Identity Politics and the Political Marketplace

Contemporary wars tend to be characterised by identity politics, that is to say, the notion that cultural, ethnic or religious identity is inextricably linked to political identity. The ascendance of political identity, as scholars of nationalism remind us, is associated with the rise of the modern state and notions of citizenship. But whereas early modern nationalism or post-colonial nationalism tended to be broad and inclusive, a way of defining the people in order to establish democracy, the identity politics that represent the narratives of warring parties tend to be exclusive, fragmentative and at the same time transnational.

Avel Chuklanov. Source: Unsplash.

It was the anthropologist Ernest Gellner who propounded the link between nationalism and modernity. According to Gellner, nationalism is a collective ideology, based on the principle that the cultural, political and territorial unit is congruent. Gellner contrasts the vertical territorially based national cultures typical of modernity with the more differentiated cultures of traditional societies. Before the invention of printing and the spread of writing in vernacular languages, it was possible to distinguish between horizontal, i.e. non-territorial, 'high cultures' generally based on religion and a scholarly written language, e.g. Latin, Persian or Sanskrit, and a variety of local vertical oral low cultures.[1] The emergence of national cultures is associated with the rise of the modern state, printing in the vernacular language, and the spread of primary education. One of the many local cultures is elevated through printing and education and spread within a territorial area bounded by the state.

But today's world is often described as post-industrial. Far-reaching changes have taken place, often loosely described as globalisation, that challenge the congruence between culture, the political unit and territory that underpinned the political arrangements of modernity. Three broad changes are relevant for any analysis of the type of identity politics we can observe in contemporary war.

First of all, the rise of the information-based economy reduces the importance of territorially based industrial production. The global economy is both more transnational and more local. Growing sectors of the economy like finance and research and development are increasingly global. At the same time, markets are increasingly specialised and local as profits are increasingly derived from catering to a differentiated market (economies of scope) rather than from low cost mass production (economies of scale). What we are witnessing is a profound change in the division of labour. On the one hand, there is a growing class of what Robert Reich calls 'symbolic analysts', people who work with abstract symbols in finance, technology, education, or welfare.[2] These are the graduates of the explosion in tertiary education, who communicate across borders and generally speak a global language, usually English. On the other hand, there is a growing underclass of people who service the new symbolic analysts, who work in the informal sector and who trade in cultural diversity through a variety of menial tasks. The classic industrial worker who formed the backbone of the nationalist ideology and was physically associated with territory through the factory system is increasingly marginalised.

Secondly, the shift from print technology to electronic communications has momentous implications, which it is probably much too soon to describe. The vernacular national print literature of the modern period has been supplanted by both more global and local forms of visual and oral representation. Novels have given way to film; newspapers are giving way to social media. On the one hand, as many analysts of globalisation point out, Internet, smart phones, satellite television, and air travel make possible new global virtual communities who speak a global language, often English. On the other hand, radio, television and mobile phones reach out to local communities that do not have the reading habit and make possible much more rapid and dramatic political mobilisation. The new technologies are associated with horizontal networks forms of organisation rather than the vertical pyramidal type of organisation typical of the modern era. At the same time , the 'echo chamber' character of social media tends to be linked to fragmented (and often extremist) forms of identity construction.

Thirdly, there has been a fundamental change in the nature of the state. On the one hand, the globalisation of the economy and communications has been a way of getting around national rules and constraints and evading the dominance of the state. On the other hand, many of the decisions that directly affect everyday life are no longer taken at the level of the state. The capacity of the state to respond to domestic demands often depends on its ability to negotiate at a transnational level with international institutions, multinational companies and other states. Parts of society, particularly the wealthy parts, which Reich describes as the cosmopolitan secessionists, escape the purview of the state, while those that remain bear a greater burden of state control.

The change in the nature of the state can be analysed through its changing revenue base. It was Max Weber who argued that political institutions are shaped by their economic foundations and that the sources of income shape the structure and dynamics of state power. What we can observe is a shift from direct to indirect taxation and from tax to rent. More and more states have become dependent on income from borrowing, external assistance or mineral revenues, especially oil. In contrast to tax based states who rely in some sort of contract with the citizens, rentier states tend to be characterised by networks of patronage and, in the context of externally driven rents, networks that are both national and global. The contemporary rentier state can be described in terms of what the CRP calls the 'political marketplace' in which politicians (or patronage networks) compete for the private distribution of the state's revenue instead of political competition around the public distribution of revenue (the provision of services and so on).

Neo-liberal economic doctrines have fed into these tendencies. Economic liberalisation in many of the countries that have experienced contemporary wars has been associated with the decline of value-adding activities such as manufacturing and agriculture, dramatic urbanisation as those who lose their traditional forms of livelihood move to towns, and increased socio-economic inequality. Privatization has given rise to oligarchic networks with privileged access to the state. These tendencies have been sped up since the 2008 financial crisis, exacerbating the monetisation of global and national political hierarchies.

So what do these changes imply for the evolution of political identity? It would be wrong to suggest that they imply a return to something like the differentiated cultural structures of the pre-modern period, described by Gellner, although it is tempting to draw such a conclusion. Applying Gellner's method of argument, we might anticipate a transnational high culture, for example, transmitted through those engaged in global communication and travel, assumed to be cosmopolitan and inclusive, combined with a myriad of local largely oral cultures more likely to be exclusive. In practice however, contemporary exclusive identities are often global and transnational while the inclusive identities typical of democracy activists and civil society may often be very local. Rather what we are seeing is the emergence of both more fragmented and more transnational political identities –the Shi'a-Sunni schism is one such example expressing both domestic strife and geo-political rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

These fragmented and horizontal identities, it can be argued, fit the political marketplace, in rather the same way that the vertical national identities described by Gellner fitted modern industry and the modern state. The patronage networks of the political marketplace are often defined in terms of identity. Competition among them is framed in terms of exclusive identities, justifying the resort to violence and mobilising political support. Growing inequality –the spread of poverty and marginalisation and the loss of certainty associated with migration – do not produce these exclusive identities, but they offer vulnerable recruiting grounds. Violence is a mechanism through which exclusive identities are constructed; if you are threatened because of your identity, you turn to those of the same identity for protection. Of course the fit is never exact neither in the modern period or today and indeed the passion associated with the rise of identity politics may foster a momentum to violence that is at odds with the calculations of the political marketplace. The point is rather to understand the social conditions of the current epoch that give rise to the kinds of identity politics typical of contemporary war.

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[1] Gellner, Ernest (1983) *Nations and Nationalism* Blackwell, Oxford.

[2] Robert Reich (1992) *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st Century Capitalism*, Simon & Schuster Ltd.

Note: The CRP blogs gives the views of the author, not the position of the Conflict Research Programme, the London School of Economics and Political Science, or the UK Government.