

# Whose Mobilisation? An Ontological Primer on the Mobilisation of National Minorities

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published in “New Nation States and National Minorities”, ed. Julien Danero, Nenad Stojanovic and Sharon Weinblum, Colchester: ECPR Press, 2013, pp. 191-207.

'No political analysis can proceed in the absence of assumptions about political ontology. That such assumptions are rarely explicit hardly makes them less consequential' (Hay 2008: 81). This chapter argues that, prior to investigating the mobilisation of national minorities in nationalising states, we should establish whose mobilisation we are talking about.\* The key question we set out to answer is: What ontological perspective allows us to assume that mobilised national minorities actually exist? While research results in the field of comparative ethnic mobilisation studies are highly sensitive to the views researchers hold about the nature of ethnic groups and ethno-political collective action, ontological considerations have largely remained implicit in their research. This chapter seeks to discuss the ontological assumptions involved in studying minority mobilisation explicitly, and to show how they affect the answers we get to our research questions.

To provide proper context for this discussion, I posit that studying the 'mobilisation of national minorities' as a bounded phenomenon requires two assumptions—the first one concerning group formation on the basis of ethnic identification, the second concerning collective action on the basis of ethnically defined interests:

–A number of individuals identify predominantly with an ethnic category and form a bounded group that is recognized as a national minority by both members and non-members (I will refer to this as the “ethnic identification assumption,” or EI)

–Members of this group share an ethnically defined collective interest and the group confronts the nationalizing state with a collective, ethno-political behaviour to defend

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\* My interest in exploring theoretical avenues beyond constructionism in the third section of this chapter was inspired by Sarah Jenkins' compelling talk at the 2011 ASN convention in New York. Constructionism was unable to account for the structurally stable meaning of ethnicity she found to be in place at the local level during her field research in Kenya. I thank her, as well as Christian Blum and Dominik Becker from the University of Cologne and the editors of this volume, for providing very helpful comments on this chapter. Needless to say, all remaining errors are my own.

this interest (I will refer to this as the “ethnic behaviour assumption”, or EB).

Drawing on a huge range of research in social and cognitive psychology, Henry E. Hale (2008) has convincingly shown that EB is not implied by EI: Ethnic identification at the cognitive level must be kept conceptually distinct from manifest interests and strategic choice that constitute the realm of ethnic politics. Nonetheless, many studies in the field of minority mobilisation still take EI to imply EB. The first section of this chapter argues that this is because the most straight forward ontological basis for treating minority mobilisation as a bounded phenomenon is an essentialist, primordial view of ethnic identity categories. Essentialism allows the researcher to assume the existence of national minorities as collective entities without further argument. This view is now considered untenable throughout a range of disciplines, although it survives *implicitly* in large-N empirical research on minority mobilisation. Indeed, it exerts a profound impact in all steps of the research process, from concept formation to operationalization, from data collection to analysis and inference. In the last instance, an underlying essentialism determines the view a researcher will hold about the viability of multinational democracy, and encourages a scholarly tendency to overemphasize cases of inter-group conflict and neglect phenomena such as intra-ethnic competition for diverse preferences of supporters, and mobilisation strategies that fall short of radical ethnic outbidding.

Social constructionists,<sup>1</sup> by contrast, have convincingly argued that working from an essentialist ontology about ethnic groups—or, in Brubaker’s (2004: 2) words, a ‘groupism’ defined as ‘the tendency to take bounded groups as fundamental units of analysis (and basic constituents of the social world)’—has serious limitations, and should be abandoned. Constructionism acknowledges that both elites’ and followers’ identity categories are manifold, and that membership in an ethnic category is defined by social practice, *not* by essential attributes. Thus, a researcher should not simply assume that a national minority exists as a social entity. Furthermore, the fact that people in a given society define themselves along a certain ethnic line (EI) does not imply that there will be a coherent behaviour across the group (EB), since group elites may construct alternative

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1 The term “constructivism” is used in many political science writings as an alternative to “social constructionism.” I stick to the term “social constructionism” in order to underscore a theoretical perspective that views social facts as the result of discursive social practice in a given context. The term “constructivism” is more adequately applied to the psychological construction of meaning at the individual level: ‘Despite the many forms of social constructionism, virtually all those who identify themselves as social constructionists favor using the term ‘constructionism’ rather than ‘constructivism’. This distinction reflects the social constructionist’s aversion to the notion of an isolated knower.’ (Raskin 2002: 17).

categories in order to mobilise support. They might find it in their primary interest to mobilise other cross-cutting identities, rather than fight for representation of the minority group.

However, as I will discuss in the second section on social constructionism, empirical studies of ethnic mobilisation that draw on a constructionist ontology of social categories do have a key shortcoming. Rather than simply presupposing their subject of analysis to exist, they run the risk of losing the capacity to delineate ethnic mobilisation studies as a specific subfield at all. The pure construction assumption regarding EI can lead to an overestimation of ethnic entrepreneurs' capacity to strategically manipulate flexible – qua constructed – identity categories, and thus may be unable to account for the simple fact that 'in many parts of the world humans on occasion behave differently towards those whom they regard as co-ethnics' (Banton 2011: 187). A pure constructionist outlook on EI makes it difficult to live up to the analytical expectation that 'it should therefore be possible to devise a conceptual framework that facilitates the *comparison and explanation of ethnic relations in different localities*, provided it takes account of the overlap between ethnic relations and certain other kinds of social relation' (Banton 2011: 187, emphasis added).

Acknowledging this challenge, the third section of this chapter suggests a third ontological path, in the form of a cognitively naturalized constructionism. Presented by philosopher Ron Mallon (2007b) as a potential means for reconciling naturalist and constructionist accounts of social categories,<sup>2</sup> this perspective is inspired by social categorisation research in cognitive psychology. This research finds a cross-cultural predisposition of the human brain to treat ethnic groups *as if they were* natural kinds, though they are in fact social constructs (Gil-White 2001, see also Brubaker *et al.* 2004). This perspective falls in line with recent empirical analyses in the field of mobilisation studies that present a more fine-grained picture of EB, and present it as a result of the relationship between elites and their supporters, in which the latter turn out to be both more heterogeneous than acknowledged by essentialism, and more stable in their ethnic identification (EI) than a pure constructionist might be willing to grant. While agreeing that EI does not imply EB, I argue that naturalised constructionism can indeed explain actors' cross-cultural predisposition to naturalize along ethnic and racial social categories, better than conventional

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2 A comprehensive discussion of the philosophical debate between constructionists and realists would exceed the scope of this chapter. I focus on the recent contributions of Ron Mallon (2007a; 2007b) because they can solve the ontological impasse constructionist minded political scientists encounter when they draw on ad hoc explanations to explain the stickiness of ethnic identity categories across socio-historical contexts.

constructionism. In addition, drawing on the topic of this volume I present an example that shows how the mobilisation of ethnic categories can turn into a default option for elites of national majorities and national minorities in the socially unstable, insecure environment of regime change.

I conclude by arguing that naturalized constructionism is in a position not just to spare researchers of the unattractive ad hoc explanations for the resilience of ethnic categories they currently tend to apply when studying ethnic mobilisation, but also to enable us to delineate ethnic politics as a distinct subject area—offering the potential to reconcile comparative, generalization-seeking research with interpretive, case-centred research.

### **Essentialist Primordialism**

The introduction to this volume states that 'recent national minority studies have mostly approached the question through the perspectives of social mobilisations, secessionism (Hale 2008 or Gurr 2001) or violence (Laitin 2007) without specifically anchoring these questionings in theories of nationalism' (see introduction to this volume). One direct consequence of dissociating minority mobilisation from the theories of nationalism that have long experienced their constructivist turn (see seminally Anderson 1991) is that many scholars studying mobilisation still employ the ethnic group as their primary unit of analysis, assuming that by virtue of belonging to the same ethnic group, ethnic elites and citizens can easily be merged into a collective actor with unified preferences. While social scientists have mostly used the term 'primordialism' to characterize a view that treats ethnic groups as naturally given and unchangeable social entities, philosophers have engaged with this perspective under the label of *essentialism* and have more explicitly spelled out what an essentialist view on ethnic identity implies. An essentialist ontology provides the preconditions under which EI may function—allowing ethnic categories to have a core essence defined by a set of intrinsic, natural (biological) properties. 'Essences' are properties or sets of properties that define which individuals are part of the category—in this case, the ethnic minority group (those who possess the necessary properties defining the category)—and which are not (those that do not possess the necessary properties) (employing Mallon's definition of essentialism, 2007a: 148). In this manner, ethnic essences account for who is in and out of a bounded group, as defined by a set of necessary characteristics.

Primordialists go one step further at this point, assuming that ethnic essence implies the presence of manifest collective interests, as well as collective action to defend this interest. In Gil-White's (2001: 515, note 2) terms, they confound 'processes such as ethnic mobilisation with ethnogenesis'. The notion that EI implies EB is not necessarily entailed by an essentialist theory of ethnic categories, however, unless we stipulate that one of the necessary criteria for belonging to an ethnic group is a certain set of preferences. The classical outbidding model of ethnic politics (as a micro mechanism, explaining patterns of interethnic conflict at the macro level) assumes precisely that. The ethnic outbidding model, whether expressed in materialist (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972) or socio-psychological (Horowitz 1985) terms, was developed in times when scholarly wisdom followed the primordial paradigm (Chandra 2005). 'The primordial communities that partition the plural society [...] provide a natural base for political organization and a source of divisiveness as well. And in the plural society, primordial sentiments are (by definition as well as by observation) manifest and politically salient' (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972: 63). The authors explicitly start from the notion of 'uniformity of preference within communities' (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972: 67) and assume that the radical elites that style themselves as the most authentic defenders of the group's collective interest will win the bulk of support among voters within each group. The outbidding model thus connects EI, collective interest, and radical behaviour, and spells out the mechanism behind the general primordial view, 'that ethnic conflict is inevitable; it is the 'natural outlet' for primordial sentiments' (Green and Seher 2003 in portraying primordialism: 521). This account of ethnic politics offers a gloomy perspective for the peaceful accommodation of national minorities within nationalising states, predicting irreducible conflicts over values fuelled by outbidding elites.

By 2011, constructionism—implying a non-essentialist view on ethnic groups—has emerged as the sole winner of ontological debates about ethnic identity in the fields of nationalism studies, and political anthropology (Lewellen 2003: 163). In a very recent article, Chandra (2011: 153), however, still summarizes recent research practices in political science that presuppose EI to imply EB: 'Indeed, the assumption that ethnicity exerts a pull on individuals that is deeper than the pull of economic interests has become a premise driving not just the questions we ask about ethnicity but also the theories we formulate about other subjects. Thus, explanations for why class-based mobilisation does not succeed often fall back on the supposedly more fundamental pull of ethnicity'. Primordialists might no longer publish articles as far as open theoretical debate is concerned (Gil-White 2001: 516), but they enjoy a vivid afterlife in empirical studies of ethnic mobilisation.

Large N approaches in particular still tend to take unified ethnic groups as their key unit of analysis, and seldom examine preference formation at the intra-group level. To supply only one most recent example, the authors of the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset explicitly state that the dataset does not intend to account for the degree of representativity and for the possible heterogeneity of positions of different organizations claiming to speak for a mobilised group. An ethnic group is defined as politically relevant 'if at least one significant political actor claims to represent the interests of that group in the national political arena, or if members of an ethnic category are systematically and intentionally discriminated against in the domain of public politics' (Cederman et al. 2009, Coding rules EPR). The power distribution between the organizations recorded as representing the group is then supposed to have an effect on the conflict behaviour of the group. This causal connection can, however, only be made if the group is stipulated to be unified in its interest, as well as in its behavioural responses to state policies. At a meta-theoretical level, only presupposing EI, as well as the implication of EI → EB, can justify this lack of effort to collect data below the group level.

Similarly, those seeking to prevent detrimental outbidding dynamics with the help of power sharing institutions share the underlying assumption of unified groups and outbidding elites. In particular Lijphart's (1977) consociational model of democracy in plural societies relies heavily on the coherence of ethnic groups, and the capacity of unified elites to speak for their respective groups as a whole. This stipulation of externally divided, internally unified ethnic groups, guided by comparatively cooperative, peace-seeking elites has, rather unsurprisingly, been criticised as somewhat paradoxical: 'Is accommodation an acceptable strategy for followers? If so, why don't they change their positions? If not, why don't they replace their leaders?' (Tsebelis 1990: 163). Nonetheless, academics and policy makers still widely turn to this model—a phenomenon that is perhaps most visible in the post-communist nationalising states in Eastern Europe. Inspired by one or more of Lijphart's (1977) four consociational principles, institutions have been installed to give national minorities in this region a stake in the game, whether in the form of proportional representation in parliament through guaranteed seats (Rumania, Croatia), eased conditions for parties representing national minorities (Serbia), a minority veto (Macedonia), or the full range of all four principles, ethnic quotas, territorial autonomy, mutual vetoes and a grand coalition executive (as is the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina).

## Social Constructionism

Only recently has the study of minority mobilisation begun to experience its own constructionist turn, driven, in part, by the various theoretical and empirical contributions of Kanchan Chandra and co-authors (Chandra 2004, 2005; Chandra and Boulet 2005; Chandra and Wilkinson 2008). A small but growing range of recent contributions now suggests that ethnic minority groups cannot be treated as monolithic blocks with intransigent group preferences, and that minorities are represented by their elites in democratic politics in a much more flexible way than has traditionally been anticipated by conflict studies and the outbidding model (see e.g. Birnir 2009; Chandra 2004, 2005; Mitchell *et al.* 2009; Stroschein 2001; Zuber 2011). By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many nationalising states have moved beyond the initial challenge of post-independence ethnic mobilisation and polarisation. Constructionists who treat ethnic identities as fluid and multidimensional (Chandra 2005: 236) now try to account for the empirically-given multidimensionality of ethnic identity: exploring the heterogeneity of preferences both across and *within* groups, and, consequently, the flexible patterns of representation and participation of ethnic groups in multinational democracy (see e.g. Birnir 2009).

A constructionist account of ethnic identification is radically different from an essentialist one. According to Mallon (2007a: 148), 'constructionist anti-essentialists are interested in replacing explanations of group differences that appeal to natural or biological differences among members of human categories with other explanations that hold that such differences are caused or constituted by relational (for example, social) differences'. In this manner, natural, intrinsic properties that justify group membership via essentialist means are supplanted by relational categories, constructed through social practice. Since ethnic categories do not rely on essential, natural properties and instead focus on social practice, they can be made and unmade by human decisions. Thus, a key constructionist insight is found in the notion that 'ordinary actors usually have considerable room for manoeuvre in the ways in which they use even highly institutionalized and powerfully sanctioned categories. They are often able to deploy such categories strategically, bending them to their own purposes' (Brubaker *et al.* 2004: 35).<sup>3</sup> On this account, ethnic groups are not naturally given biological facts; group formation is subject to human decision and cultural norms, and constitutes a topic worth researching in its own right since multiple categories form the potential bases for the classification of groups. As a

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3 A perfect example of such 'bending' is the regionalist party 'Lega Nord' in Italy. The party succeeded in mobilizing voters constructing an ethnic identity on the basis of economic disparities.

consequence, the variety of flexible identity categories available for political actors seeking to mobilise support, as well as for voters choosing whether to give this support, is diverse.<sup>4</sup>

This implies that we can neither presuppose EI, nor take the convenient short cut from EI to EB. If one works from an instrumentalist explanation of minority mobilisation, based on a constructionist ontology, strategic elites would be expected to mobilise those identity categories that best serve their interests, and these categories need not be the ethnic ones. A prime example of evidence for this constructionist line of argument in the field of mobilisation studies—and one that provides powerful evidence that EI does not imply EB—can be found in Posner's (2004) study of why cultural cleavages become politically relevant in some contexts but not in others. Posner shows that politicians choose whether to emphasize ethnic cleavages in Zambia and Malawi by following a simple 'logic of ethnic arithmetic' (Posner 2004: 539): 'If the purpose of mobilizing the cultural cleavage is to build a coalition that can help them [the politicians, CZ] achieve political power, then it is natural for them to emphasize the cleavage that defines the most usefully sized coalitional building blocks and to ignore those that define groups that are too small to be politically viable' (Posner 2004: 538). Through a range of paired comparisons, he shows that the presence of identifiable cultural difference is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for the emergence of a salient political cleavage (Posner 2004: 543). In other words: group formation on the basis of ethnic categorization does not entail mobilisation.

However, there is one problem with this conception of constructionism.<sup>5</sup> While the conventional mobilisation approach overstates the stickiness of group identity by fully essentialising the properties that an individual must have to be included in the concept of a particular ethnic group, the constructionist approach—at least in its elite-centred variant—overstates the capacity of actors to strategically bind identity categories to their purpose. It fails to account for the importance of local, cognitively-fixed identities and the stability of ethnic compared to other identities over time (Jenkins 2011). Consequently, Lewellen (2003: 164), in his introduction to political anthropology, warns readers that 'constructivism, however, can easily be overstated' and reminds us of Milton Esman's argument that 'a cultural and experiential core

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4 This has implications for institutional design in divided societies: In light of constructionist accounts of ethnic identity it is no longer self-evident why some attributes of ethnic identity mobilised at a particular point in time should be permanently advantaged over others that might be mobilised in the future; institutions that share power between currently mobilised groups have to be flexible enough to take this into account (Chandra and Boulet 2005).

5 This, and the critique that follows, is aimed at constructionist approaches within the field of mobilisation studies more narrowly—not at the paradigm, per se.



must validate identity and make solidarity credible to potential constituents' (Esman 1994: 14, cited after Lewellen 2003: 164).

Elites cannot and do not choose any random category that is demographically large enough to grant them power. Indeed, they must choose categories that are cognitively stable enough to provide the basis for group coordination in at least the medium run—otherwise their appeals will not resonate among the ethnic constituency to whom they are trying to appeal. Conversely, sometimes ethnic elites choose categories likely to yield only limited power over categories that have much higher power potential. From the perspective of Posner's findings, based on evidence collected in the context of Zambia and Malawi, elite behaviour in nationalizing Eastern European states seems irrational: if a cleavage has to demarcate a group large enough to provide for a useful coalition, the spread of minority parties in Eastern Europe is puzzling if, like Posner, we assume politicians to be power-seeking. Why should politicians engage in appealing to a group that only allows them to mobilise a maximum of 2 per cent of all voters? Why should they not seek to create larger blocks by emphasizing a cleavage that incorporates a range of ethnic minorities against the majority group, thereby constructing an 'umbrella' minority identity? National minority identity categories can be too small, demographically speaking, to guarantee power positions—yet this does not stop elites from appealing to them.<sup>6</sup>

One simple way to skirt this conundrum would be to state that there are two kinds of constructionism: an instrumentalist and a historical version. Under this distinction, only the *first* kind—which postulates that elites create groups by successfully linking power and material gains to people's participation in an ethnically defined group—is afflicted by the aforementioned problems. Green and Seher (2003) present only the latter kind under the label constructivism, and place the former under the label of "instrumentalism." However, both theories postulate that there are no groups to start with, and that there are no essential categories that define the nature of an ethnic kind. In both cases, groups are social constructs, and only the 'constructor' differs: strategic elites in the first place, and historical, external processes in the latter. Instrumentalism is not an ontological theory in its own right, but rather a specific, elite-centred *explanatory* theory of ethnic mobilisation that *presupposes* a constructionist ontology.

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6 However, if we assume the goal of symbolic power, the choice to mobilise voters on the basis of a demographically small identity category need not be irrational at all. I am indebted to the editors of this volume for pointing this out to me.

Historical constructionism focuses on historical processes that create groups as social constructs. It explores how the long-term historical institutionalization of identity categories through states makes mobilisation of ethnic categories more likely (Green and Seher, 2003). The historical view does a better job of explaining how individuals come to take a construct for fact—suggesting that a construct is more likely to be institutionalized in a particular context if it persists for a sufficiently long period of time. In this manifestation, however, constructionism’s predictions concerning minority behaviour are still problematic since they would be equivalent to those of a primordialist in the short run (and hence untestable). Additionally, we would still lack an explanation for why *ethnic* categories are particularly resilient, and provide such a fruitful basis for elites’ mobilisation strategies across such *different* historical contexts.<sup>7</sup>

Some constructionist political scientists who are sympathetic to comparative, generalization-seeking research<sup>8</sup> try to solve this problem by differentiating between categories of self-classification that can be modified in the short run, and those that are more rigid and can only be modified in the long run. From an overall constructionist perspective, Birnir (2009: 24) states that 'an ethnic group is defined by members of the group who consider themselves ethnically distinct from other groups in society. Furthermore, this identification centres on a characteristic that is difficult to suppress, such as language, location, or race'. Summarizing political scientists' contemporary use of the term 'ethnic identity,' constructionist Chandra (2006: 398) has suggested applying a definition based on 'descent-based attributes': 'ethnic identities are a subset of identity categories in which eligibility for membership is determined by attributes associated with, or believed to be associated with, descent'. Treating ethnic identity categories as relatively

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7 I agree with Colin Hay’s assertion that ontological disputes ultimately cannot be solved empirically, since the facts each side will choose to accept as valid empirical evidence are themselves informed by potentially competing ontological commitments about whether reality can be independent of and observable by the researcher (Hay 2008: 82 and footnote 3). My more modest argument against a constructionist ontological basis for studying ethnic mobilisation is therefore that *if* we accept the findings in the field of mobilisation studies that point to cross-contextual similarities in the causes and effects of ethnic mobilisation as valid evidence, a constructionist ontology does not appear to be the best choice. In light of this, I seek an alternative in section three of this chapter, drawing on advances in cognitive psychology and philosophy.

8 This may seem like a contradiction in terms if we understand constructionism in the strong sense, as an anti-realist stance not only about social facts but also about scientific findings. However, constructionism can be more limited, and emphasize merely that certain objects are better candidates for social construction than others, 'human kinds' being among the former (Mallon 2007b: 97). Weak constructionism claims that there are *social facts* (constructed and ontologically subjective) and *brute facts* that are real in an objective sense (see seminally Searle 1995). Political scientists who are self-declared constructivists when it comes to ethnic identity—such as Birnir and Chandra—seem to be of the latter sort, since they engage in cross-national data collection and research, and work from a presupposition that their concepts defining ethnic groups, ethnic representation, and ethnic competition can indeed travel across cultural contexts.

more rigid than others, and as descent-based distinctions, seems like an ad hoc explanation, however—a practice necessitated by the fact that ethnic categories play a role across contexts, and appear as more rigid than other social categories across contexts. In light of this, it seems that even a constructionist might be tempted to bring in essentialisms, when they prove most necessary, through the back door.

## Naturalized Constructionism

The nearly-universal success of constructionist over essentialist accounts of ethnic identity testifies to the idea that there are good reasons to grant that the content of ethnic categories is defined by social practice rather than biology—and, hence, differs across space and time (Mallon 2007b). However, as Brubaker (2004: 3) rightly states, this universal success bears with it the danger of preventing further improvements to the constructionist perspective, leaving 'complacent and clichéd constructivism' as a rather uninteresting analytical tool, 'too obviously right, too familiar, too readily taken for granted'. Brubaker *et al.* (2004) therefore present their own account, treating 'ethnicity as cognition'. A cognitive perspective, however, actually naturalizes constructionism—treating not the *content* of the categories as essential, but the ethnic categorization scheme as such (Mallon 2007b).

At the end of an overview on different strands of constructionism, Mallon presents an example of how constructionist and non-constructionist accounts of 'human kinds' (Hirschfeld 1996: 13) could be satisfyingly combined. He cites recent psychological findings from the study of race that also start from the tenet that biological, essentialist accounts of race are false. In explaining how 'folk racial theories'—or in our case, everyday primordialism—comes about, however, they do not simply resort to answers rooted in cultural framing and social practice. Instead, 'these psychologists posit a role for innate psychological propensities to categorize persons in particular ways' (Mallon 2007b: 103). Where Mallon himself states that constructionists have not taken much notice of this research, this is not the case for Brubaker *et al.* (2004), who cite the same psychological findings from the literature on categorization as inspiration for the cognitive turn in their study of ethnicity.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> To provide a short comparison: Mallon (2007b) refers to Hirschfeld (1996), Kurzban *et al.* (2001); Gil-White (2001), Machery and Faucher (2005); whereas Brubaker *et al.* (2004) focus on Hirschfeld (1996) and Gil-White (2001).

In his study *Race in the making. Cognition, Culture, and the Child's Construction of Human Kinds* (1996) anthropologist and cognitive scientist Hirschfeld started from the observation that 'humans appear to be ready to conceptualize the human world as composed of distinct types – what I call human kinds' (Hirschfeld 1996: 13), becoming the first to apply categorisation arguments from cognitive science to the *social* category of race. More importantly, from the perspective of this volume, Gil-White (2001) used a review of findings from the cognitive categorization literature and his own field experiments in Mongolia to explore whether there existed a 'mental machinery specific to processing *ethnies*' (Gil-White 2001: 517, my emphasis). Based on his findings, he suggests that ethnic categories are processed *as if* they were natural, human kinds, or 'species,' because they look like species to our cognitive apparatus (which has a– by his account, innate – tendency to categorize its environment in terms of natural kinds). In this view, category-based endogamy and descent-based membership meet our brain's criteria for classifying something as a 'natural kind' (Gil-White 2001: 532). This helps explain why we tend to essentialise ethnic and racial, but not other social categories. In addition, Gil-White (2001: 536) provides an evolutionary explanation for how this cognitive mechanism came about: applying our 'species-module' to ethnic categories likely evolved as a cognitive practice since it provided a double evolutionary advantage in ancestral times: '(1) it allowed us to learn a lot about out-groups in a very inexpensive way, in particular by making inductive references about nonobvious properties, and (2) it made possible processes of discrimination that prevented us from incurring the costs of coordination failure'.

If our predispositions to view the world in ethnic categories is itself ingrained in humans' cognitive makeup, then the following statement, made by Brubaker *et al.* (2004: 45), should be qualified: 'Race, ethnicity, and nationality exist only in and through our perceptions, interpretations, representations, classifications, categorizations, and identifications. They are not things in the world, but perspectives on the world – not ontological but epistemological realities'. In fact, if we take the findings cited seriously, the content of ethnic categories is *still* determined by our socially shared perspectives on the world. But a perspective that categorises humans along ethnic lines is itself a fact—pertaining to a cognitive system that makes the construction (and naturalisation) of similarities between members of a society that belong to the same ethnic group much easier than the construction of perceived natural belonging among, for example, members of a society that all work in the same profession.

This naturalized constructionism, which operates at the intersection of culture and cognition (Hirschfeld 1996: 14)<sup>10</sup> has the potential to account for the fact that, independent of the specific content of ethnic categories in a specific socio-historical and institutional context, people tend to naturalise ethnic rather than other categories: 'people the world over appear to discriminate between members of their own and other ethnoraces in a unique way: they naturalize the difference. 'Naturalization' here involves the practice of conceptually identifying social differences with natural ones.' (Hirschfeld 1996: 21). In the political realm, this seems poised to reasonably explain cross-cultural empirical findings about the role of ethnicity in politics, explaining, for example, why in situations of regime change and democratization, ethno-national identities tend to be highly mobilised across contexts (Hechter 2000: 93). In the absence of other defined social categories, orientation along ethnic lines appears as a default option for the human brain. The 'groupness variable' (Brubaker 2004) takes on a higher value under conditions where other social categories have collapsed or are in the process of profound reconstruction. Peripheral elites take advantage of this window of opportunity to gain power and choose ethnic appeals to mobilise ordinary citizens who are now much more likely to categorize their social world in terms of human kinds. Shared perceptions of the social world as a space demarcated along ethnic lines helps solve the collective action problem for ethnic minority groups in new nation-states, where other categories are not yet discernible on the political scene.

In nationalizing states in particular, an additional factor to consider is the idea that majority elites may already follow a strategy of nation-building. Instead of advertising 'cultural models that supersede in part our native intuitions' (Gil-White 2001: 535), majority elites in these contexts may concentrate on emphasizing them. This, in turn, sets forth the ideal conditions for minority elites who seek to mobilise support. These minority elites can draw on the local importance of ethnicity on the ground, since EI has been solved for them by the cognitive default orientation. To go one step further and form a collective interest of the group as a basis for ethnic collective action (EB), they are primed to find an easy target: presenting the nationalizing state (i.e., the state as constituted by the ethnic majority) as a threat to the survival of the identity of the national minority. Hence, shared interest is presented (i.e., constructed) as crucial to the self-preservation of the ethnic minority, in the face of central nationalism. Naturalized constructionism can thus explain why ethnic mobilisation takes place under conditions of regime

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10 Hirschfeld (1996: 14) refers to his own approach both as a 'cultural psychological' or a 'universal constructivist account'.

change across contexts without falling back on essentialist accounts of ethnic identity, since it leaves a decisive role for discursive social practice in filling the ethnic perspective with content. Indeed, the conditions for membership in each context depend on social practice and are relational, not natural. The fact that we have a predisposition to resort to ethnic categories when other information in our social environment is scarce is, at least according to the findings cited, likely to be innate.

Another empirical implication of the perspective of naturalized constructionism can be found in Birnir's (2009) comprehensive study of electoral politics in new democracies. She finds that, in new democracies where ethnicity is part of electoral competition, party systems stabilize more quickly than in circumstances where parties make no appeal to ethnic categories. At the micro level, she explains that voters who identify with an ethnic group, and have the opportunity to vote for an ethnic party, can cast their vote on the basis of information that is less costly than information on the programs of parties based on less intuitive appeals. If no parties run on ethnic platforms, voters cannot use their cognitive default category to vote in a newly developing multi-party system, and their voting patterns are hence less stable, due to a lack of information on the actual positions of parties that have only recently been formed.

Whether ethnic categories will lead to the subsequent formation of a collective interest associated with that category, and whether this will result in a conflictual or cooperative relationship between national minorities and majorities (EB), remains open to debate, since the answer still depends on political actors' choices as they attempt to garner the support of voters with multiple identity categories, under institutional restrictions. When making this choice, however, both elites and citizens are limited in their flexibility by the cognitive resilience of ethnic categories. This explains why multinational states can be expected to remain somewhat special in the long run, since cognitively predisposed shared ethnic perceptions ease the formation of collective interests and collective action. Ethnic elites seeking to receive a mandate in representing the minority—vis-à-vis the nationalising state and within the state's institutions—can draw on the cognitive practices of individuals who identify with the same ethnic category. Since the content of these ethnic categories is not essentially fixed, however, elites may in the longer run redefine the social categories they include—and those they exclude—through their appeals.

## Conclusion

In the introduction, I posited that studying ethnic minority mobilisation as a given phenomenon requires assuming both the collective ethnic identity of a bounded minority group (EI) and its coherent political behaviour (EB). And in my subsequent analysis, I have shown that an essentialist account of ethnic identity, traditionally embraced by primordialists, provides the most straightforward ontological basis for these assumptions. On this account, ethnic identification is a natural given, based on necessary and sufficient properties that define who is a member of an ethnic group (see table one for a summary). When studying minority mobilisation, primordialists take an additional short cut assumption that is not itself implied by an essentialist ontology: stating that a unified group identity implies the presence of unified interests that contradict the interests of members associated with *other* essential categories, such as the national majority within the state. The most useful elite strategy for gaining as much support as possible within the group is thus most likely to be ethnic outbidding, wherein each competitor styles herself as the most authentic defender of the manifest group interest.

*Table 1. Theoretical perspectives on ethnic identification*

Theory	Ontological status of ethnic categories
Essentialist Primordialism	Essential (natural and intrinsic properties as necessary and sufficient conditions for membership)
Social Constructionism	Constructed (relational properties contingent on social practice define membership)
Naturalized Constructionism	Constructed under cognitive predisposition (cognitive predisposition to naturalize ethnic categories; actual category defined by relational property-clusters caused by social practice in a given context)

Essentialism at the ontological level allows us to take the bounded, politically cohesive group as a given and study minority mobilisation as such: a phenomenon at the level of bounded groups. Essentialism is, however, now very widely accepted to be untenable, leaving the field to anti-essentialists, and above all social constructionists, who treat ethnic categories as constructs caused by social practice. The beauty of this change of perspective is that it forces us to engage with minority mobilisation as a complex, compound phenomenon, and tackle research questions such as how ethnicity is *made* and *unmade* through the drawing of social boundaries (Wimmer 2008), and how ethnic groups' collective preferences are *formed* through interactions between competing elites and voters (Giuliano 2000).

I have also tried, however, to show that constructionists in the field of mobilisation studies struggle to explain the resilience of ethnic categories, and therefore often resort to ad hoc explanations of 'everyday primordialism' that force them to give up a unified ontological assumption about the social world—one that is somehow meant to be different for the researcher (constructed) and the participant (caught within the primordial matrix). Additionally when it comes to the more specific topic of studying the strategies of elites, who often seek support by invoking ethnically charged issues, the flexible nature of constructed categories does not correspond to the limits elites encounter on the ground when trying to change the category they're appealing to. Treating EI as the contingent result of context-dependent constructed categories fails to provide theoretical concepts that can account for the fact that ethnic categories are more stable than other categories, and that this holds true across time and space.

Constructionism's seemingly ad hoc definition of ethnic categories—as more rigid than others—can be avoided under a third perspective that treats ethnicity as a cognitive, classificatory scheme (Brubaker *et al.* 2004; Gil White 2001), whereby the fact that we classify by means of ethnic categories can be attributed to an 'evolved [...] ethnic cognitive system' (Machery and Faucher 2006: 1029). The exact nature of the cluster of properties associated with ethnic categories in social practice can only be established a posteriori, however, through empirical analysis (Mallon 2007a, 2007b). Following from this view, the resilience of ethnic categories as a means for navigating our social environment is not a mere by-product of social practice within the institutional opportunity structures provided by historically contingent processes. Rather, reliance on ethnic (as opposed to other) categories for social classification under conditions of insecurity can be thought of as stemming from an innate cognitive predisposition to think in ethnic terms. By contrast, the concrete attributes associated with an ethnic category are seen as socially constructed in nature, and only careful study of classificatory practice and the meaning of a category in a specific context can yield the set of properties that define actual membership.

Reviewing the literature on social categorization in 2005, Machery and Faucher (2005: 1029) still cited Gil-Whites' (2001) findings and his argument in favour of an ethnic cognitive system as an endorseable advance—suggesting that more work needs to be done to highlight how social constructionist and cognitive-cum evolutionary accounts (such as Gil-White's) can be further integrated. This is also an important area for the future of studies of ethnic mobilisation. Taking the conditions for ethnic identification and mobilisation as both universal (ethnic categorization as an innate cognitive mechanism) and context-specific (the cluster of properties defining



membership in the ethnic category as a social construct) should open avenues in research. Working from this perspective, comparative research aimed at generalizable knowledge on the role of ethnicity in political mobilisation and context-centred, interpretive approaches seeking to extract the actual meaning attached to specific ethnic categories in a given context can be *connected*, rather than inimically juxtaposed – an enterprise already being undertaken within this volume.

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