What is an Ethnic Group? Political Economy, Constructivism and the Common Language Approach to Ethnicity

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1. Introduction

Ethnicity has been a major subject in the social sciences for the past several decades. First appearing in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1972, it has recently become a source of debate in the field of political economy, where many scholars have investigated the relationship between ethnicity and civil war, growth, institutions and violence using econometric tools. While several academics have already criticized this literature for not taking into account 'constructivist findings' (Chandra 2001, Laitin and Posner 2001), i.e., that ethnicity is both fluid and endogenous to external factors, I rather argue that at least one influential set of scholars has, on the contrary, employed an extreme version of constructivist theory. In their analysis these authors have, however, inadvertently show how badly constructivism functions when attempting to analyze ethnicity, which is actually much less fluid and endogenous than many constructivists would have us believe. As a solution I propose the use of a modified 'common language' definition of ethnicity, which, I will show, is more suited to political economy analyses than any other approach.

This paper is organized as follows. In section two I investigate the ongoing diverse and controversial debates about the nature of ethnicity. More specifically, I examine what Fearon and Laitin (2000) call the 'interpretivist' and 'quantoid' paradigms, where the latter can be divided into primordialist and constructivist approaches. In section three I show that, while many authors in political economy do not explicitly define ethnicity, they nonetheless largely adhere to constructivist theories in their work. In particular I consider recent World Bank scholarship on ethnic conflict, focusing on the works of Paul Collier and his co-authors, who have been highly influential in recent econometric analyses of conflict. I explicate two key errors that have resulted from using the constructivist approach to analyze ethnic conflict, namely the incorrect assumptions that 1) groups can 'invent' themselves when it is economically advantageous to do so, and 2) the fluidity of ethnicity allows people to shift their allegiances when it suits them. In the fourth section I make the case that a modified version of Fearon and Laitin (2000)'s 'common language' definition of ethnicity is the most suitable definition of ethnicity for the political economist. By basing a definition of ethnicity on a belief in common descent, a common history and a common homeland, the common language approach is both easy to use and similar to how ethnicity is understood in popular usage. Finally, in the conclusion I discuss ways in which the political economy debate on ethnicity may be bettered.

2. Defining Ethnicity

2.1. Introduction and History

Defining ethnicity is a minefield, as many authors have recognized. As shall become obvious in this section, scholars have proposed a bewildering variety of approaches to ethnicity,

all of which are currently in use. Thus it would seem that Chandra (2001, 8)'s claims that one such approach, the constructivist paradigm, 'can be said to have been more or less established across disciplines by the 1980s' and that 'it is now virtually impossible to find a social scientist who openly defends a primordialist position,' is incorrect. I shall first review the history of ethnicity as a concept before examining each of the two main approaches to defining ethnicity, namely the 'interpretivist' and 'quantoid' approaches.

As already mentioned, ethnicity is a new term in the social sciences, even though the word 'ethnic' has been used in the English language since the mid-fourteenth century. Its meanings have changed radically throughout history: originally referring to heathens, pagans or gentiles, it acquired racial characteristics in the nineteenth century and was used in the twentieth-century U.S. as a way to refer to those immigrants of non-northern or western European descent (Eriksen 1993, 4). It first grew in importance in the social sciences as anthropologists tried to make sense of the emergent social and cultural formations within Africa and other parts of the Third World in the 1960s (Eade 1996, 58). Hence ethnic groups took on a new meaning, namely the idea of tribe, formerly used to refer to a sociopolitical unit whose members were related by kinship ties. This shift in meaning took place as many social scientists attempted to critique the Eurocentric discourse in which the peoples of the developing world were referred to as 'tribes' while those in the developed world remained 'peoples' or even 'nations.' This latest incarnation of ethnicity meant that, for the first time in the history of the word, it was – and continues to be – applied universally across the globe.

Part of the problem in defining ethnicity is the way in which it has been misused and abused as a term in popular discourse: as Allen and Eade (1999, 36) note, 'the term ethnicity has escaped from academic discourse, and it is unlikely that it can be recaptured.' Yet even within

academia ethnicity has been expanded in its meaning to capture identity groups formerly seen as separate entities: Connor (1994, 101-102) cites examples in sociology where ethnic groups are taken to be synonymous with minorities and even all identity groups which are mobilized for political ends. He argues that the indiscriminate application of ethnic group to numerous types of groups obscures vital distinctions between various forms of identity. If nothing else, this use of 'ethnicity as a cloak for several different types of identity... presumes that all the identities are of the same order.'

2.2. The 'Interpretivist' and 'Quantoid' Approaches

In attempting to deal with the quagmire of defining ethnicity, scholars have largely adopted two strategies, which Fearon and Laitin (2000, 4) name the 'interpretivist' and 'quantoid' approaches. The former refers to the strategy of using a variety of situational definitions suitable to each case study, an approach used by a variety of scholars, especially anthropologists who are cautious in defining ethnicity outright and prefer to let their subjects define the term. One such anthropologist, Eller (1999, 7), claims that, rather than being 'a single unified social phenomenon,' ethnicity is actually a family of 'related but analytically distinct phenomena.' An 'interpretivist' approach is also apparent in much postmodernist and post-Marxist work. Such authors as Stuart Hall, Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein claim that 'ethnicity must be viewed as a plastic and malleable social construction, deriving its meanings from the particular situations of those who invoke it… Ethnicity has no essence or center, no underlying features or common denominator' (Smith 1998, 204).

While this argument has its merits, it is hardly useful for social scientists looking to compare ethnicity and ethnic conflicts in a variety of places and periods, for obvious reasons. It

is for this reason that the 'quantoid' approach is more popular among political scientists and other non-anthropologists. This paradigm may be defined as a scientific attempt to precisely define ethnicity, no matter how it is used in common parlance. This approach is to be distinguished from the way terms are defined in the dictionary and Fearon and Laitin (2000)'s 'common language' approach – which I examine later – in that it allows the scholar to construct ethnicity according to his/her preference(s) rather than those of the masses. Authors who follow this approach tend to situate themselves somewhere between two extreme camps, namely essentialism/primordialism and instrumentalism/constructivism. The first school can best be described as that which is so prevalent in journalism and non-academic discourse today, namely the view that ethnic groups are ancient and immemorial kinship groups and thus given facets of social life. This paradigm was first expressed by German romantic philosophers like Herder and Fichte and has continued to be held to one degree or another by such writers as Basil Davidson, Clifford Geertz, Edward Shils and Steven Van Evera. One variety of primordialism which holds some sway today is the sociobiology approach of Van den Berghe (1979, 1996), where ethnic groups are actual kinship groups and members use nepotism to propagate their line. However, such an approach necessarily includes groups based on common descent, i.e., castes in India and European aristocracies, that most scholars would not consider ethnic groups.[2]

The second paradigm is one used by most scholars today across all social science. It first overtook primordialism as the dominant paradigm in the 1960s and 1970s thanks to such anthropologists and sociologists as Abner Cohen, Ernest Gellner, Aidan Southall, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who all agreed, for one reason or another, that ethnic groups –

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[2] See Smith (1998, 147-151) for a critique of Van den Berghe along these lines. I examine castes and classes more in section 4.

and/or nations – are the artificial constructs of modern elites for their own purposes.[3] In recent decades it has become widespread through the works of Benedict Anderson, Fredrik Barth, John Breuilly, Rogers Brubaker and Eric Hobsbawm, among others. The central idea of constructivism is that ethnic groups are artificial and constructed rather than natural and eternal, and, just as they can be created, they can also be destroyed or, in the postmodernist vocabulary, fragmented and deconstructed. In summarizing the various strands of constructivism, Chandra (2001, 7) claims that it holds that 'ethnic groups are fluid and endogenous to a set of social, economic and political processes.'

3. Constructivism in Current Political Economy Literature

Of these approaches the constructivist one has had the most impact on current political economy literature: while most authors in the field fail to identify which definition they are employing in their work, it is obvious that they merely using a constructivist approach without explicitly stating so. Below I examine the work of some of the most influential scholars in the field of political economy and ethnicity, namely Paul Collier and his co-authors at the World Bank and Oxford University.[4] I show that Collier et al. have used an extreme form of constructivism that has led to two key errors, namely 1) that ethnic identity cannot be easily conjured up when it is economically advantageous to do so, and 2) that, once it exists, ethnic identity is much less fluid that constructivists would have us believe.

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[3] While some scholars might argue that constructivism and instrumentalism are different, I agree with Lustick (2001, 22) in his assessment of instrumentalism as one variety of constructivism.

3.1. The Invention of Secessionist Political Communities

In various works Collier and his co-authors attempt to understand how various social and economic phenomena, including ethnic diversity, affect the outbreak and longevity of civil war. They conclude that ethnicity is not a cause of conflict but can easily be manipulated by greedy elites, arguing that ethnic groups can be created to suit their economic needs. This argument in and of itself is, in its essence, constructivist, since it emphasizes how ethnicity is endogenous to economic and political factors. Thus, Collier and Hoeffler (2005, 3) argue, greed creates ethnic grievance in rich regions, using the theory of 'tax exit' among the rich to claim that 'secessionist political communities invent themselves when part of the population perceives secession to be economically advantageous.' Drawing from the constructivist theories of Anderson (1991) and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983),[5] Collier and Hoeffler (2005) use the examples of Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia as well as that of Croatia and Slovenia from Yugoslavia to show that the richest regions of countries often secede when they feel as if the central government is transferring their wealth elsewhere. Indeed, this theory could help to explain why Switzerland (2nd highest per capita income in Europe), Norway (3rd) and Iceland (5th) refusing to join the EU while member countries like Denmark (4th), Sweden (6th) and the UK (7th) remain hesitant about their commitment. The same argument can apply to poorer regions which feel that their poverty is due to an unfair transference of wealth to other regions; Collier and Hoeffler (2005, 22) give the secession of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) from (West) Pakistan in 1971 as an example.[6]

However, to test this theory one should examine cases where rich or poor regions do not 'invent' a political identity. If, as claimed, these 'secessionist political communities' can merely

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[4] The attention here on the work of Coller et al. is by no means supposed to be an *ad hominem* attack; rather, since his work has been so influential in political economy literature over the past few years, I believe his work should come under special scrutiny.
[5] Ranger (1993) later repudiated much of his constructivism.

invent themselves when it is 'economically advantageous,' the number of potential secessionist movements would run into the thousands, if not even millions. Indeed, as if to confirm Collier's argument, it is in fact hard to count the number of separate communities some of whose residents believe that they would be economically better off on their own: three recent examples from the US include the citizens of Killington, VT, who voted to secede from Vermont and join New Hampshire due to high state property taxes in March 2004 (Associated Press 2004),[7] those of Long Island, ME, which voted to secede from the city of Portland due to high property taxes in November 1992 (McHenry 2002), and the residents of 27 poor rural counties in northern California who voted to divide the state in two in June 1992 (Los Angeles Times 1992).[8] There are undoubtedly many more such places where residents harbor dreams of economic autonomy.[9]

In the three examples given above, however, none involves the secession of an ethnically/nationally-defined group from a political entity marked by ethnic/national identity. It is highly likely that the number of such non-ethnic attempts at 'tax exits' exceeds the mere 'hundreds of romantic secessionist groups' whose claims are overtly ethnically based. Indeed, far from ethnic secessionist groups' claims encompassing 'most areas of the earth' (Collier and Hoeffler 2005, 16), there are large areas of the planet with no such secessionist movements. For example, there is a distinct lack of such a movement among the citizens of the geographically contiguous states of Connecticut, Massachusetts and New Hampshire, which rank #1, 3 and 6, respectively, in personal income per capita in the US (Brown et al. 2004, 31). Collier and Hoeffler (2005) cannot explain this lack of a movement, arguing that, while 'shared economic

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[6] Horowitz (1985, 233) notes that poorer regions are more likely to secede than richer regions.

[7] Vermont is the 22nd richest state in the US in terms of per capita income while New Hampshire is the 6th richest (Brown et al. 2004, 31).

[8] All three urban counties that voted on the issue chose to keep the state intact, while all but one rural county voted for division.

interests coincide with cultural identities' in the cases of Eritrea, Slovenia and Croatia, 'cultural identities are usually fluid.' They duly note that Eritrea's 'population includes three major religious groups, five ethnic groups, nine official languages and three official writing scripts' (Collier and Hoeffler 2005, 22).[10] In other words, Eritrea is as culturally diverse as the three aforementioned American states – if not more so, since there is only one writing script among these four states. Why, then, are there no 'romantic secessionist groups' in these states? One could ask the same question about three of the poorest American states, Louisiana (43rd in personal income per capita), Arkansas (49th) and Mississippi (50th), whose cultural and historical connections as part of the American South arguably make its citizens also more homogenous than Eritrea (Brown et al. 2004, 31).

Other examples outside the US abound: for every example of residents of a disproportionately rich or poor region like East Pakistan, Punjab or Quebec attempting to secede for economic benefit, there are many other rich and poor states and regions where there is no significant secessionist movement: examples include two of the richest states in India, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, as well as the richest and poorest regions of Canada, British Columbia and the Atlantic region, respectively. The reason, of course, is that the population of these states and regions either do not see themselves as members of the same ethnic group or nation or see themselves as part of a greater ethnic group or nation:[11] in other words, the fluidity of cultural identities can only go so far. Thus Collier and Hoeffler (2005) make the same

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[9] Other similar secessions that have not suceeded in the US include various efforts to separate Staten Island from New York City and a failed referendum on the division of Los Angeles in 2002; cf. McHenry (2002).

[10] Jacquin-Berdal (2002, 81) claims Eritrea actually contains nine ethnic groups.

[11] While these three rich US states see themselves as part of a region, namely New England, they hardly see themselves as constituting a separate ethnic group or nation; the same goes for Arkansas and Mississippi as well as the Canadian states and Maharashtra, whose largest city, Mumbai, is ethnically very diverse. According to Harriss (2003), caste and religion have overtaken ethnicity in contemporary Tamil Nadu electoral politics. A Tamil

mistake that Connor (1994, 145, 147) criticized in an essay first published in 1984, namely the 'tendency to stress economic forces [as a] manifestation of a broader tendency to mistake the overt characteristics of a nation for its essence.' Indeed, the problem with such an economic analysis is that 'defining ethnonational conflicts in terms of economic inequality is a bit like defining them in terms of oxygen: where you find the one, you can be reasonably certain to find the other.' In other words, all countries have richer and poorer regions, only a fraction of which tend to coincide with ethnic groups to produce secessionist movements.

Thus, in order to account for both the prevalence of 'tax exit' strategies of the citizens of Killington, VT, Long Island, ME, and rural northern California and the lack of any such movements among federal states in the US, Canada, India and elsewhere, the only possible conclusion is that 'secessionist political communities' can indeed 'invent themselves when part of the population perceives secession to be economically advantageous,' but only when secession does not have an ethnic/national element. Conversely, contra such constructivist 'underdevelopment' theorists as Hechter (1975) and Nairn (1977) as well as Collier and Hoeffler (2005),[12] even when it is economically advantageous for a region to 'invent' itself as a political community and then pursue secession from a ethnically/nationally-defined entity, very few such regions actually do so, even if they already possess some type of communal identity like the American South or New England. As shall become apparent in a moment, one potential example of such a group invented for economic purposes, namely Scotland, turns out to be neither 'invented' nor dependent on the economy for its continued existence.

3.2. The Fluidity of Oil and Ethnic Identity: The Case of Scotland

secessionist/nationalist movement did enjoy support in the 1950s, when Tamil Nadu was much poorer than it is

Much of the current political economy literature on civil wars has focused on the role of primary commodities, especially oil, in promoting secession. In his analysis, Collier (2001, 147) claims that 'the creation of a political community for the control of a region's natural resources may also create a political community for the ethnic group,' citing as an example the electoral breakthrough of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in 1974 shortly after Scottish oil became valuable. Echoing his aforementioned argument that economic reasons can lead people to 'invent' themselves as a secessionist community, Collier (2002) argues that the Scottish and other such 'people who live above the oil acquire an identity – we are the people sitting on top of the oil. There is always some ethnic group sitting on top of the oil and so they get a political agenda: we are different, we could be rich.'[13] More specifically,

> In electoral terms Scotland as a political community only dates back to 1974. Something happened between 1970 [when the SNP received 11.4% of the vote] and 1974 [when it received 30.4%] as a result of which many people in Scotland switched to imagining themselves as part of a geographic community, as opposed to their previous class-based political identification. There is little doubt as to the cause, i.e., the dramatic rise in the international price of oil as a result of the Yom Kippur war of 1973 (Collier and Hoeffler 2005, 6-7).

Here again Collier and Hoeffler (2005) adhere to a strict constructivist line, echoing Kasfir (1979, 372)'s argument that, 'if categories are fluid, identity may shift dramatically not only from one ethnic category to another, but from ethnicity to class…' – or vice-versa, as the Scottish case suggests.

There is reason to support Collier and Hoeffler (2005)'s analysis, especially in light of the SNP campaign that 'it's Scotland's oil' in the early 1970's that was credited for the party's

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now, partly due to attempts by the central government to impose Hindi as the sole national language (Kohli 1997).
[12] See Smith (1998, 46-63) for a critique of these two books along similar lines.
[13] Collier et al. (2003, 60) make the same argument.

success in the 1974 elections (Harvie 1998, 184). Indeed, the SNP continues to link world oil

prices and Scottish independence, seen currently in its accusations that

> Prime Minister Tony Blair is nicking our oil, while only the SNP want to invest it in Scotland's future. With the current average price of oil at $45 per barrel and 30 years worth of oil and gas left to exploit, Scotland stands to benefit from our North Sea resources to the tune of 1 trillion dollars in the future.[14]

Furthermore, to see the Scottish attachment to North Sea oil one need merely examine the names

given to the oil fields, including those of Scottish castles (Balmoral, Dunbar and Glamis), clans

(Argyll, Crawford, Duncan, Esmond, Forbes, Gordon, Hutton, Innes and MacCulloch) and saints

(Blane, Clare, Cyrus, Machar, Magnus and Ninian), along with more overtly nationalistic names

like Highlander, Ivanhoe, Rob Roy, Saltire (an alternative name for the Scottish flag), Tartan

and, most provocative of all, Arbroath, drawn from the Declaration of Arbroath which

proclaimed Scottish independence from England in 1320 (Herald 1994).

Nonetheless, Collier and Hoeffler (2005)'s argument is flawed for two reasons. The first

is more of an individual mistake than anything inherent to constructivist thought, since even

those writers most inclined towards constructivism do not argue that 'Scotland as a political

community' (henceforth 'Scotland') dates back only to the early 1970s.   Indeed, the

aforementioned historian of nationalism John Breuilly (1993, 320-326) has argued that

contemporary Scottish nationalism is partially a result of regional aid programmes in the 1960s:,

when 'SNP success began… Only because of a fairly good showing before 1971 was the party

in a position to exploit the discovery of oil.' Breuilly (1993) and other scholars also look back to

the Act of Union in 1707, which left Scotland with its own church as well as a separate
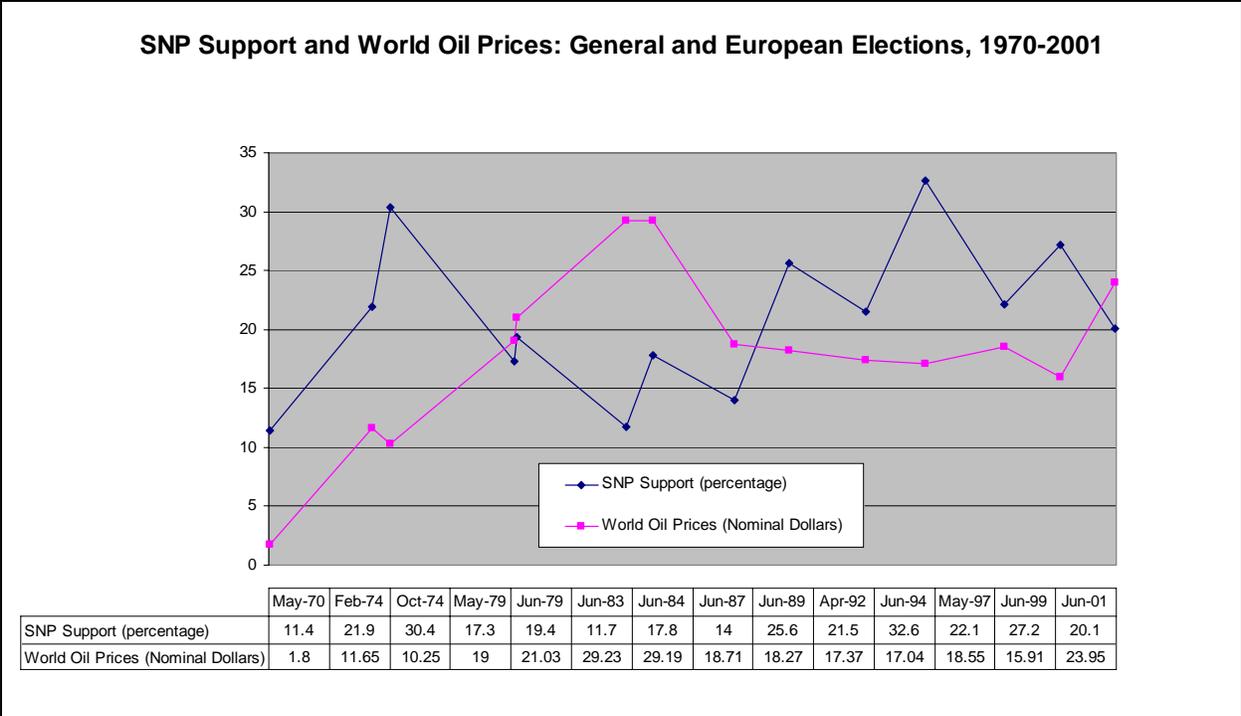
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[14] http://www.snp.org/html/news/newsdetail.php?newsID=2810.

university, legal and banking system, all of which helped to create or maintain a separate national identity.[15]

The second problem with Collier's argument, however, goes straight to the heart of constructivist theory, namely that ethnicity is actually not all that fluid. More specifically in the case of Scotland, it is very difficult to argue that fluctuation in the price of oil is paralleled by a similar fluidity in Scottish national identity, for two reasons. First, the relationship between oil prices and SNP support is much more complicated than Collier and Hoeffler (2005) lead their readers to believe. On one hand, as Figure 1 shows, Collier and Hoeffler (2005) are undoubtedly correct in their argument that oil prices and SNP support rose together in the early 1970s. However, the SNP's fortunes have hardly followed world crude oil prices since 1974. For instance, when oil prices reached their lowest mark in a quarter-century in the late 1990s, the SNP held on to 22.1% in the 1997 general elections, more than it had won in general elections in 1992 (21.5%) or 1987 (14.0%). More troubling for Collier and Hoeffler (2005)'s argument is the fact that, in the early 1980s when oil prices skyrocketed due to the Iran-Iraq war, the SNP only received 11.7% in the 1983 general election. This result represented only 0.3% more than the SNP received in 1970, before 'Scotland' existed, according to the authors.

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[15] While there was no SNP or general elections allowing the scholar to assess Scottish nationalism electorally in the 18th century, Colley (1992, 8) nonetheless argues that, 'for many poorer and less literate Britons [in the 18th century], Scotland, Wales and England remained more potent rallying calls than Great Britain, except in times of danger from abroad.' Hastings (1997, 61-62) claims that Scottish nationalism was already a potent force by the time of the Act of Union.

SNP Support and World Oil Prices: General and European Elections, 1970-2001

	May-70	Feb-74	Oct-74	May-79	Jun-79	Jun-83	Jun-84	Jun-87	Jun-89	Apr-92	Jun-94	May-97	Jun-99	Jun-01
SNP Support (percentage)	11.4	21.9	30.4	17.3	19.4	11.7	17.8	14	25.6	21.5	32.6	22.1	27.2	20.1
World Oil Prices (Nominal Dollars)	1.8	11.65	10.25	19	21.03	29.23	29.19	18.71	18.27	17.37	17.04	18.55	15.91	23.95

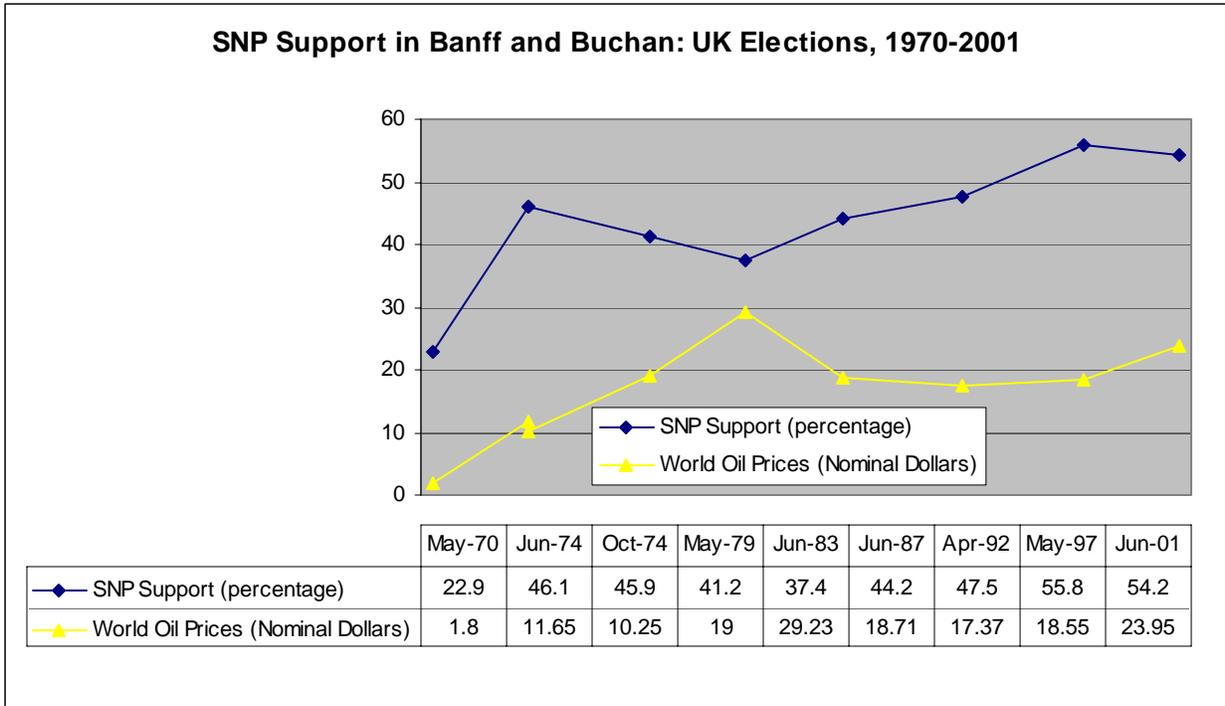**Figure 1 (Sources: Energy Information Administrationm, US Department of Energy; Wikipedia)**

There are then three possible explanations for this result: either 1) 'Scotland' temporarily ceased to exist when SNP support dropped below a certain threshold, i.e., some number between 11.7% and 14%,[16] 2) 'Scotland' continued to exist since the threshold was between 11.4% and 11.7%, or 3) once created in the early 1970s, 'Scotland' has continued to exist since then independent of SNP results. Certainly the first two explanations are nonsensical, as they rely on the existence of some arbitrary threshold measuring the existence of Scotland as a political community. The third explanation, while not as bad as the first two, is nonetheless contradictory: if one can attribute the birth of 'Scotland' to the early 1970s based on the increase in SNP support, why should one then neglect SNP results thereafter? Yet this is exactly what Collier and Hoeffler (2005) seem to imply in their argument. Of course, this argument, the only

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[16] If this threshold were to be at 14% or above it would also indicate that 'Scotland' did not exist in the 1987 general election.

of the three that makes sense, is more primordialist than constructivist, since it states that 'Scotland,' once it came into being in the early 1970s, has not fluctuated significantly since then. This point is echoed by Van Evera (2001, 20), a self-declared primordialist, who writes 'ethnic identities, while constructed, are hard to reconstruct once they form.'

Of course, if one is to take Collier and Hoeffler (2005)'s argument to its logical conclusion, one should not only examine SNP support across all of Scotland but also in those areas which have the greatest claim to the North Sea oil. Most North Sea oil that makes its way to Scotland arrives one of three terminals, namely Cruden Bay in the constituency of Banff and Buchan (which received 43.8% of all offshore oil in 2000), Sullom Voe in the Shetland islands (35.9%) and Flotta in the Orkney islands (10.7%) (Department of Trade and Industry 2001). Residents of all three areas could logically claim that the oil is 'theirs' and would therefore be expected to vote more for the SNP when oil prices are high than other parts of Scotland which see little direct benefits from the oil industry.
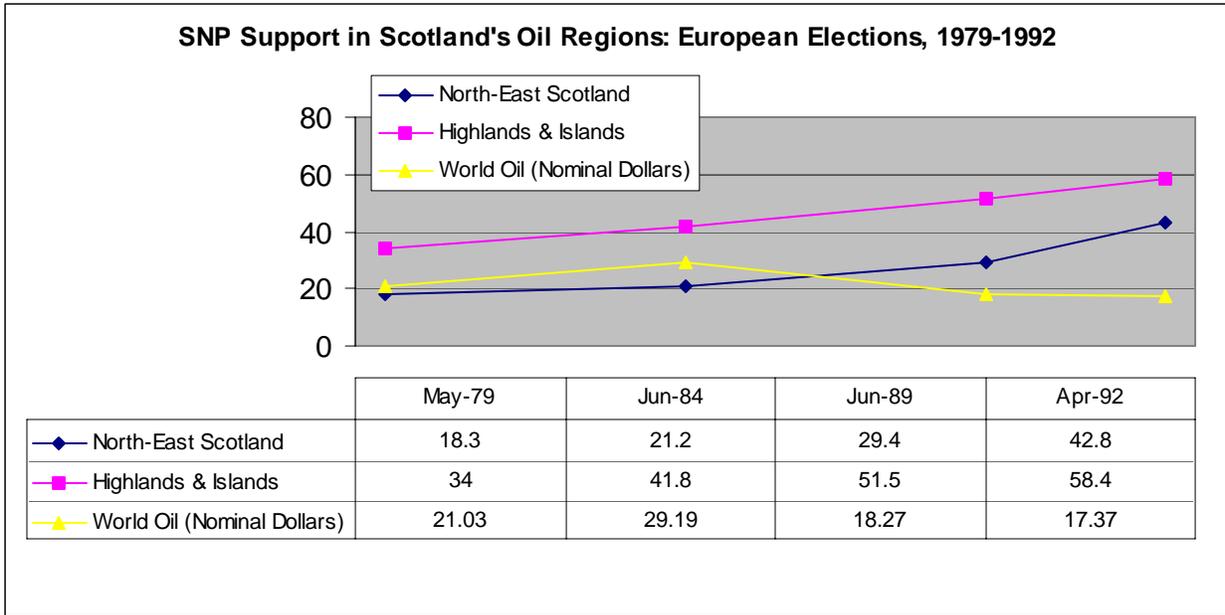
Yet, as figure 2 shows, electoral support for the SNP in Banff and Buchan has hardly followed the price of oil since 1970; indeed, if anything, it has had an inverse relationship, with the exception of the period 1970-1974. (I leave it out the data for the Orkney and Shetland islands here as the SNP ran a local candidate in only six of nine general elections since 1970.)

SNP Support in Banff and Buchan: UK Elections, 1970-2001

	May-70	Jun-74	Oct-74	May-79	Jun-83	Jun-87	Apr-92	May-97	Jun-01
SNP Support (percentage)	22.9	46.1	45.9	41.2	37.4	44.2	47.5	55.8	54.2
World Oil Prices (Nominal Dollars)	1.8	11.65	10.25	19	29.23	18.71	17.37	18.55	23.95

Figure 2 (Sources: See Figure 1; http://www.election.demon.co.uk)

Similarly, if we examine European elections between 1979 and 1992,[17] in which the Orkney and Shetland islands formed part of the Highlands and Islands constituency while Banff and Buchan was subsumed in North-East Scotland, it is obvious that SNP support again shows little relationship with the price of oil, as seen in Figure 3.

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[17] The UK changed to a proportional representation system for European elections in 1999, whereby Scotland now consists of a single constituency.
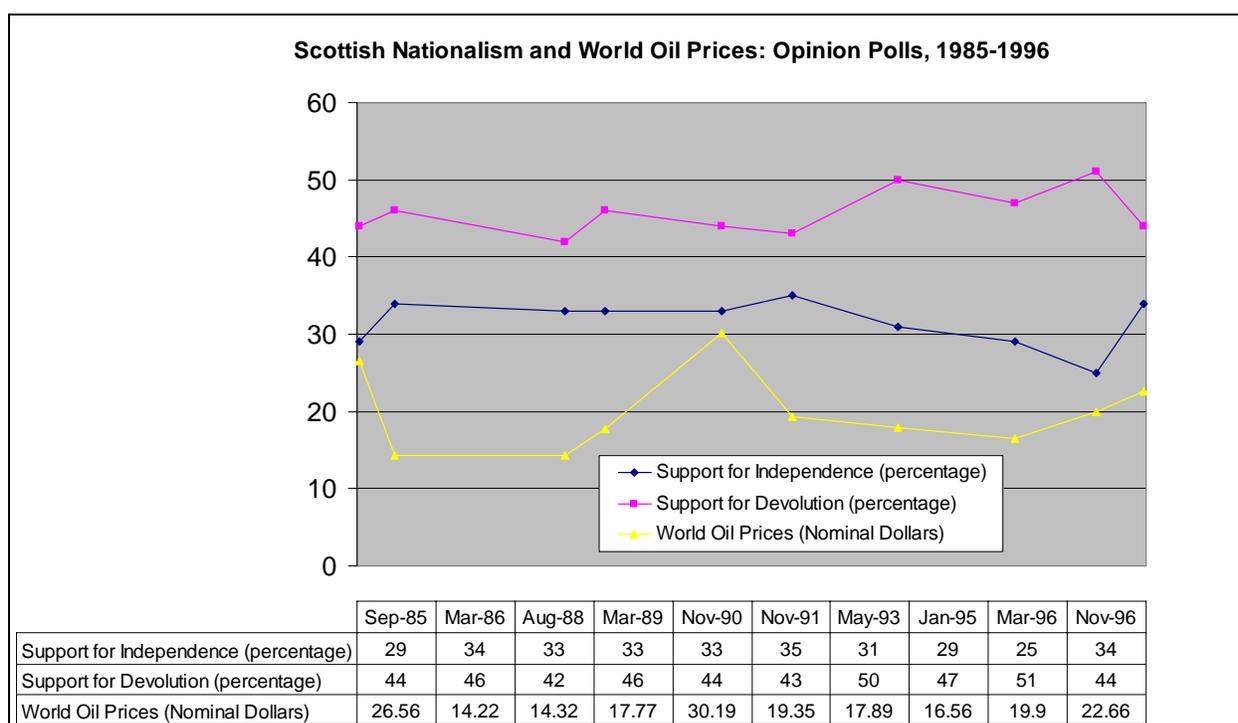
Figure 3 (Sources: See Figure 2)

	May-79	Jun-84	Jun-89	Apr-92
North-East Scotland	18.3	21.2	29.4	42.8
Highlands & Islands	34	41.8	51.5	58.4
World Oil (Nominal Dollars)	21.03	29.19	18.27	17.37

The second problem with arguing that the fluidity of oil and national identity are somehow correlated is that SNP support and Scottish nationalism are not one and the same. Indeed, SNP support can and has wavered due to factors other than Scottish nationalism, namely decisions taken by the SNP leaders, other political parties, the central government and other groups: obvious examples include the Kilbrandon Royal Commission report of 1973, the establishment of the Scottish Constitutional Convention in 1989 or referenda on devolution in 1979 and 1997. In other words, even if one were to agree that ethnic/national identity is as fluid as constructivists claim it to be, this fluidity would nevertheless remain very difficult to measure with electoral data.[18] As Horowitz (1998, 27) writes, 'party politics is thus not a perfect reflection of ethnic conflict.'

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[18] This same problem applies to Manor (1996, 463-464)'s analysis of voting in the Telegana region of Andhra Pradesh in South India, where a local nationalist party won the elections in 1971, the Congress Party won the 1977 and 1980 elections and, finally, a regional party won the 1983 elections. As the Scottish example shows, one cannot

An alternative to SNP election results that can be considered more reliable is polling data, which is available for the period 1985-1996 on the questions of Scottish independence and devolution (i.e., a separate Scottish Parliament).[19] The results, plotted in Figure 2, show two things, both of which already confirm the SNP results discussed above. First, there is again no relationship between oil and national identity in Scotland, measured either on the basis of support for independence or devolution. Second, support for devolution and independence varied very little over the period in question, much less than both SNP support *and* oil prices.[20]

Scottish Nationalism and World Oil Prices: Opinion Polls, 1985-1996

	Sep-85	Mar-86	Aug-88	Mar-89	Nov-90	Nov-91	May-93	Jan-95	Mar-96	Nov-96
Support for Independence (percentage)	29	34	33	33	33	35	31	29	25	34
Support for Devolution (percentage)	44	46	42	46	44	43	50	47	51	44
World Oil Prices (Nominal Dollars)	26.56	14.22	14.32	17.77	30.19	19.35	17.89	16.56	19.9	22.66

Figure 4 (Sources: See Figure 1 and Footnote 19)

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so easily claim that the election results are an examples of how 'political identities wax and wane… with great speed and fluidity.'

[19] http://www.bbc.co.uk/politics97/devolution/scotland/briefing/scotpolls.shtml.

[20] This point is confirmed by Brand et al. (1983, 465), who write that 'there seems to have been no relation between this proportion [of around 20% support for independence] and the percentage which voted SNP.'

Thus one can safely conclude that, over the past few decades, Scottish national identity has remained unaffected by oil prices and, if one is to extrapolate from the opinion poll data, relatively unchanged in intensity over decades.[21] Such a result would be hardly surprising to a non-constructivist, who would merely note the way Scotland – which was traditionally divided between Gaelic-speaking Highlanders and Scots-speaking Lowlanders, among other divisions[22] – has been able to forge and maintain a strong national identity since at least the nineteenth century. Indeed, as already noted, Scottish nationalists have been able to build upon a common history dating back to 1707 and even before.[23]

3.3. Conclusion

In our examination of recent political economy literature I have shown how Collier and Hoeffler (2005) have overestimated both how easy it is for people to 'invent' themselves as a political community when it is economically advantageous and how fluid and shifting the identities of these communities are when they do exist. While Chandra (2001) and others have remarked how few scholars have employed constructivist theory in political economy literature, quite the opposite is true as regards Collier and Hoeffler (2005), who instead rely upon an extreme form of constructivism. Yet what is the solution to the excesses of extreme constructivism? Should one merely agree with scholars like McCrone (2002, 307), who writes that, while national identity 'is not fixed and can change over time,… a person's sense of

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[21] Brand et al. (1983, 465) write that 'research has shown that the level of support for home rule has been remarkably steady since at least the late 1940s.'

[22] Cohen (1996, 805) writes that 'Scotland is a country of enormous heterogeneity in almost every significant aspect.'

[23] I have been able to examine Scotland in good detail because of the large amount of data available: sadly, detailed opinion surveys and regular election results are not common among many other such potentially secessionist regions. However, there is nothing to suggest that Scotland is somehow an anomaly compared with other such potentially secessionist regions, which, in the cases of Slovenia, Catalonia, Quebec and others, are as if not more

national identity is not in a perpetual state of flux'? Or should one discard constructivism altogether and agree with the primordialists that ethnicity does indeed have a central, unchanging core? In place of these two options I rather suggest a third solution in the next section, namely a modified 'common language' approach.

4. A Modified Common Language Approach

4.1. Introduction

The problems presented by an extreme form of constructivism should not, of course, detract from the larger constructivist project. One could just as easily criticize the problems of extreme primordialism evident in the sociobiological school of Van den Berghe and others, pointing to a need to find a middle path between constructivism and primordialism as such self-styled 'ethnosymbolists' as Hutchinson, Smith and others have attempted to do. Yet, at the same time, it is important to recognize that, perhaps, a moment has come for the field of ethnic studies to move beyond this simple dichotomy – or more accurately, continuum – which has dominated the field for the past four decades. Such a task has already been undertaken by Fearon and Laitin (2000) in their criticism of the whole 'quantoid' approach. They argue that social scientists should be concerned with using 'ordinary language' definitions of terms, which are constructed by finding principles of attribution based on intuition and popular usage. In their attempts to cover the groups intuitively understood to be ethnic while excluding those groups not normally considered as ethnic, Fearon and Laitin (2000, 3-4, 20) eventually come up with a definition of ethnic groups as 'groups larger than a family for which membership is reckoned primarily by

ethnically homogenous. It is, on the other hand, only prudent to call for similar such examinations of nationalist

descent, is conceptually autonomous and has a conventionally recognized 'natural history' as a group.' This approach can be seen as the social science equivalent of the lowest common denominator, where the definition uses the least amount of description necessary to cover all applicable cases but no more.

The common language definition is more suitable for use in political economy than the 'quantoid' approach for two reasons. First, in relying upon popular usage to provide a definition, it mimics a dictionary but in a specific academic context. Such a definition therefore makes it easy for academics to step down out of their ivory towers and discuss with policy makers and the general public, who tend to be unversed in theories of ethnicity and nationalism, the relationship between ethnicity and various political and economic factors without getting bogged down in explaining the definition of ethnicity. Indeed, Connor (1994, 91) has often remarked how debates over definitions have frustrated him and other scholars from progressing in their study of the subject, writing that such terms as '"nation" and "nationalism"… are shrouded in ambiguity due to their imprecise, inconsistent and often totally erroneous usage.' Furthermore, the 'linguistic jungle that encapsulates the concept of nationalism has only grown more dense' over time. In being both precise and correlated with popular usage, the common language approach is therefore more suitable for giving policy recommendations than the 'quantoid' approach.

Second and as important, the common language definition gives certain key qualities that must be present for an ethnic group to exist, thereby allowing researchers to construct data sets based on such a definition.[24] Indeed, some scholars do not give any such key qualities: Hutchinson and Smith (1996), for example, admit that not all of their six characteristics of

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movements where such data exists.

[24] For one example of such a data set, based on the common language definition, see Fearon (2003).

ethnicity are essential for an ethnic group to exist.[25] However, many 'quantoid' theorists already do list similar key qualities in their definitions – see for instance the writings of Nash (1996, 25), whose three essential criteria for the creation and maintenance of ethnicity are assumed kinship ties, commensality and a common cult. Again, however, one is struck by the technical nature of such a definition, relying on the rarely-used (and even less understood) concept of commensality; Nash's three criteria are unfortunately indicative of the 'quantoid' approach to defining ethnicity using often obscure and complicated terminology. If the scholar is to use a set of criteria that clearly marks ethnicity, (s)he should rely upon criteria that correlate with popular usage.

As noted, the definition relies on three aspects of ethnicity, namely a common descent, conceptual autonomy and a 'natural history.' The first and third qualities are, as noted above, relatively common among definitions of ethnicity: while descent features most strongly in primordialist definitions, a common history is strongly emphasized by Smith and his fellow ethnosymbolists in their discussion of myth and memory. The second quality is Fearon and Laitin (2000, 9)'s attempt to avoid including such groups as Indian castes and the British upper class, in that 'an aristocracy cannot exist – conceptually – unless commoners exist, and the same applies for classes and castes. By contrast, the existence of an ethnic category does not depend conceptually on the existence of any particular other ethnic category.' In other words, the conceptual autonomy roughly corresponds to whether a group is defined by its internal attributes or in opposition to another such group.

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[25] The authors write that ethnic groups 'habitually exhibit, albeit in varying degrees, six main features.' It does not help matters that, almost alone in the field, Hutchinson and Smith write about *ethnies*, or 'ethnic communities,' rather than ethnic groups; similarly and equally unhelpfully, sociobiologists like Van den Berghe use the word 'ethny.'

Yet there are several problems with the use of conceptual autonomy as a defining factor for ethnicity. First, as already noted in the case of commensality, it is hardly likely that conceptual autonomy is a criterion that would correlate with popular usage. Second, while Fearon and Laitin (2000, 16) agree that 'it is an empirical fact that ethnic groups "understand themselves" through contrasts with other ethnic groups,' they fail to recognize that there are no ethnic groups (or nations) in recorded history that have not in some way defined themselves in opposition to another such group or groups.[26] Conversely, one cannot easily argue that castes and classes are not conceptually autonomous: members of high castes in India and the upper class Britain are the descendents of invaders from central Asia and Normandy, respectively, who were, at the time, ethnically different from the resident population. Indeed, the same argument applies to the Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda and Burundi, whom Fearon and Laitin (2000) nonetheless claim to be conceptually autonomous.

4.2. The Importance of the Homeland

A better way to exclude classes and castes from a typology of ethnicity – while also including Hutus and Tutsis – is the notion of a homeland. Traditionally understood as the 'original' home of an ethnic group, the homeland is much more readily used in popular discussion of ethnicity than conceptual autonomy. Smith (1998, 63) includes a homeland in his definition, noting that

> Ethnic nationalists… desire the land of their putative ancestors and the sacred places where their heroes and sages walked, fought and taught. It is a historic or ancestral 'homeland' that they desire, one which they believe to be exclusively 'theirs' by virtue of links with events and personages of earlier generations of 'their' people.

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[26] Cf. Cohen (1978, 389), who writes that 'ethnicity has no existence apart from interethnic relations.'

Smith (1991, 9) defines this 'homeland' as

> The 'historic' land… where terrain and people have exerted mutual, and beneficial, influence over several generations. The homeland becomes a repository of historic memories and associations… The land's resources also become exclusive to the people; they are not for 'alien' use and exploitation.

The homeland is missing from the common language definition because Fearon and Laitin (2000) attempt to include the Roma (Gypsies), who do not live in a definable territory. However, this case is somewhat controversial, as many if not most Roma conceive of themselves as the descendents of immigrants from north-west India. (This is reflected in the presence of a red 16-spoke wheel in the middle of the Romani national flag, copied directly from the Indian national flag.) Furthermore, as the Roma are as the sole example of an ethnic group without a homeland given by Fearon and Laitin (2000, 11),[27] it is possible that it is the exception that proves the rule.[28]

A homeland also provides a way to exclude classes and castes yet include groups like the Tutsi and Hutus. Despite the fact that the both the British upper classes and high castes in India descend from foreign invaders,[29] this fact has little to no relevance in contemporary British and Indian societies, since neither group claims Normandy or central Asia as their homeland.[30] Contrarily, the idea that Tutsis are originally from Ethiopia while the Hutus are indigenous to the

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[27] Toft (2001, 6) also notes the Roma as the only ethnic group without a homeland.

[28] Of course, one could argue that Fearon and Laitin have implicitly included a homeland in their definition, since the 'natural history' of an ethnic group they include must take place in some territory – which with most ethnic groups corresponds to their homeland.

[29] Cf. Cordaux et al. (2004), who show stronger genetic links between high castes in both North and South India to central Asians than to tribal groups in both areas.

[30] In fact, one could argue that both groups have so successfully indigenized themselves that they are emblematic of their respective nations. In Britain one need merely note the popular title of 'England's Rose' bestowed upon the aristocrat Princess Diana, while in India the highest caste, the Brahmins, are the priests in the religion most central to Indian identity, namely Hinduism.

Great Lakes Region has great contemporary resonance in regional ethnic politics, playing, for instance, a large role in the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

One possible response to substituting a homeland for conceptual autonomy in the common language definition is that, by excluding castes and classes and including the Roma, it results in the same set of groups as the original definition and is therefore no better or worse. However, there are two very good reasons to include a homeland in a definition of ethnicity. First, recent political economy scholarship has shown how important ethnic homelands are to the study of ethnic conflict and war. Toft (2001, 5-6) argues that 'the likelihood of ethnic war is largely a function of how the principal antagonists – a state and its dissatisfied minority – think about a territory in dispute… Ethnic groups will seek to rule territory in which they are geographically concentrated, especially if that region is a historic homeland.' On the other hand, 'conceptual autonomy' seems to play little role in predicting conflict or war between groups; one need merely note the prevalence of caste conflict across India and various degrees of class conflict across nearly the whole world.[31]

Second, the addition of a homeland to the definition allows us a better way to tackle the controversial question of whether racial groups should be included in a set of ethnic groups. According to the original common language definition, races cannot unquestionably qualify as ethnic groups since they are not clearly conceptually autonomous: as with castes and classes, they are largely defined in opposition to other groups rather than their internal characteristics.[32]

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[31] For one example of how caste conflict plays out in contemporary South India, see Harriss (2003). There remains, however, more research to be done into the differences between conflict generated between conceptually autonomous groups and non-conceptually autonomous groups.

[32] Banton (1983, 106) writes that 'ethnicity is generally more concerned with the identification of "us," while racism is more oriented to the categorisation of "them".' To make this point in more down-to-earth terms, one need merely question the concept of 'White Pride' put forth by white supremacists: what, exactly, is there to be proud about being white, other than not being black? As I shall show in a moment, the opposite case of 'Black Pride' is more complex.

Indeed, one cannot imagine a group of people defined by the color of their skin if all people have the same color skin. (The same would go for defining people on the basis of other racial features like epicanthic [eye] folds, hair type, nose shape, etc.)[33] Yet while some scholars like Banton (1983) and Smith (1991, 21) would agree that ethnic communities 'must be sharply differentiated from a race,'[34] many others like Van den Berghe (1979) and Eriksen (1993, 4-5) would disagree. For instance, Varshney (2001, 365) claims that, by classifying religious, racial and sectarian conflicts as ethnic conflicts, the scholar can thereby compare disputes which are often similar in their 'intensity, duration or relative intractability.' Most importantly, of course, many if not most non-academics would include races as ethnic groups, at least in the US, thereby meaning that, if one is to stick to the common language approach, one should incorporate race into a definition of ethnicity.

When one applies the homeland criterion to racial groups, one gets a complex answer. One could make the case that racial groups can be said to have homelands: blacks come from Sub-Saharan Africa, whites from Europe, Hispanics from Latin America and Asians from South Asia (as the word is used in Britain) or East Asia (as it is used in North America). However, as was noted above in the case of the British aristocracy and the Indian castes, it is important to distinguish a mere place of origin from a homeland to which a given group sees as part of its identity. Indeed, while white Americans come from Europe, the image of Europe as a homeland has relatively little resonance for them, especially as compared to white minorities in Africa.[35] Furthermore, white Americans rarely designate themselves 'European-Americans,' preferring to

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[33] Fearon and Laitin (2000) seem to gloss over this problem, assuming that races are conceptually autonomous like ethnic groups.

[34] Similarly, Malik (1996, 174-177) notes, 'among sociologists and anthropologists… there is a general sense that if race describes differences created by imputed biological distinction, ethnicity refers to differences with regards to cultural distinctions.'

use the inaccurate word 'Caucasian,' which (in the form of 'Caucasoid') was originally coined by 19th-century anthropologists to describe those peoples of European, Middle Eastern and North Indian descent.[36] White Americans also have less attachment to their place of origin than black Americans, who have increasingly called themselves 'African-American' since the demise of the word 'Negro' in the 1960s. Both African-Americans and black residents of the West Indies were at the forefront of the pan-African movement in the early 20th century, which promoted, among other ideas, the idea of Africa as the homeland for all blacks in the world and, among adherents of Marcus Garvey, the return of blacks to Africa.   Needless to say, the white separatist/supremacist movement in the US does not call for whites to return to Europe but rather establish a white homeland in the US. Finally, one need merely contrast how visits to Africa by American politicians are often seen as a ploy to garner more African-American votes; similar visits to Europe are never seen as attempts to increase support from European-Americans.[37] Thus it is much easier to make a case for black Americans as an ethnic group than white Americans.

Of course, this argument should not suggest that black Americans actually are an ethnic group, but merely that a stronger case may be made for them than for white Americans. The fact remains that, as with many white Americans, most black Americans do not actually know their specific place of origin. As opposed to most Africans themselves, who are very aware of their specific homelands, black Americans cannot identify, in Smith (1991, 9)'s words, the 'sacred places where their heroes and sages walked, fought and taught.' This problem has led black

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[35] In an autobiography of her childhood in what was then Rhodesia, Fuller (2003) notes with bemusement her mother's professed love for Scotland, as her 'home' even though she had only set foot there as a tourist.

[36] Interestingly, white supremacists like David Duke prefer the phrase 'European-American' to 'Caucasian,' perhaps in an effort to legitimize 'white nationalism;' cf. www.duke.org.

Americans – as well as West Indians and Black Britons – to view the entire continent of Africa as their homeland, adopting such dispirate 'heroes and sages' as the 20th-century Ethiopian emperor Hailie Selassie and the 19th-century Zulu king Shaka Zulu despite the fact that practically no black Americans are of Ethiopian or Zulu descent. One need merely contrast African-Americans with people of South Asian descent in Fiji, East and South Africa and the Caribbean, almost all of whom can identify the part of South Asia – normally north-west India – where their ancestors originated.

4.3. Conclusion

A common language definition of ethnicity thus improves on both constructivist and primordialist theories in a variety of ways. In its reliance on key, simple criteria it is both easier to use in policy analysis and compiling data sets. Furthermore, the substitution of a homeland for conceptual autonomy in the common language defintion allows us to include at least some racial groups in our definition of ethnicity, thereby bringing it closer to how ethnicity is understood in popular usage.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have examined how an extreme form of constructivism has misled several major scholars of ethnicity and conflict to incorrect assumptions about the fluidity and endogeneity of ethnicity to external factors. In proposing how to solve this problem, rather than

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[37] Indeed, such a strategy might even decrease a politician's share of the 'white vote' – inasmuch as one can speak of such a thing: see for instance the recent animosity towards the French, German and Spanish for not fully supporting the US in its invasion of Iraq.

advocating a less extreme form of constructivism or a version of primordialism or 'perdurabilism' (Hale 2004, 462), I have instead proposed a modified form of Fearon and Laitin (2000)'s common language definition. I have argued that this new definition, which substitutes a homeland as a criterion instead of conceptual autonomy, is the most suitable definition of ethnicity for use in political economy literature.

Yet, if one were to return to the examples examined in section 3, how would this new definition fare? Since the common language definition does not emphasize fluidity and endogeneity to external factors, let alone the influence of the economy, it is obvious that it would not support Collier and Hoeffler (2005)'s claims that Scotland or other nations and/or ethnic groups could be created when it is economically advantageous to do so or that their salience and/or existence would fluctuate along with other factors. Indeed, such ethnic characteristics as belief in a common descent, history and homeland do not waver over mere years or even decades. However, on the other hand, a belief in common descent can and does change over generations and centuries when, due to intermarriage, old beliefs in common descent are disregarded and new ones are formed: as Van den Berghe (1996, 59) notes, 'three or four generations of 25% or more exogamy typically erode both racial and ethnic boundaries, and lead to the formation of new ethnic groups.'[38] These phenomena of both ethnic assimilation and creation are easily observable across the world at all periods in history, whether in the case of the assimilation of the Banyoro of Buddu (Uganda) into Buganda (also Uganda) over the course of the 19th century (Wrigley 1996, 218-219),[39] or the creation of a new American nation, separate from Britain, by the time of the American Revolution.

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[38] Caselli and Coleman (2002, 6) rather argue that assimilation among non-Anglo white immigrants to the US has taken place when newcomers 'learn the language well enough that they [can] disguise their ancestry.'

[39] This 'thorough absorption' of the Buddu natives took place within 'four generations at the most.'

While a belief in common descent can and does change significantly over merely a few generations, a belief in a common history or a common homeland is not likely to change as quickly. In the latter case, one need merely observe the current arduous attempts to create a European (supra)national identity in light of the fact that European history is largely filled with centuries of almost constant internal warfare. (Indeed, one could argue that one byproduct of this search for a common European identity has been the rise in both anti-Islamism and anti-Semitism in Europe in recent years, since a shared Christianity, wars against Muslim invaders and the persecution of Jews are three of the very few aspects of European history common to most European nations.) Even more slow to change, however, is a belief in a common homeland: while the Jews are perhaps most notable in their attachment to their homeland of Israel for the past three millennia, they are by no means anomalous, as seen with black Americans in their continued attachment to Africa centuries after being brought over as slaves to the New World.

While the above might suggest that the common language approach therefore has more in common with primordialists like Van den Berghe than constructivists, it is important to also note that the approach does not disallow a key feature of constructivism, namely the ability to hold multiple identities at the same time. To return to the Scotland example, there is nothing wrong with the supposition that people may choose to emphasize their class identity over national (Scottish) or state (British) identity at a given point in time and that their emphases can and will change. The approach even allows for multiple ethnic identities: one need merely observe the nested identities of the traditional residents of the Ssese islands in the Ugandan part of Lake Victoria, who can legitimately identify themselves ethnically as Basesse, Baganda or Bantu, where all three identities qualify as ethnic under the common language approach. Furthermore,

in its emphasis on a common history, the common language approach allows for the creation of new identities when formerly unitary ethnic groups or nations are split between states and thereby develop separate histories, as with the Somalis and their residence under colonial rule in Ethiopia and British, French and Italian Somaliland.[40]

Thus the common language definition allows for both change and continuity in a way with which few scholars would disagree – except for those on the extremes of the primordialism/constructivism continuum. However, up to now, few scholars have examined its merits. Of course, one must add that unfortunately few scholars of ethnicity in the political economy literature have examined the merits of *any* definition of or approach to ethnicity (Green 2004). Therefore, if political economy studies of ethnicity and nationalism are to move forward, scholars must first examine their preconceptions of ethnicity before engaging in the debate on the 'interpretivist,' 'quantoid' and common language approaches. Only then will they be able to avoid repeating the mistakes of previous scholars.

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[40] While many scholars still speak of the Somalis as a singular ethnic group or nation, it is increasingly evident that citizens of the unrecognized country of Somaliland – whose borders corresponde with the former borders of British Somaliland – see themselves as a separate nation from other Somalis (Jacquin-Berdal 2002, 190).

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