An overview of Günther Schlee's theory on 'ethnic conflicts'.

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Abstract. This review paper aims to sum up Günther Schlee's main considerations about theories of ethnic conflicts. The interest in reviewing this topic is related to the author's main academic ambitions to research the use of ethnicity as an argument for state violence in several regions. The paper is therefore divided into 4 topics. Firstly, an introduction about Günther Schlee and his work. Secondly, a discussion about the arguments used to defend ethnicity as the main cause of ethnic conflicts. This arguments are divided by Schlee into six main points: cultural differences/ethnicities are the cause of ethnic conflicts; the clash of different cultures reflects ancient oppositions; ethnicity is universal; ethnicity is ascriptive; a people is a community of shared descent; ethnic groups are territorial. Thirdly, an overview of Schlee's theoretical frame to tackle the subject of ethnic conflicts and the different levels of analysis (A, B, and C), which considers: A) the semantic fields of identity concepts; B) the politics of inclusion and exclusion; C) The economics of group size and social position. Finally, combining the analysis with another review article about Günther Schlee's work, written by Aleksandar Bošković and Suzana Ignjatovic´, some general conclusions are made about the analytical possibilities brought up by the book.

Keywords. Ethnic Conflicts, Ethnicity, Conflict Theory, Identity, Günther Schlee.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to give an overview of Günther Schlee's book "How enemies are made: towards a theory of ethnic and religious conflicts", published in 2008 by Berghahn Books [1], and combines the overview with a review article [2] about Schlee's work, to analyse important aspects of current conflict theories.

Prof. Ph.D. Günther Schlee is a political anthropologist and ethnologist who researched in his Ph.D. studies the Rendille ethnic group in Kenya. His research interests are related to identity and difference, changes of alliances, kinship and friendship. Schlee typically uses the 'inter-ethnic' procedure and combines historical, sociological, and philological methods. He is currently the spokesperson of the International Max Planck Research School REMEP (Retaliation, Mediation, and Punishment) and co-chairing the Centre for Anthropological Studies on Central Asia with Peter Finke (University of Zurich) [3].

Günther Schlee's book 'How enemies are made: towards a theory of ethnic and religious conflicts' tackles questions regarding the concept of ethnic conflicts and the main assumptions made, either by common-sense or by political elites, about ethnicity as a factor of conflict. Two main aspects will be covered in this article: firstly, how ethnicity is seen as a factor that generates conflicts and what are the six arguments that are used to defend this proposition; secondly, what Schlee proposes as an alternative explanation to "ethnic conflicts". Before targeting those topics, however, it is important to understand Schlee's goal and methodology to approach the concept of ethnic conflict.

Günther Schlee claims to be 'preoccupied with the many aspects of identification in conflict situations which I believe to be open to rationalist explanations and which have not yet been sufficiently explained along those lines' (1 p33). In this sense, he explicitly opts for staying away from earlier ethnic conflicts explanations such as primordialism – which 'regards ethnicity as naturally, or at least organically, formed through time' – or instrumentalism – 'which perceives ethnic identities in principally rational terms' [4]. Rather, he approaches the subject in a

gradualist way, in which he considers many variations and covariations, instead of focusing on one single aspect of ethnic identification. Therefore, Schlee proposes a theory that has: 'a) a gradualist perception of stability over time, b) a relativist concept: one kind of identification changing faster than another, and c) an empirical approach: let us find out how fast things change and then find out why they change at different rates' (1 p43).

The main goal of the book is to explore the combination of cost-benefit factors and cognitive representations to analyse identification processes, and to do that, the author resorts to the use of a Rational Choice Theory, which will be later discussed in this article. Before doing that, it is important to explore Schlee's critics of the arguments of ethnicity as the cause of conflicts.

2. Arguments on ethnicity as the cause of conflicts

According to the author, 'the phrase "ethnic conflicts" has come to be used rather naturally, particularly since the end of socialism and the rejection of the perspective of class struggle' and, since then, 'it is assumed that ethnicity (and according to this model every form of difference, particularly also religion) represents the cause of conflicts' (1 p15). Overall, both political elites and the non-scientific community shares this perspective, which is based on six points described and criticised by Schlee. It is important to understand that the first proposition is the main popular theory on conflicts and that the other five corroborate the first.

2.1 Cultural differences/ethnicities are the cause of ethnic conflicts.

To explain and criticise such an argument, Schlee uses the example of former Yugoslavia and Somalia. In the first case, there seemed to be no or little awareness of 'ethnic' differences within the country before the 1990s, with minor linguistic differences between the Republics and religious variety as a more important element of differentiation. After the Yugoslav Wars, however, people explicitly affiliate themselves with ethnic identities. In the case of Somalia, a rather homogenous population in terms of culture, language, and religion, conflict and factionalism is still present. Therefore, the proposition that cultural differences are the cause of ethnic conflict could 'only be supported if the extent of difference between conflicting parties reflected the intensity of their conflicts' (1 p15), which is not plausible after observation – neither cultural homogeneity guarantees peaceful coexistence, neither cultural differences generate conflicts.

2.2 The clash of different cultures reflects ancient oppositions

Schlee uses the example of the opposition between Armenians and Azeri, who claimed to exist for at least 1,000 years, and the Kalenjin group in Kenya, whose existence can only be traced after colonial rule. The existence of conflicts in both regions allows criticising this proposition because no evidence supports the argument that older oppositions led to more intense conflicts or vice versa. According to Schlee, ethnicity is constantly redefined, and 'the border between us – the "we" – and the "other" is constantly being renegotiated' (1 p18).

2.3 Ethnicity is universal

This third proposition claims that every human belongs to an ethnic group, and sees ethnicity as a natural and universal structural principle of humanity. One can associate this proposition with the primordialist interpretation of ethnic conflicts, which perceives ethnicity as naturally formed. On the contrary, 'no ethnic "group" possesses a fixed outside border and that means that we are not dealing with groups at all, but rather with a continuum in which the border between the "we" and "the others" shifts depending on the point of view of the group's observer (1 p19). Instead of a natural principle, ethnicity needs to be seen as a modern science creation, since ideas of similarities and differences were created in Europe and often imported to political discourses in colonized regions.

2.4 Ethnicity is ascriptive

The fourth proposition that enforces ethnicity as the cause of ethnic conflict sees ethnicity as an irreversible attribute and states as a rule that it is impossible to change an ethnic affiliation. The author opposes that argument by giving another Kenyan example: the Cushistic-speaking population in north Kenya often transit from an ethnic group to another due to historical and economic conditions, varying according to time. Schlee calls this transit from one group to another an 'institutionalised bridge' that individual crosses according to specific conditions, although the "cultural features perceived as distinctive for the ethnic group involved will not necessarily change when members move from one group to another" (1 p20).

2.5 A people is a community of shared descent

Against this proposition, Schlee states that "the connections between ethnic boundaries and boundaries of descent groups are rather loose. In many cases, the circle of people with whom one intermarries is smaller than one's ethnic group; on the other hand, it can comprise elements of other ethnic groups". I.e., there is a difference between an ethnic group and a group of shared descent and sometimes one can surpass the other.

2.6 Ethnic groups are territorial

This proposition is based on assumptions related to the foundation of nation-states, a specific form of territorial state that originated in Western Europe,

an external structure that was imposed on completely different contexts. This structure implicates that ethnic groups "strive for a united territory and, eventually, for national sovereignty" (1 p21), forming an ethnically homogeneous or with a clear majority state. However, Schlee argues that in many cases, ethnic groups have cohabited with others in the same territory, and that gives them specific features of specialisation. According to the author, 'the most successful and usually most brutal form of political realization of the above six problematic propositions is the foundation of nation-states. Only a small minority of today's more than 180 'nation' states worldwide, however, corresponds to this picture' (1 p21).

After unravelling the six points above mentioned, Schlee insists 'that ethnicity is not the cause of conflict but rather something that emerges in the course of conflict or acquires new shapes and functions in the course of such events" (1 p22). To understand ethnicity as the cause of conflicts is to disregard both micro-level identity changes and larger-scale changes, because, by doing that, one is freezing and naturalizing ethnic identities.

3. Rational Choice Theory and Schlee's explanation of 'ethnic' conflicts

As stated before, Günther Schlee resorts to a Rational Choice Theory to explain identification processes and ethnicity features in conflicts. To understand Shclee's approach, a reference to the basic principles of the RCT is necessary, and, to achieve that, the review article by Boskovic and Ignjatović [2] is very useful. The authors present six premises on which RCT is based 'a) focus on the individual actor; b) agency can be understood; c) rationality; d) consequentialism and instrumentalism; e) egoism; f)maximization' (2 pp292-293), and Schlee applies most of this principles in his conceptualization.

Schlee's theoretical framework is based on three interconnected domains: a) social structures and their cognitive representations: the semantic fields of identity concepts; b) the politics of inclusion and exclusion; c) The economics of group size and social position. There is no determination from levels A to B to C, on the contrary, they can be addressed simultaneously, however in this article they will be treated separate for didactic purposes.

3.1 Level A: The semantic fields of identity concepts

Level A refers to the criteria that people use to identify themselves plausibly with others, such as language, religion, and descent. This are the categories that are employed in Level B domains, which will be discussed after, related to strategies of inclusion and exclusion. Therefore, these categories

are situational and manipulable according to needs. The author divides two types of identities relation: paradigmatic, when one dimension of identity is accentuated at the expense of another; and syntagmatic, when there can be more than one significant identity criteria used at the same time.

According to Schlee, 'each type of identification opens up a broad repertoire of possible categorisations, which can overlap with one another in a multitude of ways' (1 p61), i.e. there can be a predominant identity filiation and complementary filiation. The author uses a diagram (Fig. 1) to illustrate his explanation, showing three possible (but not restrictive) dimensions of affiliation: state/nation, religion, and ethnic group or language, as follows:
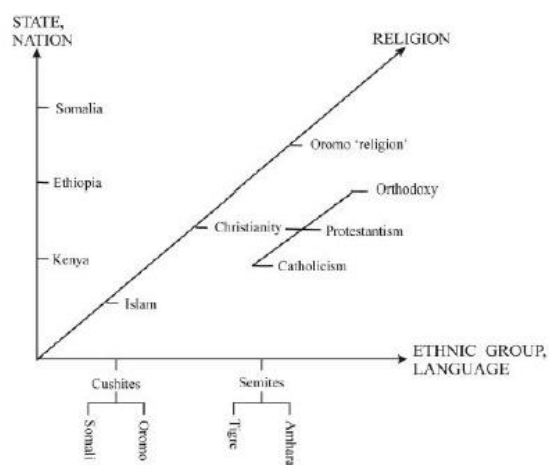

Fig. 1 - Three-dimensional conceptual sphere with ethnicity, religion, and national affiliation (1 p62).

The graph shows the possibility to shift emphasis from multiple categories, without redefining or changing identities – for example from religion to ethnicity or nationality according to advantages and disadvantages in a specific situation – and without the other features ceasing to be relevant.

Finally, the author states that there are three situations of change in the dimension of identification: individual level, group level, and the public sphere, where criteria can overlap and form 'cross-cutting ties'. Consequently, the possibility to choose from one criterion to another implies that 'cross-cutting ties can be situationally ignored. They are thus not always present as a binding force. Identity and difference should, therefore, not be considered as resulting from certain criteria, i.e., the presence or absence of certain markers, as factors on their own, which can generate hostility or cohesion' (1 p67). Moreover, identity markers can be selected to pursue goals of inclusion and exclusion and, therefore be seen as the basis for political rhetoric.

3.2 Level B: The politics of inclusion and exclusion

As described in Level A, the different criteria of identification are used in order to establish limits in-

group identities, subject to which Level B refers to, the politics of inclusion and exclusion. There are mainly two variables under Level B: firstly, groups and their sizes, and secondly, how actively and skilfully people are involved in identity discourses. That is because 'size needs to be weighted because not all allies count alike and mere calculations of size may be modified by considerations of economic power, organisational capability, cultural prestige or military capability' (1 p40).

The factor of size can change according to 'larger or smaller units of the same kind, and by switching from generic terms to subsumed concepts' and vice versa. The possibility of choosing to reduce or increase the group's number requires mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, that is not carried out isolated but in interaction with other's strategies. To explain this situation, Schlee uses the Rendille and Degodia people who live in the same region in Somalia, however, have different patterns of adaptation to the same environmental conditions. The first maintains economic practices, related to the creation of 'small undemanding' and weak camels, that limit the group size and resources. The second, on the contrary, keep big and healthy camels and maintains strategies of expansion, integrating outsiders, and conquering other regions. After this explanation, Schlee concludes that 'the appropriate unit of reference for anthropological research into such strategies is not the ethnic group or tribe, but rather the region'.

3.3 Level C: The economics of group size and social position

Level C is deeply related with Level B because it also tackles the subject of group sizes, but it does not mean that B is strictly determined by C. Level C focuses on the discussion of costs and benefits of narrower and wider identifications. To explain his analysis, Schlee uses the theorem of 'crowding' and the example of a golf club: 'a large membership in a club reduces the individual's costs', leading to some disadvantages such as the 'crowding' of the club and the decrease of leisure value. Consequently, 'many of the better-off members of the club will wonder whether it might be preferable to be a member in a smaller, more 'exclusive' club and in return accept a higher club subscription' (1 p40). According to Schlee, 'for participation in the benefits of an institution, fewer people are preferable, because, this way, more is left for the individual'.

Cost-benefit analysis, however, do not include only economic reasons, for example. There are 'cases in which people profess or attribute identities for non-economic reasons or simply have no options because their social identities are inescapable' (1 p41), and here the author includes discussions about emotions. Schlee explains that our decisions are not 'entirely or overwhelmingly taken deliberately and on rational grounds' and 'behaviour often looks as if it is guided by rational reasoning' (1 pp41-45). Therefore, it is also necessary to consider degrees of consciousness and intentionality when talking about identification.

Related with these degrees of consciousness and intentionality is Schlee's explanation of contractuality as a variable in identification and alliance processes. The author distinguishes between membership in groups, which refers to oppositions of 'we' and 'us', and alliances with groups, which refers specifically to 'others'. However 'alliances do not abolish group boundaries and they do not even blur them', but they are highlighted (1 p46). Alliances are formed more often between groups that have common denominators, based on ethical and identity-related considerations – for example, alliances between groups of genealogical closeness. Therefore, '"contractuality" as a variable would have to state to what degree an arrangement is contractual and, by implication, to what degree it is shaped by non-contractual element', for example, closeness and similarities or a mixture of considerations of culture and custom (1 pp47-48).

4. Conclusion

Through this paper, it was possible to see how Günther Schlee's theoretical frame can be useful to approach the use of ethnicity in characterizing contemporary conflicts. Despite the rather reluctance to apply the Rational Choice Theory in sociology, as explained by Boskovic and Ignjatović as related to a 'disembodiment from the context' and to 'the commom misconception of maximization', Schlee's Rational Choice Theory seems appropriate to tackle ethnicity and identification processes in conflicts.

Finally, Schlee points out to a few 'basic questions' that remained not completely answered by his theory, such as: 'who makes these decisions (the question of individual or collective agency) and what is the frame of reference for the cost-benefit analyses which inform such decisions? Is it individual gain, or does group identification have a role to play? And, finally, need we distinguish between the calculations of leaders and followers?' (1 p52). Additionally, Schlee claims to neither have a complete set of variables to identification processes nor a finalised theory. These are some relevant questions that can be considered by researchers when approaching the subject. Overall, considering that the 'maximization is the underlying premise (the cost-benefit calculation of actors) that represents the mechanism for the construction of identities' (2 p293), Schlee's book is of great value to deconstruct both popular views about ethnicity in conflicts and sociologists reservations with RCT.

5. References

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