The Parable of the Tribes: Identity and Conflict

Otto F. von Feigenblatt[1], Millenia Atlantic University (Miami, Florida)

Abstract: The present paper explains the Parable of the Tribes by concentrating on the relationship between identity and conflict. By introducing Jan Neverdeen Pieterse' seminal work on ethnicity the Parable of the Tribes is explained and analyzed as an example of ethnic conflict. Finally the paper concludes by recommending the adoption of the paradigm of "Human Security" as a viable alternative to choosing from a set of objective criteria as in principled negotiation, or to constructing a brand new shared worldview through dialogic cosmopolitanism and problem solving workshops.

1. Introduction

The Parable of the Tribes describes a central concern of Political Science and International Relations, the security dilemma (Kolodziej, 2005). Several tribes living near each other may enter a period of warfare due to the aggressive behavior of one of them. If one of the tribes behaves aggressively then the other tribes have four options (Midlarsky, 2000, p. 29). The first approach would be to withdraw from the region. This would avoid warfare but would mean a loss of territory for the tribe. A second option would be for the tribe to allow itself to be obliterated by the aggressive tribe (Midlarsky, 2000, p. 29). This happens when a weaker tribe refuses to surrender but at the same time

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[1] Professor Otto F. von Feigenblatt is Count Palatine of the Sacred Palace of Lateran (Pontifical) and Hereditary Baron of Feigenblatt-Miller. He is the author of three books dealing with International Security and more than fifty of his articles have appeared in academic journals. **Otto F. von Feigenblatt** is an elected Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of GreatBritain and Ireland, an Academician of the Constantinian Academy of Arts, Letters, and Sciences (Palermo, Italy) and a member of the United States committee of the Council for Security and Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP). Otto F. von Feigenblatt is serving as the editor in chief of the *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* and as one of the chief editors of the *Journal of Postcolonial Cultures and Societies*. www.vonfeigenblatt.com

refuses to withdraw. A third option avoids destruction by surrendering an entering a subservient relationship of vassalage with the aggressive tribe. This usually involves the payment of tribute to the dominant tribe in exchange for protection. Finally, the tribe may be absorbed by the dominant tribe and may disappear as a discreet unit. In other words, the members of the weaker tribe will become members of the dominant tribe and during that process they will lose the culture and other unique characteristics of their former tribe (Midlarsky, 2000, p. 30).

It is important to note how there are important similarities between the Parable of the Tribes and the traditional security dilemma espoused by realist and neorealist international relations scholars. The differences and similarities between the two will be discussed in detail in other sections of the paper but for now it will suffice to mention that while the Parable includes cultural factors, the traditional security dilemma does not (Cozette, 2008; Jackson & Nexon, 2009). Thus the Parable of the Tribes provides the link between identity and conflict that is missing in the traditional security dilemma. Understanding the link between identity and conflict is particularly important due to the sharp increase in ethnic conflicts after the end of the Cold War (Abulof, 2009; Ashizawa, 2008; David Carment, 2009; Pieterse, 2007).

The final section of the paper attempts to tackle the problem described in the Parable of the Tribes and aptly explained in Lewis Coser's seminal work on social conflict, namely the exacerbation of conflict due to the ossification of ethnic identities (Coser, 1956). Identity formation is both the solution and the cause of the problem. Therefore, the key to managing identity conflict is to control or at least influence identity formation (Bowman, 2001; Devare, 2009; von Feigenblatt, Suttichujit, Shuib, Keling, & Ajis, 2010; McCargo, 2008). The interdisciplinary Human Security paradigm is used as a theoretical starting point in the search for an overarching identity.

2. The Parable of the Tribes and the Security Dilemma

Otto F. von Feigenblatt, *Millenia Atlantic University (Miami, Florida)*

The Security Dilemma is the central concept behind classical realism and neorealism (Cozette, 2008; Jackson & Nexon, 2009). According to these two paradigms of international relations, the international system of sovereign nation-states is characterized by anarchy (Guilhot, 2008; Kolodziej, 2005). There is no overarching authority governing the behavior of nation-states (Lal, 2004). Therefore nation-states have to provide their own security in an uncertain and hostile environment (Jackson & Nexon, 2009; Kolodziej, 2005; Tickner, 2008). Thus, the central concern is the protection of the nation-state against external threats. In order to protect itself from external threats a nation-state needs an army (Bitzinger, 2010). Since nation-states feel insecure due to the anarchic international system, they will attempt to increase the size and strength of their armed forces (Bitzinger, 2010; Ellis, 2009; Emmers, 2001). The initial intend of this increase in military capabilities is defensive in nature but is interpreted a aggressive/offensive by other nation-states (Bitzinger, 2010; Kolodziej, 2005). The result of the increase in the defenses of state "A" is that state "B" will feel threatened and react by increasing its own military capability to match or surpass that of state "A". State "A" will then interpret this as a further threat and increase its own military capability even further. This process will continue until there is a military clash and one state prevails against the other. Thus there is a dilemma because both states would be better off if they did not increase their military capabilities (Kolodziej, 2005). Resources could be used for other purposes rather than the military and there would be fewer threatening armaments in the international system (Weitz, 2011). Neorealists agree with the previous view of the security dilemma but they also take into consideration economic size in addition to military armaments, territory, and human resources (Jackson & Nexon, 2009). They emphasize the need to have a strong economy backing a strong military. Trade is also emphasized by neorealists as a one way to decrease the incentives to go to war (Jackson & Nexon, 2009).

It should be noted that the referent of security is the nation-state and not its people nor a particular culture or

religion (Kolodziej, 2005). The securitizer is the coercive forces of the nation-state (MacFarlane & Khong, 2006). Thus, there is a difference between the security dilemma and the Parable of the Tribes in that what is to be protected is the vessel, in this case the nation-state, and not its contents, such as a particular ethnic group's culture and language. Moreover, the referent of security in the case of the Parable of the Tribes ultimately is a certain identity (Midlarsky, 2000). What is to be protected is a particular identity that defines the boundaries of a certain social group. Therefore, disappearance through assimilation would be considered to be the demise of the group as a distinct unit in the same way as physical obliteration would (von Feigenblatt et al., 2010). On the other hand loss of territory would be considered to be a lesser evil since the group would survive.

Identity and Conflict

Identity is at the center of many disputes due to the constitutive role it plays in maintaining a social group (Bowman, 2001; Coser, 1956; McCargo, 2009). In other words, a core identity serves as the basic glue uniting individuals with particular needs and interests into a single coherent social unit. Since identities are complex, in a constant state of flux, situational, and malleable they can be manipulated in order to limit or expand the size of a particular social group (Pieterse, 2007). Therefore a core identity can be used as a way to exclude a certain group or to expand the group to include a new group. Thus a group's identity resembles an amoeba in that it can contract and release some of its contents or expand to engulf new ones.

Norm entrepreneurs play an important role in defining and interpreting the core values and mores underlying a particular identity (Pruitt & Kim, 2004). Thus identity can be used to mobilize a group in order to pursue certain material needs and interests (Avruch, 1998; Weber, 2005). Identity is inextricably linked to ethnicity which refers to the core values and traditions of a particular social group (Pieterse, 2007). Due to the relationship of ethnicity with identity, the concept possesses some of the same characteristics of

identity such as a core set of shared values, a situational nature, and flexible boundaries.

There are hundreds of models of ethnicity but Jan Nederveen Pieterse's model is particularly useful in order to understand the Parable of the Tribes (Pieterse, 2007). Pieterse classifies ethnicity into four types (Pieterse, 2007, p. 33). The first type is domination ethnicity which is characterized by a strong ethnic group controlling most of the resources and exercising control over other ethnic groups. Control in this case includes the power to define a national culture based on the core values of the dominant group's culture. This type of ethnicity resembles the outcome of surrendering in the Parable of the Tribes. The weaker group would enter a subservient position and could eventually be engulfed by the dominant group through assimilation (Midlarsky, 2000). An extreme case of this type of ethnicity would be labeled an ethnocracy which is characterized by control of the state by a single cultural group (von Feigenblatt, 2009e; von Feigenblatt et al., 2010; Pieterse, 2007). A weaker form of ethnic domination is enclave ethnicity (Pieterse, 2007, p. 33). This could result from the third choice in the Parable of the Tribes. The weaker ethnic group surrenders and enters a tributary relationship with the stronger group in exchange for a certain degree of autonomy (Midlarsky, 2000). This would lead to a dominant ethnic group controlling most of the resources in the area in addition to exercising suzerainty over the weaker group which would survive as a distinct group with a different set of core cultural values (Lin, 2009; Shani, 2008). Weaker groups in this type of ethnicity tend to isolate themselves from the dominant group in an effort to protect their culture from those of the majority dominant culture. Moving along a continuum of domination, the next type of ethnicity is called competition ethnicity (Pieterse, 2007, p. 33). In this kind of ethnic relationship, distinct ethnic groups compete against each other for control over resources as well as to control the formation of "national culture". It should be noted that no single group is dominant in this kind of relationship. This type could result from the choice of resisting an attack by another ethnic group resulting in an inconclusive outcome. Finally at the other

extreme of the continuum one finds optional ethnicity (Pieterse, 2007, p. 142). In this kind of ethnicity each individual member is free to choose elements from a vast array of cultural sets. There is little ethnic group cohesion in this type of ethnicity while there is a strong attachment to the state as a social contract facilitating the operation of modern social life (Pieterse, 2009). This type of ethnicity can be considered to be a starting ideal state for the Parable of the Tribes or the long term goal after many cycles of conquest, assimilation, and surrender.

Pieterse aptly describes the nature of identity by claiming that "identity is best thought of as identification" and "identification is ongoing and relational" (Pieterse, 2007, p. 32). Thus identification is a process leading to a relatively temporary identity. The process can be manipulated by social groups with concrete needs and interests and therefore "ethnic groups are interest groups that use cultural capital as a mobilization resource" (Pieterse, 2007, p. 34). Nevertheless while ethnic groups arise out of the mobilization of interest groups the identities around which they are built solidify and become more resistant to change with time (Devare, 2009; von Feigenblatt et al., 2010; Pitiyanuwat & Sujiva, 2005). This means that the core values used to define an ethnic group become important independent variables in terms of conflict with other groups. Therefore a conflict that might have arisen over a struggle for natural resources may transform into one centered on identity/culture (von Feigenblatt, 2009c). It should be noted that the way regular group members perceive a conflict is not the same as the way it is perceived by norm entrepreneurs and leaders (von Feigenblatt et al., 2010; Pieterse, 2007; Schröder & Schmidt, 2001). Elites usually understand both the importance of identity mobilization as well as the ultimate goal of their interest group.

Thus identity is used in order to mobilize a group in other to struggle for limited resources. Since identity is such an important factor in order to mobilize the group towards goals considered important by the leadership, then control over identity formation is clearly pivotal in order to both manage and wage ethnic conflict (David Carment, 2009; von

Feigenblatt, 2009e; von Feigenblatt et al., 2010; Pieterse, 2007). According to most conflict theorists, the natural reaction to a perceived cultural threat (a threat to alter that group's culture), is greater in-group cohesion and greater hostility towards outsiders (Coser, 1956; Mitchell, 1981; Pruitt & Kim, 2004). This is the most important challenge for most forms of conflict management strategies such as mediation, negotiation, and problem solving workshops. The two groups still have to negotiate on shared values in order to rebuild their relationship. Needless to say this is time consuming and due to the identification of certain values with the culture of one group or another, it may require considerable political will.

3. Overcoming Identity Conflicts by Engendering a Global Cosmopolitanism based on "Human Security"

Critical theorists have tackled the challenge of the lack of a shared intersubjective reality since the 1940s (Stuart Sim, 2005; Willis, 2007). One of the most promising threads is the one currently embodied by Jurgen Harbermas' dialogic cosmopolitanism (Habermas, 2005, 2006). His approach to the problem relies on communication. According to Habermas overcoming communication barriers opens up the possibility to true dialogue which then facilitates the sharing of a common intersubjective reality (Habermas, 2005). This approach has been very influential in the European Union and aims to explain the relative success achieved in the process of European integration (McCormick, 2005). Nevertheless Harbermas' approach to cosmopolitanism requires a very high level of sophistication from the average citizen and while it facilitates the negotiation of a joint identity it does not provide a clear framework to guide that process.

Taking dialogic cosmopolitanism one step further would involve providing not only a method to overcome communication problems but also a holistic framework to reconstruct the initial relationship between the ethnic groups. The framework must be based on widely shared

needs and interests while at the same time showing how they are interrelated. Moreover the guiding framework must de-emphasize the ethnic group in favor of the needs of the individual. One possible approach would be the adoption of the Human Security paradigm which is popular in the field of international development studies as well as in certain circles of international security studies. Human Security was famously defined by Ogata and Sen as "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want" (Battersby & Siracusa, 2009; King & Murray, 2001; MacFarlane & Khong, 2006; Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007). The referent of security is not the nation-state but rather the individual human being (MacFarlane & Khong, 2006). Moreover, the securitizer is not only the state apparatus but instead includes the entire transnational community including both state and non-state actors (von Feigenblatt, 2007, 2010a). While a detailed discussion of the theoretical development of Human Security is beyond the scope of this essay, it should be noted that the theory merges important aspects of Amartya Sen's theory of economic development by linking human development to an increase in capabilities as well as trends in security studies such as the responsibility to protect (R2P) (Bellamy, 2009; Brunnee & Toope, 2006; von Feigenblatt, 2009a, 2009b, 2009d, 2010c; MacFarlane & Khong, 2006; Sen, 1999).

Human Security could fill the void created by conflict management strategies aiming to help parties shed their ossified intersubjective realities such as John Burton's problem solving workshops and Ury and Fischer's principled negotiation (Fisher & Ury, 1991; Kriesberg, 1997). The previously mentioned conflict management strategies guide parties to a point where they can shed their preconceived ideas but leave them at a difficult point where they have to either agree on a set of objective criteria or to create their own framework (von Feigenblatt, 2009b; Ury, 1993). Thus parties are expected to jointly create a theoretical framework that will then be used to solve a common problem. Needless to say this is a daunting task that requires the creation of a theoretical framework that usually takes decades to hundreds of years in the making, in a few sessions. Moreover, parties are expected to carry the great burden of

constructing a shared system to give meaning and shape to their joint solutions to problems (Kriesberg, 1997).

Rather than leaving parties in a shared theoretical void, they could be provided a neutral, holistic, and operationalizable theoretical framework so that they can more easily jointly construct a new shared intersubjective reality. Complex questions such as the place of man in society, the connection between development and governance, and the relationship between security and economic growth are answered by the Human Security approach (Battersby & Siracusa, 2009). Once the parties are taught this new theoretical framework/world view they will gradually internalize it and move on to tackling concrete problems such as the management of natural resources, border disputes, trade, and soldier reintegration (von Feigenblatt, 2010b). Progress would be much faster than if the parties had to choose from a set of objective criteria or be forced to create their own approach in a few sessions with their previous antagonists. While the use of Human Security in negotiation of ethnic and group conflicts is relatively new, the Human Security Theory of Integrative Negotiation for Socio-political conflicts which attempts to operationalize the use of the approach in conflict management, has been well received by the academic community as evidenced by the attention it received from the International Association for Asia Pacific Studies (von Feigenblatt, 2010b). It should be noted that while the previously mentioned theory has been shown to have considerable explanatory power for certain socio-political conflicts such as the one in Thailand between the Red Shirts and the Yellow Shirts, further research is needed in order to test its effectiveness in a more controlled environment (von Feigenblatt, 2010b).

4. Conclusions

The Parable of the Tribes represents some of the most important concerns in international relations, international security studies, and international political sociology. Identity is added to the traditional concerns of the security dilemma so as to explain ethnic conflicts rather than simply

inter-state competition. In order to understand the role of identity in conflict, Jan Nederveen Pietersen's typology of ethnic conflict was discussed at length in relation to the possible outcomes of the Parable of the Tribes. In addition to that a few approaches to overcoming the identity conflict were mentioned. Habermas' dialogic cosmopolitanism was contrasted and compared to Burton's problem solving workshops and Ury and Fischer's principled negotiation. Finally, the operationalization of Human Security as part of conflict management strategies was suggested as a possible way to overcome identity conflicts.

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