. With regard to the constructivist and rationalist interpretation, it suggests that the two can compliment each other and combine to form a richer, more complete explanation. As to the 'how to' question, it would seem that a form of the 'temporal sequencing' approach to bridge building is most appropriate in the present empirical domain.

First, the constructivist and rationalist interpretations can compliment each other. Neither approach, although consistent with reality and conforming to the particular political outcome, offer a complete explanation. The RPF invasion, being an event triggered by prior events and choices, is only partially explained by the constructivist approach. Focusing as it does on possibilities and tendencies for political action as structured in the construction and re-constitution of political identities, the constructivist approach does not account for a decisive factor in organised political action – the decisions of first actors. The rationalist interpretation is much better suited to explain the RPF executive's choice to invade. When focusing on one such event, rational choice seems to have a comparative advantage over constructivism. However, rationalism fails to account for the great extent to which the first actors in RPF were embedded in the intersubjective reality of their own political identity. The RPF invasion occurred within a limited domain of possibilities that was structured in the meaning of 'Tutsi' as a political identity. Bridging the gap between the constructivist and rationalist interpretation would generate a richer explanation. Couching that explanation in general terms would build more complete theory. How to?

A form of 'temporal sequencing' may be most appropriate when using bridge building to theorise the international escalation of 'ethnic' conflict. Recall that temporal sequencing involves viewing political processes as a series of temporally dependent steps where rationalist and constructivist explanations alternate to illuminate each step (Jupille et al. 2003: 22). Temporal dependence is a theme in the process leading to the RPF invasion. The most basic unit of Mamdani's (2001) account (Fig. 2) is the sequence in which an *ethnie* is gradually imbued with a particular political meaning, politicised, reified (in the ontological sense), and then serve as the foundation for particular choices of action. Constructivism could then
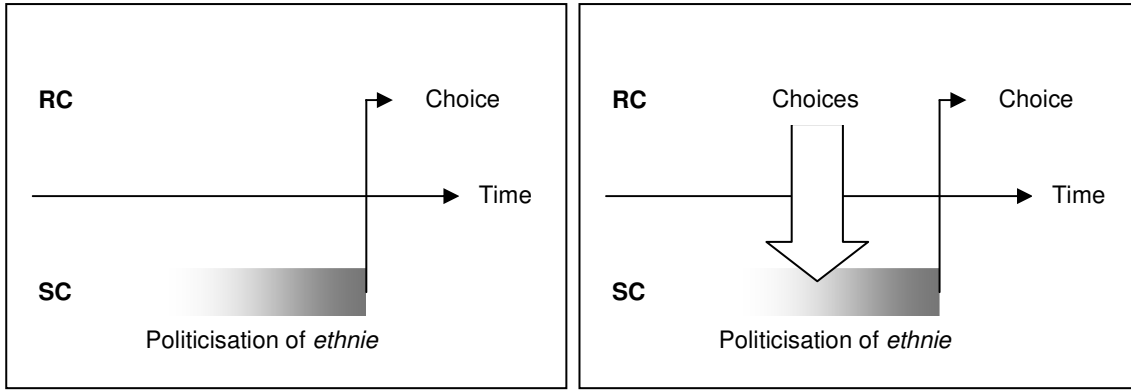
Figure 2

Figure 3

| Figure 2: | The most basic explanatory unit of political violence rooted in politicised ethnicity, sketched in a dual social-theoretic space of rational choice (RC) and social constructivism (SC): an *ethnie* is gradually imbued with a particular political meaning, politicised, ontologically reified, and then serves as the foundation for choices of action. | Figure 3: | In a more advanced version of the explanatory unit from Figure 2, the politicisation of and *ethnie* is not only a product of social construction, it also is a function of choice as individuals choose to organise around a particular ethnic identity. This model serves as the foundation for determining the appropriate method for bridge building. |

explain the politicisation of an *ethnie* and rationalism account for choice. The picture is complicated somewhat by the element of choice when individuals organise around an ethnic identity (Fig. 3). In order to reproduce this basic relationship in general theory, a temporal sequence may be adapted by applying a 'domains of application' approach to the first step in the sequence – that of the politicisation of ethnicity. The domains of application approach involves identifying which aspects or areas of social or political processes that best are captured by either rationalist or constructivist explanations, and specifying the scope conditions for when either mechanism is at play (Jupille et al. 2003: 21). In such an adaptation of temporal sequencing one is left with a two-step approach to building theory.

The first step theorises the politicisation or ontological reification of an *ethnie*. Recognising that this can come about by social construction and rational choice, the first step specifies the scope conditions that determine whether or when choice or social-constitutive processes account for the dominant mechanisms.

The second step in the temporal sequence uses rationalism to theorise the choices that are rooted in the ethnic group. Having first theorised the politicisation of an *ethnie*, the temporal sequence now reifies (in the analytical sense) that *ethnie*, and explains choices with reference to preferences arising from it.

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Concluding remarks

The value added by a bridge building approach to theorising the international escalation of 'ethnic' conflict is its potential for richer description of social mechanisms leading to interventions. Bridge building offers ways of structuring theory in order to account for the social ontology of ethnicity, while retaining the advantages of the individualist ontology of executive choice. Bridge building may offer a solution to this paper's central puzzle: on one hand the social ontology and endogeneity to political violence of the politicised *ethnie*, on the other hand the interesting findings of many studies that exogenise and reify ethnic groups. A 'double interpretation' (Zürn & Checkel 2005) of one account of an intervention with a strong transnational 'ethnic' dimension (Mamdani 2001) has suggested that theory in this empirical domain is best structured by a two-step 'temporal sequencing' that in the first step applies a 'domains of application' approach. Thus one may in the first step theorise the politicisation of ethnic categories by combining constructivism and rational choice, and by specifying the scope conditions for either set of mechanisms. In a second step one may analytically reify the outcome of step one, and explain choices arising out of the politicised *ethnie* with reference to given preferences.

The costs of applying bridge building include its limited possibilities for generalisation, and its ostensibly narrow range of available methods. With regard to generality, bridge building sacrifices parsimony in favour of a fuller explanation of a carefully delimited range of phenomena. Bridge building belongs to the domain of middle-range modelling (Zürn & Checkel 2005: 1048) and has no aspirations to grand unifying theory. Bridge building is also limiting with regard to methods. The typical starting point is the qualitative, process-tracing case study (Checkel *forthcoming*: 2), and it is at present difficult to see how politicised ethnicity could be endogenised in statistical analysis. One reason for this is the difficulty of operationalisation.

Operationalisation is a challenge in any form of empirically driven theory building that seeks to combine constructivist and rationalist approaches. Consider for example the difficulties of operationalising the politicisation of ethnic identity. How does one distinguish between choice and socialisation by observation? These and other operational challenges must be dealt with in due course.

A last challenge that has not been properly discussed is theoretical, and regards the endogenisation of one defining element for the transnational *ethnie* – the line, or the international border. Any model that seeks to endogenise transnational

ethnic groups must account for the line and the political significance it has acquired. As one has seen, the political meaning of transnational cultural communities, that is the *ethnie* that transcends international borders, is as much a function of conditions on either side of the line as of conditions across the line.

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