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David Romano

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1 Making sense of ethnic nationalist resurgence

Introduction

Throughout today's world, ethnic minorities are mobilizing along ethnic nationalist lines, demanding power and recognition as a group from the states in which they live. In some cases, they are demanding a state of their own, based on their group's status as a nation of its own. These challengers to the states in which they live are often brutally suppressed, yet mobilization often continues in the face of this repression. Why, despite the high risks involved and the often remote chances of success, have such movements continued to emerge?

Contextually specific accounts of ethnic nationalist resurgence typically lack much of a theoretical component. The historical details of specific cases are thought to present an "obvious" explanation for the conflict – "group 'X' was oppressed, dissatisfied, or simply in a position to wrench more power from the state, which it then tried to go about doing in the following way . . ." forms a common approach to the subject. The fact that we can probably find a vast array of injustices, grievances, and relative deprivation affecting ethnic minorities in every society on the planet, yet few ethnic minority groups mobilize for change, is left unexplained. Approaches that are more theoretical often focus so much on one element of the phenomenon (such as socio-political structures in society, movement strategies, or identity struggles) that the resulting account leaves out more than it explains.

The world certainly needs a better understanding of ethnic nationalist resurgence, given the shocking violence and high death toll that has occurred in places as far apart as Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, East Timor, and, in the case examined here, Kurdistan. The study of politics and sociology includes many facets of human relations, but ethnic nationalist strife stands out as one of the most dramatic manifestations of the struggle for power that lies at the heart of political, and human, interaction. A better understanding of ethnic nationalist resurgence requires that one see both the individual trees as well as the forest. If we take the trees as specific cases of ethnic nationalist resurgence and strife, and the

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forest as the broader generalizations and theoretical understandings of such phenomena, then we arrive at the spirit in which this study is undertaken. By rigorously applying general social movement theoretical frameworks to the Kurdish case, I hope to paint a clearer picture of the forest, while at the same time recognizing the rich detail of some of its trees. In this sense, the main contribution of this book is a theoretical one, although what is hopefully a compelling account that includes new details of the specifically Kurdish case, is also presented.

This study of Kurdish ethnic nationalism originally focused on how people are mobilized into ethnic nationalist organizations, given the often high risks and dubious prospects of success for many such movements. I initially expected that an analysis that clarifies the mobilization process could in turn explain the emergence of ethnic nationalist challenges to state authority. I found, however, that to discuss the mobilization process I needed to pay equal attention to the politico-structural context in which it was occurring. Although the analytical approaches that I planned to apply to Kurdish cases of nationalist mobilization (resource mobilization and rational choice theories) do pay some heed to the contemporary context in which actors exist, they are for the most part ahistorical, ignoring the less immediate context out of which actors emerge. Additionally, the rational actor and interest maximizing behavior upon which much of resource mobilization theory is predicated was unable to account for significant elements of the Kurdish case. In particular, the dynamic nature of people's identity, and hence an account of their grievances, interests, and goals, became a major issue rather than a given. Therefore, in addition to an account of the structural political context and mobilization methods of movements, identity politics emerged as the third essential component for a compelling explanation of the emergence and fortunes of Kurdish ethnic nationalist challenges to the state. The reciprocal effects of these three levels of analysis, structural political context, mobilization methods, and identity, proved to be an important part of a satisfying examination of the Kurdish issue. Moreover, I contend that the theoretical issues grappled with in this explanation are not limited to the Kurdish case. Not only the logic of analysis, but also the parcelling of an extremely complex phenomenon into cognitively manageable chunks, should be useful for anyone seeking to examine social movements in other contexts.

Why the Kurdish case?

Kurdistan, as its proponents call it, lies within and around the Zagros mountain range, and is currently divided between the borders of Turkey,

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Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Kurds form roughly twenty-three percent of Turkey's population, twenty-three percent of Iraq's, and ten percent of Iran's population.¹ Kurdish is an Indo-European language related to Persian; the three major dialects spoken today (and not completely comprehensible to each other) are Kurmanji, Sorani, and Zaza. Seventy-five percent of Kurds speak Kurmanji and practice Shaffiite Sunni Islam, while the other twenty-five percent are divided between Shiite Muslims (fifteen percent) Alevi, Christian, Jewish, Yezidi, and Ahl-i-Haqq faiths.² A strong tribal element, a shared memory of a mountain pastoral-nomadic past, awareness of the homeland *Kurdistan* (roughly speaking, the mountainous region described above), and distinct social practices combine with language and history to form a Kurdish culture and ethnicity. This culture maintained its distinctiveness and integrity throughout the centuries.³

The Kurdish homeland's location at the meeting point of the Ottoman and Persian empires also meant that various Kurdish principalities (with varying degrees of attachment to the Ottomans and Persians) were used as a buffer and battleground between these empires. In the seventeenth century, Kurdish poet Ehmed-e Xani had already lamented the situation of the Kurds:

I leave it to God's wisdom
 The Kurds in this world's state
 Why are they deprived of their rights?
 Why are they all doomed?
 See, from the Arabs to the Georgians
 Everything is Kurdish and, as with a citadel,
 The Turks and the Persians besiege them
 From four sides at once.
 And they both make the Kurdish people
 Into a target for Fate's arrow.⁴

Of course, Khani's nationalist view of the Kurds was at least three hundred years ahead of most of his countrymen. It was only around the time of World War One, as the break-up of the Ottoman Empire loomed on the horizon, that Kurdish nationalist movements emerged in significant form. For the purposes of this study, the contemporary division of

¹ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I. B. Taurus, 1997), p. 3; and Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State* (London: Zed Books, Ltd., 1992), p. 15.

² Mehrdad Izady, *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook* (Washington DC: Taylor and Francis, 1992).

³ Mordechai Nisan, *Minorities in the Middle East* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1991), p. 28.

⁴ Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Christine Allison, *Kurdish Culture and Identity* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1996), p. 10.

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the same ethnic group within three different states provides a rare comparative opportunity – the emergence of such Kurdish ethnic nationalist movements can be compared in three different structural contexts. More than twenty Kurdish revolts have broken out in the twentieth century. This provides us with a rich historical tapestry for the analysis of ethnic nationalist mobilization. To what extent these revolts were based on a politicized Kurdish ethnicity is one issue investigated here. Kurds in Iraq, Iran, and especially Turkey have traditionally had the option of assimilating into the dominant society, rather than pursuing their interests as Kurds. Many Kurdish elites did, in fact, choose this route. Explaining such choices strikes at the heart of the debate on the nature of ethnicity and the (re)emergence of ethnic nationalism.

The emergence of ethnic nationalist challenges to state authority in the Turkish, Iraqi, and Iranian cases is particularly puzzling. Especially in Turkey, discrimination against talented and motivated Kurdish individuals who assimilate to the dominant culture is minimal; Turkey's former President, Turgut Ozal, was half-Kurdish. Yet in all three states, political expressions of Kurdishness have been brutally suppressed. What accounts for continued Kurdish sub-national challenges, if the penalties for such challenges are so severe, and assimilation is an available, less dangerous option?⁵ Given the awesome repressive capacity of these states, as well as some of the most vigilant imaginable policies opposing expressions of politicized Kurdish ethnicity, how were Kurdish opposition groups able to mobilize effective challenges? If we can satisfactorily explain the mobilization process in the Kurdish case, we might be able to explain it anywhere, particularly in contexts where sub-national challenges to the state are less dangerous.

Finally, the Kurdish nationalist movements themselves display fascinating differences. Today, we can compare the Turkish Kurdish PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) to the Iraqi Kurdish KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) as well as the Iranian Kurdish KDPI (Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran) and Komala. The PKK, for instance, was a non-tribally based, avowedly Marxist-Leninist group, drawing much of its support from urban Kurds. Its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, was originally active in the Turkish political Left, but severed his connection with Turkish groups and

⁵ For a Kurdish nationalist, the answer is simple: assimilating and forsaking one's identity is akin to suicide. Such an answer poses severe problems for many social scientists who favor a rational-choice approach and would attempt to explain such a choice in more utilitarian terms (e.g. the possible gains in improved status from a successful ethnic nationalist challenge make the risks worthwhile at times).

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founded his own ethnically based Kurdistan Workers' Party.⁶ The Iraqi KDP, on the other hand, has much more of a traditional tribal base (despite its urban origins), and is more conservative in its class and gender perspectives. It draws more of its support from rural Iraqi Kurds. The programs espoused by each movement differ considerably as well. Accounting for such differences sheds a great deal of light on theories of ethnic nationalism and social movements. New mechanisms and important variables in ethnic nationalist mobilization may also be uncovered.

On the nature of ethnicity

Kurdish nationalist challengers to the state belong to a subset of social movements known as ethnic nationalist movements. In order to understand what this means we must address the nature of ethnicity, a concept resistant to clear-cut definition. "Ethnicity" generally refers to a complex web of social and historical traits that combine to form someone's identity. Definitions currently in use generally highlight a group's emphasis on common origins and descent, as well as shared characteristics based on language, race, religion, territory, culture, values, or history.⁷ These common origins and shared characteristics may be real or fictitious. These may be important to different degrees, or one or more may even be absent.⁸

David Brown describes the "traditional," or primordial, approach to understanding ethnicity as an assumption that groups sharing distinctive religious, linguistic, or racial characteristics will naturally arrive at a corresponding group consciousness, a consciousness that typically manifests itself in the nationalist desire for a state belonging to the group in question.⁹ Works such as that of Geertz exemplify the primordial approach.¹⁰ This view, however, fails to explain why some "objective" cultural groups fail to develop strong group consciousness, while others with more tenuously shared characteristics *do* emerge as fairly unified, ethnically conscious polities.¹¹ Scholars such as Smith and Stack respond

⁶ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, p. 418.

⁷ Myron Weiner, "Peoples and States in a New Ethnic Order?" *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4, (1992). Hutchinson and Smith provide the following definition of an *ethnic*: "[a] named population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members," *Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 6.

⁸ Crawford Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism* (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), p. 11.

⁹ David Brown, "Ethnic Revival: Perspectives on State and Society," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (1989), 5.

¹⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). ¹¹ *Ibid.*

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by positing the existence of a latent primordial identity, which could be politically activated under the right stimulus.¹²

Instrumentalists such as Brass and Gurr, on the other hand, argue that ethnicity is an imagined identity, typically constructed by elites to further their instrumental goals.¹³ Gurr and Harff state: “The main goals of a group are assumed to be material and political gains; cultural identity is invoked only as a means to attain those goals . . . Political entrepreneurs capitalize on . . . differences to establish ethnically based political movements aimed at increasing the economic and political well-being of their group or region.”¹⁴ Milton Esman adds the following:

Instrumentalists . . . argue that ethnicity is not a historical given at all, but in fact a highly adaptive and malleable phenomenon. In response to changing conditions, the boundaries of an ethnic collectivity can expand or contract, individuals move in and out and even share membership in more than one community. The very content, symbols, and meaning of a particular collective identity can and do evolve. In effect, ethnicity is a dynamic, not fixed and immutable element of social and political relationships.¹⁵

Such an argument, however, may exaggerate the degree of flexibility of ethnic identities as well as understate the powerful emotional appeal of ethnicity.¹⁶ In Donald Horowitz’s memorable phrase, “The ethnic group is not just a trade union.”¹⁷

The theoretical divide between instrumentalists and primordialists is often overstated, however. A view that takes the various components of ethnicity (language, culture, shared origins, religion) as the building blocks, or context, from which ethnic identification *may* be constructed, solves the problem. These building blocks limit the flexibility of the construction; although the ethnic kinship ties may be fictional, they cannot be pulled out of thin air.¹⁸ Factors such as the state, the process of modernization, the manipulations of state and non-state elites, and

¹² Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin Books, 1991); John F. Stack (ed.), *The Primordial Challenge* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986). Stack argues that such a latent primordial identity could nevertheless be dynamic in nature, as it experiences continual reinterpretation and adjusts to different circumstances, however.

¹³ Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (London: Sage Publications, 1991); Ted Robert Gurr and Barbara Harff, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Gurr and Harff, *Ethnic Conflict*, p. 78.

¹⁵ Milton J. Esman, *Ethnic Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 10.

¹⁶ Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict: Group Comparison and the Sources of Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 104.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Esman argues that “Efforts to ‘construct’ an ethnic identity from empty cultural materials usually fail, like the attempt in the 1960s to regenerate an ‘Occitanian’ identity in Southern France, for the label conveys no legitimate meaning to its intended constituents” (*Ethnic Politics*, p. 10).

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the mobilization process itself determine the saliency of ethnic identification as a political factor.¹⁹ If, as Ross and Cottrell contend, “Ethnicity is a particular type of collective identity which has at least the potential for being a basis of mobilization,”²⁰ then the literature on social movements can be profitably applied to cases of ethnic nationalist challenges to the state. Particularly if one views ethnicity as at least partially constructed (from fictional myths of origin, historical events interpreted in a nationalist light, and so on), the ethnic group and especially ethnic nationalist movements claiming to represent the group become ascriptive in nature. One can choose to be a member of the ethnic social movement or not.

Young and Esman in particular insist on the need to view ethnic identity as a dynamic variable, one that can ebb and flow in political importance. One of the tasks of an ethnic nationalist organization is to instill and maintain a strong sense of ethnic identity in all those who could conceivably fall within the ethnic group’s defined category.²¹ The organization’s task does not end there: existing ethnic identities must then be politicized, that is, used as a basis for making claims or challenges towards the state. Hence, this study proposes a four-fold categorization of ethnic identity:

- (1) those who lie structurally outside the ethnic group category (they can never identify with the ethnic group in question);
- (2) those who may be within the ethnic category, but who do not identify themselves ethnically;
- (3) those who consider themselves part of the ethnic group, but in a non-politicized way (they do not make claims on the state based on their ethnicity); and
- (4) those whose ethnic identity is politicized.

Such a four-fold categorization is necessary in order to evaluate an ethnic nationalist movement’s status amongst the populace (how many opponents, possible supporters, and active sympathizers it has available depends on

¹⁹ Young, *Politics of Cultural Pluralism*; John F. Stack (ed.), *Ethnic Identities in a Transnational World* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981); Joseph Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); Susan Olzak and Joane Nagel (eds.), *Competitive Ethnic Relations* (New York: Academic Press, Inc., 1986); Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*; Esman, *Ethnic Politics*.

²⁰ Jeffrey A. Ross, Phillip Rawkins, Ann B. Cottrell, and Robert St. Cry, *Mobilization of Collective Identity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980), p. x.

²¹ Here I implicitly refer to the objective limits of constructed ethnic identities, which must be evaluated in a contextually sensitive manner. For instance, a Francophone Quebecer may move to Ontario as a child, forget French, and become an Anglophone Canadian. However, a fourth generation Chinese Malaysian cannot become a Malay by forgetting Chinese.

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people's identity), as well as the values and motivations of different elements of the populace (since someone's goals cannot be known without first establishing their identity).

Ethnicity is one of several possible identifications and sources of motivation; other sources include occupation, ideology, class, region, and religion.²² Yet, Esman convincingly adds, "Ethnicity is not, however, normally only one of several equal choices. The more politicized ethnicity becomes, the more it dominates other expressions of identity, eclipsing class, occupational, and ideological solidarities."²³ Hence if we can establish that a significant portion of the populace has developed a politicized ethnic identity, it would follow that this identity plays the central role in motivating their actions and forming their value preferences.

On social movements

Previous literature on both ethnic nationalist resurgence and social movements in general tended to derive its explanations from one of three broad levels of analysis: the state, its institutions, and their relationship with society (termed the "structural approach" here), the social movements and their mobilizational imperatives (referred to as "resource mobilization" and "rational choice" perspectives here), and finally, social psychology and identity. A few scholars such as Charles Tilly have important elements of all three approaches in their work, but one level of analysis dominates the others (in Tilly's case, the resource mobilization perspective), and the synthesized interplay of the variables is not clearly laid out.²⁴

Structural approaches

Structural theorists agree with A. J. R. Groom's explanation of the structuralist approach in social sciences:

The starting point of structuralism is simple. An emphasis must be given to the whole since this has an impact greater than the sum of its parts and must therefore be taken into consideration in any empirical theory of behavior at whatever level. As Richard Little puts it, "Structuralists assume that human behaviour cannot be understood simply by examining individual motivation and intention because,

²² Esman, *Ethnic Politics*, p. 15. ²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1978). Tilly's approach, for example, fails to consider identity as a dynamic variable, subject to influence by both social movements and structural changes in the state and society. As a result, people's identities, goals, and values are treated as a given.

when aggregated, human behaviour precipitates structures of which the individuals may be unaware.”²⁵

Although few theoretical approaches examining social movements, ethnic nationalist resurgence, and revolution fit neatly and exclusively within the category of “structural” theories (Theda Skocpol’s 1979 work stands out as an example of an approach that completely rejects the importance of movement strategies, agency, and chance), a great many *do* place the bulk of their analytical emphasis on the broader political system, the economy, historical trends, and the general characteristics of a society.²⁶ Karl Marx’s ideas about how objective contradictions between the relations of production and the forces of production eventually engender revolutionary class conflict and the overthrow of an antiquated system is the most well-known of structuralist approaches. Although the deterministic conviction of some Marxists that such factors will necessarily and certainly bring about a revolutionary overthrow is shared by few contemporary scholars of the subject, his focus on structural variables remains widespread.²⁷ The occasional brief attention that primarily structuralist theories pay to agency and the strategies of social movements is, in fact, the most common tactic for explaining away deviant data, and generally not an integral part of the theoretical approach.

Theda Skocpol provides the following rationale for a strictly structural approach to explaining revolutions:

... historically no successful social revolution has ever been “made” by a mass-mobilizing, avowedly revolutionary movement ... in no sense did such

²⁵ A. J. R. Groom, “Paradigms in conflict: the strategist, the conflict researcher, and the peace researcher,” *Review of International Studies* 14 (1988), p. 76. Although Groom and Little’s statements about structuralism were made in reference to international relations, they can also apply to our subject matter.

²⁶ For instance, some of the more well-known scholars of ethnic resurgence, revolutions, and rebellions who pursue what I broadly term *structural* approaches include: Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969); Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (London: Sage Publications, 1991); Brown, “Ethnic Revival”; Jack Goldstone, *Revolutions: Theoretical, Comparative, and Historical Studies* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986); Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975); Chalmers Johnson, *Revolutionary Change* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966); Joel S. Migdal, *Peasants, Politics, and Revolution; Pressures Towards Political and Social Change in the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967); Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and Eric Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

²⁷ Marx himself, however, left room for agency in his theories.

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[revolutionary] vanguards – let alone vanguards with large, mobilized, and ideologically imbued mass followings – ever create the revolutionary crises they exploited. Instead . . . revolutionary situations have developed due to the emergence of politico-military crises of state and class domination. And only because of the possibilities thus created have revolutionary leaderships and rebellious masses contributed to the accomplishment of revolutionary transformations.²⁸

In short, Skocpol's focus revolved around the necessary conditions for revolutions (crises of state) without paying attention to sufficient conditions – mainly the actions and strategies of the actors in question.

Specific structural variables applicable to an analysis of revolutionary upsurges and rebellion (including ethnic nationalist resurgence) include²⁹ modes of production, class conflict, state fiscal and economic crises,³⁰ subsistence crises and absolute deprivation,³¹ relative deprivation,³² improvements in social and economic conditions after prolonged oppression,³³ improvements in socio-economic conditions followed by stagnation or a sharp reversal,³⁴ rigid institutions unable to keep pace with societal demands and changes,³⁵ cleavages within a society's elite and ruling classes,³⁶ loss of a government's effective coercive capacity,³⁷ the nature and organization of peasant communities,³⁸ transnational relations,³⁹ urbanization and demographic growth,⁴⁰ modernization,⁴¹ internal colonialism and a cultural division of labour,⁴² and finally,

²⁸ Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, p. 17.

²⁹ Many of these variables are important to the theories of several different scholars. In their treatment here, however, I attribute them to the scholar(s) whose use of the variable in question is the earliest such attempt or one of the most well known. Some ideas, such as subsistence crises and absolute deprivation's role in causing people to rebel, are so old that it is hard to justify attributing them to anyone.

³⁰ Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*.

³¹ James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

³² Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

³³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Vintage, 1954).

³⁴ James C. Davies, "Toward a Theory of Revolution," *American Sociological Review* 6: 1 (1962), pp. 5–19.

³⁵ Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1965); Johnson, *Revolutionary Change*.

³⁶ Brinton, *Anatomy of Revolution*; Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*.

³⁷ Brinton, *Anatomy of Revolution*.

³⁸ Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship*; Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*; Scott, *Moral Economy of the Peasant*.

³⁹ Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*.

⁴⁰ Young, *Politics of Cultural Pluralism*; Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion*.

⁴¹ Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1953); Robert Melson and Howard Wolpe, "Modernization and the Politics of Communalism: A Theoretical Perspective," *American Political Science Review* 64 (December 1970), pp. 1112–1130; Young, *Politics of Cultural Pluralism*; and Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*.

⁴² Hechter, *Internal Colonialism*.