

# **The Global Resurgence of Ethnicity: An Inquiry Into the Sociology of Ideological Discontent**

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This essay takes the position that global resurgence of ethnic hostilities can be seen as a manifestation of discontent with the proclaimed national ideologies. The breakdown in the conviction that adherence to an ideology and the application of a related social agenda would ameliorate the critically felt ills of a society, has resulted in the redirection of frustrations towards scapegoat minorities. Whether the ideology has been democratic secularism or socialism, the inability to "deliver the cargo" of economic and social well being, political stability has proven to be a direct indictment against the ideology itself. And, like opportunistic diseases, ethnic suspicion, hatred, and hostility have invaded the body politic of the national communities weakened by a crisis of ideological faith. In India, for example, the trend towards "Hinduization" indicates disillusionment with a forty-year experiment with secularism. This essay proposes that resurgent ethnicity has filled the vacuum created by the loss of ideology, and it takes a different trajectory to the "end of ideology end of history" theme of K. Marx, D. Bell, H. Marcuse, and F. Fukuyama. Its objective is to enquire into the conditions needed for ideological realization and the consequences of its loss.

## **Introduction**

As the Twentieth Century draws to an end, the world witnesses an intensification of ethnic, religious, and tribal confrontations. Ethnic hostilities and ethnic conflict have become a world-wide phenomenon. Yugoslavia, Rwanda, India, Algeria, Congo, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Egypt, the Republics of the former Soviet Union, and countless others have been repeatedly shaken by the paroxysm of ethnoviolence. Ethnicity and ethnic upsurge are defining political and social alliances in the struggle for power, and, in some cases, in the struggle for survival of individuals, groups, and nations.

The ubiquity of ethnic conflict runs counter to the more democratic and progressive aspirations of earlier decades. These ideals had predicted a steady decline of ethnic attachments which were seen as essentially transitional and recessive.<sup>1</sup> In Milton Gordon's "liberal expectancy" there was the expectation that in the modern and modernizing societies the "primordial" differences between groups would become less significant. In response to the democratizing influence of education and communication there would be increasing emphasis on achievement rather than ascription. The Marxist "radical" expectancy held that social class—an economic category—would do away with all other divisions. Class and the spirit of 'proletarian internationalism' would define social alliances—not language, religion, tribe, or national origin.<sup>2</sup>

The movements for national liberation in colonial Asia and Africa, and the socialist 'class based' frameworks of Soviet Union, China, and other Eastern European nations which seemed to unify the otherwise diverse segments of the society, gave substance to these "expectancies." The general belief among progressives was that these broad coalitions based on economic and political characteristics would define future alliances and not narrow ethnic attributes.

The disturbing escalation of ethnic violence in recent years challenges all these assertions. Ethnicity is alive and well. Its power to determine boundaries, alliances, and battlelines has never been stronger. As a consequence, there has been an eclipse of hope associated with these progressive ideologies.

## Purposes

Since it was expected to diminish in significance, social scientists' interest and analysis of the subject matter—later coined as "ethnicity"—had not even coalesced until quite recently. In their 1973 study on the subject, Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan contended that "ethnicity seems to be a new term."<sup>3</sup> This shows that a systematic effort to conceptualize the phenomenon had not even started in earnest until the late 1970s. As Moynihan writes, "it is possible to have studied international relations through the whole of the twentieth century and hardly to have noticed...the turmoil of the ethnic conflict." "Clearly", he continues, "we had a subject here that had to struggle to make its way into the modern sensibility."<sup>4</sup> As Donald L. Horowitz has summed up: "Connections among Biafra, Bangladesh, and Burundi, Beirut, Brussels, and Belfast were at first hesitantly made—isn't one 'tribal', one 'linguistic', another 'religious'—but that is true no longer. Ethnicity has fought and bled and burned its way into public and scholarly consciousness."<sup>5</sup> As a consequence of delay in acknowledging the gravity of this matter, social scientists have, at best, only partial answers and explanations of this global "pandemonium." What is urgently needed is a general theory

of ethnospecific behavior and interaction which can draw out patterns in otherwise diverse events; a theory which can explain the revival of ethnic conflict, the vitality and potency of ethnic boundaries in Yugoslavia, Algeria, India, or any other country. Today, "ethnic conflict possesses elements of universality and uniformity that were not present at earlier times. The ubiquity of the phenomenon provides the basis for comparative analysis."<sup>6</sup> This paper proposes that the revival of ethnic hostilities can be seen as a manifestation of comprehensive disillusionment with proclaimed ideologies in one country after another. The breakdown in the conviction that adherence to an ideology and the application of a related social agenda would bear fruit in terms of amelioration of critically felt ills of the society has resulted in the redirection of animosities, frustrations, and discontentment towards scapegoat minorities—ethnic, religious, and tribal. Whether the professed ideology has been democratic secularism or socialism, the inability to deliver the cargo of economic and social well-being, political stability, human rights, fairness in everyday dealings, and peace to the national community has proven to be a direct indictment against the ideology itself. And, like opportunistic diseases, ethnic suspicion, hatred, and hostility have invaded the body politic of the national communities weakened by a crisis of ideological faith. This paper proposes that resurgent ethnicity has filled the vacuum that has been created by the loss of ideology.

### **Ideology and Ethnicity**

The dismantling of the Soviet Union and its satellites and the subsequent escalation of ethnic strife in the region have brought a new vigor to the discussion of ethnicity. Quite a bit of interesting dialogue has ensued in trying to account for the reemergence of ethnic conflict and the renewed emphasis on ethno-nationalism in the republics of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, after having been absent as an area of contention for almost seventy years in the Soviet Union and about four decades in Yugoslavia.

Since 1917, ideology, not ethnicity, had been salient in the political, economic, and diplomatic discourse of the Soviet Union. And for the last five and half decades, ideology—specifically a version of Marxism-Leninism—had been the determining factor in policies and alliances in domestic and foreign matters of this region in general. As a consequence, for much of this century the basic conflict has been over ideology. Post-1945 world politics is basically the politics of revolution and counter revolution, Marxism-Leninism and capitalism. This pattern broke down in 1989 with the unraveling of the Soviet Union and was immediately equated with the triumph of one, the "right" ideology over the other. The events have been viewed, since then, as a fitting obituary for socialism and a victory for capitalism, democracy, and freedom. The ethnic

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resurgence is viewed, quite simply, as an effort to complete unfinished business and to play out impulses which had remained incomplete<sup>8</sup> under the ironhanded control of the socialist state. This point was clearly brought out in a recent *New York Times* article.

Freed from the grip of a communist propaganda that had insisted that all peoples of the Soviet Union live in harmony and brotherhood, Russians and other nationalities are struggling to come to terms with a world in which they can say anything whether it be...an ugly racial slur against a neighbor or a blatant anti-Semitic remark.<sup>9</sup>

The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia were very serious about upholding "their formulas for national federation and autonomy. As E.J. Hobsbawm puts it,

these were the only form of constitutional arrangements which socialist states have taken seriously since 1917...while other constitutional texts...have for long periods been purely notional, national autonomy has never ceased to have a certain operational reality...Hence, as we can now see in melancholy retrospect, it was the great achievement of the communist regimes in multinational countries to limit the disastrous effects of nationalism within them. The Yugoslav revolution succeeded in preventing the nationalists within its states from massacring each other almost certainly for longer than ever before in their history, though this achievement has now unfortunately crumbled.<sup>10</sup>

Tito gave highest priority to the maintenance of a viable federal system within a socialist framework. One of his greatest accomplishments was his success in forcing quarrelling nationalities into a single unit. With the constitution of 1963, Yugoslavia became a federal republic comprising Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Macedonia.<sup>11</sup>

The socialist governments maintained a state of stability and ethnic harmony, quite successfully and for a reasonable period, by following a policy which was intrinsic to their ideological agenda. Can the breakdown, then, be used as a legitimate ground to indict the ideology? Does the resurgence of ethnicity in these countries discredit Marxism and its claim that class, an economic category and not ethnicity, "would be the all determining crucible of identity?"<sup>12</sup>

Francis Fukuyama's first essay on the subject published in the Spring of 1989 argues quite simply that Marxism is dead as a guide to political construction. Marxism, to him, was a temporary threat to liberalism, and has been suitably discredited. What we have witnessed is "the passing of Marxism-Leninism...its death as a living ideology of world historical significance."<sup>13</sup> In the process, the ideals of liberal democracy have been vindicated. There has been "[the] triumph of the west, the western idea...an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism...[and] a total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to western liberalism." Mankind's ideological evolution has ended in this triumph and in the "realization of human freedom."<sup>15</sup> This is the end of ideology, and the end of history.

Fukuyama's "end of history—end of ideology" thesis can be used to explain ethnic hostility as a situation which remains unresolved under the authoritarian control of regimes misguided by "invalid, alternate" ideologies such as Marxism-Leninism. The demise of totalitarian regimes simply enables this cauldron of ethnic strife and violence to be emptied out however painfully. Once the ironhand loosens, a panoply of ethnic problems seething just below the surface in all the intervening years is unleashed. The first steps of a newly democratizing society is, therefore, directed tragically at fighting out primordial tribal issues. From this point of view, ethnic resurgence is regarded as concomitant to an end in ideology. Therefore, as Fukuyama contends, the end of history "does not by any means imply the end of international conflict...there would still be a high and perhaps rising level of ethnic and nationalist violence, since those are impulses incompletely played out."<sup>16</sup>

The recent events in Congo are a case in point. In 1990-91, a democracy movement, modeling itself on campaigns for change that were shaking governments in East Europe, began to take root in this country. It forced one of Africa's most determinedly Marxist-Leninist one-party states to hand over power. The democratic elections that followed opened up a Pandora's box of tribal hatreds. Ethnic and regional rivalries have undermined Congo's stability since then.<sup>17</sup> There again we see the exit of an authoritarian state being followed by an escalation of ethnic grievances and hostility.

Some very troubling questions, however, remain unanswered. At what point at the end of history does ethnonationalism play itself out completely? How long does a nation have to subscribe to the ideals of liberal democracy before the issues of ethnic conflict are resolved? What guarantees are there that the democratic ideals will liberalize the intensity of ethnic, religious, tribal hold—ever? Who is to say that progressive liberal expectancy will not wither away as ungloriously as radical expectancy? The experiences of democratic India over the last forty-five years fails to give credence to the notion that "end of history" will mean a true realization of human freedom—

– among other things, freedom from the insecurities, uncertainties, and limitations of ethnoviolence.

What this paper proposes, as an alternative explanation, is that it is not an end of ideology but a loss of ideology that is catapulting nation after nation into these situations of violent strife. How can a society lose an ideology? In two ways: First, when the ideology is distorted, its true essence is lost. The promise it might have held for resolving the core issues is lost. Second, when the most visible protagonists of the ideology, individuals who are most associated with the ideology—the leaders and politicians—are involved in actions and policies that are deemed questionable by the broad sectors of society, the ideology loses its validity, its authenticity. Because, in the judgement of most people, an ideology is only as good as its most ardent advocates—its most vocal, visible practitioners.

Erich Fromm wrote almost thirty-five years ago: "It is one of the peculiar ironies of history that there are no limits to the misunderstanding and distortion of theories, even in an age when there is unlimited access to the sources; there is no more drastic example of this phenomenon than what has happened to the theory of Karl Marx in the last few decades."<sup>18</sup> Fromm passionately believed that the Soviet Union was greatly responsible in propagating this distortion "...the Russian communists appropriated Marx's theory and tried to convince the world that their practices and theory follow his ideas. Although the opposite is true...the Russians' brutal contempt for human dignity and humanistic values is, indeed...the misinterpretation of Marx as the proponent of an economic-hedonistic materialism..."<sup>19</sup> and because "Soviet Union has been looked upon as the very incarnation of all evil; hence her ideas have assumed the quality of the devilish."<sup>20</sup>

In the minds of most observers, Stalin's system of unbridled terror, Ceausescu's blatant abuse of human rights, and the totalitarianism associated with these and other regimes has become synonymous with Marxism. Therefore, when these regimes lost their legitimacy in the last years of the 1980s, Marxism was also considered to have lost its legitimacy. To many, however, what has really been discredited by the developments of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe is not Marxism as a theory of society and social change, but certain totalitarian regimes and their version of Marxism. As Robin Fox contends, the fall of Ceausescu does not mean the demise of Marxism:

Marx certainly said that the temporary proletarian government should seize the means of production, distribution and exchange from the capitalists, he said nothing about, and would have been horrified by, despotism, secret police, totalitarianism, repression, gulags, purges, genocide and grandiose arms programs. Those

consequences of Leninism are what have brought about the downfall of the "socialist" regimes, along with the failure of the totalitarian system of production to raise living standards.

For Marx the only route to true communism was through the internal contradictions of capitalism. These had to be fully developed and fully played out before a proletariat endowed with true class consciousness could emerge and make the transition to the next stage. This progression for Marx was governed by the laws of history; there was no way of cutting corners. One could never reach communism via state despotism imposed by external forces, as in Eastern Europe, or dictatorships established by charismatic tyrants in noncapitalist countries.

In this view, then, the past seventy years or so can be seen as an interruption of the basic process of social change, and one which a Marxist, as opposed to an apologist for Soviet-style tyranny, would have predicted to be inherently unstable and doomed to failure. In the view of genuine Marxist theory, capitalism must run its course. There is no warrant for shortcuts.<sup>21</sup>

In the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Rumania, true class consciousness, the true essence of "proletarian internationalism, one which would be able to successfully withstand narrow parochialism", would be able to truly resolve the "alienation of man from other men,"<sup>22</sup> never developed. The ideals of the "socialist man" were defined by the nomenclatura and were imposed from above. For the broad masses of the people these ideals were like empty eggshells—fragile and devoid of any spiritual content.

The Soviet experience failed to resolve "the alienation (of Man) from his species life...(his) alienation from the essence of his humanity."<sup>23</sup> The recent upsurge of hateful tribalism is a consequence of this failure to restore the essence of humanity in the men and women of the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries. This failure stemmed from the inability or the unwillingness of the regimes to recognize that "...Marx's aim was that of the spiritual emancipation of man, of his liberation from the chains of economic determination, of restituting him to find unity and harmony with his fellow man and with nature."

Unfortunately, for the great majority of the people, the despotism of the so-called "communist" regimes, the constant indignities from economic and material deprivation, and the escalating costs of a mind-



less arms race, all added up to an indictment of the ideology of Marxism. In their minds, it was all rooted in the ideology. Consequently, the promise of the ideology to deliver a better life was lost. The ideology lost its spiritual persuasion. The communities, weakened by a crisis of ideological faith, have subsequently succumbed to primordial tendencies inherent in ethnic suspicion, hatred, and hostility. Frustrations have been re-directed against the "other", designated on the basis of tribal, religious, regional, and other such ascriptive criteria.

In India there has been a similar eclipse of faith in the ideals of secularism. This is epitomized in the disturbing rise of religious fundamentalism, secessionist movements by the Sikhs in the Punjab, Muslims in Kashmir, and a myriad of other sectarian movements in various parts of India. Even though Hobsbawm has assured us that secession in post-colonial regimes is more of an exception than the rule, the separatist agitations in the South-Asian subcontinent, often bloody, take a heavy toll on the welfare and security of the area.

On 7 December 1992, as the Hindu fundamentalisms proceeded to destroy the Barbri Masjid, they also destroyed "the very premise of their nation, that secular right of law, not Hinduism, binds the country together."<sup>25</sup>

How did this come about in a nation which has epitomized civility, democracy, secularism, and nonalignment? A country which has been a beacon of hope for the post-colonial world—with Gandhis and Nehrus to show the way. The upsurge of fundamentalist and sectarian tendencies can, to a large extent, be attributed to the lack of any significant progress in the economic and social well-being of the general populace. A lacking which is directly tied to: (i) the Indian governments disastrous economic policies and planning over the last forty-five years; (ii) social structural problems stemming from gross inequalities in the distribution of land and the continued absence of aggressive land reform strategies; and (iii) the preoccupation of the leaders and politicians with electoral politics towards which all efforts are invested. It is this last point which is particularly important for our discussion on the state of ethnic India.

One explanation for the persistence of ethnic boundaries has been the convenience with which the group can become "a focus of mobilization for the pursuit of group or individual interests. Ethnic conflicts can become one form in which interest conflicts are pursued."<sup>26</sup> Thus ethnicity becomes a means of advancing interest, influencing government decision making, affecting electoral choices, and distributing favors. In several countries, votes are solicited by appealing to specific ethnic interests, the constituencies manipulated by promises of favorable "distribution of governmental largesse."<sup>27</sup> Such manipulative techniques can often have disastrous consequences.

In the 1980s, the Congress Party in India, under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, hoping to make electoral gains in the



state of Punjab, supported the extremist Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale by undermining the moderate leadership of Akali Dal. Even though Sant Bhindranwale and his secessionist party were involved in countless terrorist acts, the Central government refused to take action and was also unwilling to make concessions to the moderate Akalis. The tactic worked and the Congress Party was successful in the polls. However, by June 1985, the Central government felt compelled after a series of assassinations of innocent Hindus and moderate Sikhs in the Punjab to launch an assault on the Golden Temple in Amritsar, where Sant Bhindranwale and his followers had taken refuge. That assault, along with the assassination of Indira Gandhi by two Sikh bodyguards in October, 1984, and the subsequent bloodbath in which thousands of Sikhs and Hindus, mostly poor, were massacred, is an unfortunate example of how governmental manipulation of specific ethnic groups and their interest lobbies can have catastrophic outcomes.

Though Punjab stands out as the most egregious instance of ethnic manipulation, it, nevertheless, is anything but unique. Other religious, tribal, and caste groups have been the victims of such partisan machinations. The Khasis, Bengalis, Assamese, Boro's, Mizo's in Assam and Meghalaya, Muslims, and Hindus in virtually every state have been victims. One group has been repeatedly pitted against the other for the sake of electoral gains. The ease with which ethnic groups facilitate group interests makes them particularly suitable as vehicles of manipulation, which often reinforces their claims at authenticity.

A total disregard for the laudable ideals of secularism can also be seen in government policies, agendas, and laws designed to appease certain ethnic and religions groups which are considered strategic for electoral victory. Even for thoughtful, well-meaning individuals, the special laws for Muslims on the issues of marriage, divorce, and family planning, the rigid quotas for the lower castes and untouchables, the "son of the soil" provisions for reserving employment opportunities and college admission, seem totally incongruent with the principles of secularism. The Hindu fundamentalist political parties have made the most of these policy debacles. As a consequence of their effective propaganda, in the minds of many Indians these policies are misconstrued as stemming from the ideals of secularism, further diminishing the latter's validity. The consternation they feel about the government and its policies is directed against those who are considered the beneficiaries of these policies and, thus, their adversaries. So many have been left out that all across the country there is growing political appeal to sectarian prejudice that continues to weaken India's long claim to secularism and democracy. Out of the crisis of faith in these progressive ideals has emerged political parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which preaches that Indian-ness means "Hindutva"—total loyalty to Hindu chauvinism, and Hindu superiority—and whips up rampant anti-Muslim sen-

timent in a climate heavy with frustration, anger, and vengeance. In such an atmosphere, whatever remained of the ideals of secularism are further betrayed and the march towards a fair, democratic, and egalitarian society further derailed.

What we witness in India is what Ralf Dahrendorf refers to as the "refeudalization" of society, the return of the ascribed as opposed to achieved characteristics as determinants of social stratification.<sup>28</sup> That the new stratification is correlated with ethnicity makes the latter a more fundamental source of stratification. Therefore, a person's caste, language, religion, and ethnic status becomes vital in the determination of economic status—jobs, education, property ownership, access to bank credit, so on and so forth.

As ideologies, socialism, secularism, nationalism or democracy lose their validity, governments and groups are "decreasingly able to mobilize support and form coalitions on the basis of ideology (and) increasingly attempt to mobilize support by appealing to religion, language and other similar ascriptive identities,"<sup>29</sup> thus reinforcing them and giving them further validity. For the post-colonial Third world nations, the disillusionment with ideologies, which had infused them with hope for a stable, secure future, has been particularly hurtful and alienating, increasing their vulnerability to the opportunistic diseases of xenophobia and bigotry.

## **Conclusion**

This paper takes the position that the recent revival of ethnicity can be seen as a reaction to a loss of ideology in respective nations. When people lose an ideology which had served as the underpinning of their efforts at nation-building, the empty space is filled with the sentiments of a reviving ethnicity which then becomes paramount in the determination of alliances. In nation after nation, ideologies such as socialism, secularism, and democracy have taken the backseat as ethnicity has assumed prominence in national affairs. The eclipse of hope that by pursuing the ideals of an ideology a nation can lay the foundations of a secure life and future for its citizens has resulted in upsurge of xenophobic and nativist currents. The domination of ethnicity in a society's socio-political dialogue pushes ideology further into the background. Ethnicity, not ideology, becomes salient in the political, economic, and diplomatic discourse of the society.

It is the position of this paper that ethnicity can be delegated a secondary place—ethnic rivalries can become subdued or muted if strong ideologies become prominent and are validated. Ethnic preeminence in a society's affairs is not inevitable. It assumes that faith in a set of ideals can restore the essence of humanity in the nations around the world and strengthen the human community so it can withstand the divisive ten-

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dencies of ethnic propaganda. People will continue to belong to diverse cultural communities, however, that will not be a basic, fundamental, or sole source of an individual's identity.

People need to believe in something bigger than themselves, something that will save them from themselves. Ethnicity and its current theme of divisiveness and exclusion can be delegated to a secondary place if people can believe in a set of higher ideals with a proven track record and be convinced that persual of those ideals will resolve the critically felt problems of their society. It is not the contention of this paper that subscribing to a progressive ideology will mean a total demise of ethnic divisions and ethnic strife. Nonetheless, it would diminish the persuasiveness of such divisions.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Daniel P. Moynihan, *Pandemonium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Moynihan, 28.

<sup>3</sup> Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, *Ethnicity* (Cambirdge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Moynihan, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Moynihan, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 6.

<sup>7</sup> E.J. Hobsbawn, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (Cambridge: University Press, 1990), 183.

<sup>8</sup> Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", *The National Interest*, (Summer 1989): 18.

<sup>9</sup> Francis X. Clines, "In the Deep South of the Soviet Fold, Complaints Rise in Many Tongues", *New York Times*, 7 Janurary 1990.

<sup>10</sup> Hobsbawn, 183.

<sup>11</sup> Louis L. Snyder, *Global MiniNationalisms* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 120.

<sup>12</sup> Moynihan, 28.

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<sup>13</sup> Fukuyama, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Fukuyama, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Ryan, "After the End of History", *History Today*, 4 (October 1992): 8-10.

<sup>16</sup> Fukuyama, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth B. Noble, "Democracy Brings Turmoil in Congo" *New York Times*, 31 January 1995.

<sup>18</sup> Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: Ungar Publishing Co., 1961), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Fromm, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Fromm, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Robin Fox, "Marxism's Obit is Premature", *The Nation*, 14 May 1990, 665-666.

<sup>22</sup> Fromm, 49.

<sup>23</sup> Fromm, 53.

<sup>24</sup> Fromm, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Marina Budhos, "Hard Passage to India", *The Nation*, 13 December 1993, 721.

<sup>26</sup> Glazer and Moynihan, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Glazer and Moynihan, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Glazer and Moynihan, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations", *Foreign Affairs*, (Summer 1993): 29.