

ETHNO-TERRITORIALITY AND ETHNIC CONFLICT*

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ABSTRACT. Ethno-territoriality is an increasingly invoked term by those doing research on nationalism and ethnic conflict. Despite this, it has not been subject to detailed definitional and conceptual examination. This article develops a conceptual framework for thinking about ethno-territoriality and ethnic conflict. It begins by briefly describing the relationship between territoriality, state sovereignty, and nationalist politics. I then provide a definition of ethno-territoriality and outline a four-part typology of the key elements of ethno-territorial practice. Following this I discuss the role that ethno-territoriality plays in the making of ethnic conflict. *Keywords:* *ethnic conflict, ethno-territoriality, nationalism.*

Territory is a fundamental basis of the modern sovereign-state system, and a common objective over which wars are fought. Identification with, and assertion of authority over, territory is also a central component of ethno-nationalist politics. At the same time, attempts to control contested spaces often generate social strife, especially when they engender rival ethno-territorial claims by states or communities. So it is not surprising, perhaps, that the terms ethno-territoriality and ethno-territorial are increasingly invoked by those doing research on nationalism and ethnic conflict. The two words, for example, can be found over fifty times in Gerard Toal and Carl Dahlman's *Bosnia Remade*, which offers a detailed analysis of ethnic cleansing during the Bosnian war and attempts to facilitate postwar returns (2011). Moreover, a search of Google Scholar returns only twenty-three works that use the term ethno-territoriality in all the years before 2000, but more than ten times this number (238) between 2000 and 2015, while a similar search for ethno-territorial returns 623 hits before 2000, and 2,888 results between 2000 and 2015.¹ While more frequently invoked in recent years, ethno-territoriality has not been subject to sustained definitional or conceptual examination. It tends to be used as a descriptive shorthand, a synonym for ethnically based territorial units within states, or an explanation for ethnic conflict over state spaces driven by political elites. However ethno-territorial projects are not so straightforward. They take place at multiple scales (not just the state level), involve various actors (not just elites), and are made up of an ensemble of political and social practices.

The aim of this article is to develop a definitional and conceptual framework for ethno-territoriality and describe why it is a useful concept for thinking about the dynamics of ethnic conflict. I begin by briefly reviewing the well-established linkages between territoriality, state sovereignty, and nationalist politics. Then I provide a definition of ethno-territoriality and outline a four-part typology of

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the key elements of ethno-territorial practice. The last section discusses the relationship between ethno-territoriality and ethnic conflict.

TERRITORIALITY, NATIONALISM, AND STATE SOVEREIGNTY

Individuals and institutions engage in a variety of territorial projects. We are constantly constructing, reinforcing, and contesting rules of “in and out,” classifying and organizing places. At its most basic level, territoriality is a strategy directed toward the control of space, not just for its own sake, but as a means through which other goals may be accomplished. In his classic text on the subject, Robert Sack defines human territoriality as “. . .the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area” (1986, 19).

Territoriality is, as this definition suggests, inextricably tied to questions of power. Asserting and enforcing territorial claims makes concrete power relations. More fundamentally, territoriality is an important aspect of authority and power. It is, Sack claims, “the primary spatial form that power takes” (1986, 26). Territoriality, though, is not just about power and control. It is also interwoven with matters of meaning. Territories are meaningful bounded spaces, symbolizing and communicating a variety of social understandings at a variety of scales. There is no inherent meaning that adheres to territory per se (Elden 2013). Rather, it is territorial practices and ideas that give meaning to the social things we call territories (Knight 1982). Territorial significations may be clearly communicated, as when private property is surrounded by fencing and posted signs that say “Keep Out!” But territoriality can also be conveyed more subtly, such as the gendered territorialization of separate “work” and “home” spheres of responsibility and labor activity (Domosh and Seager 2001). Situated at the intersection of power and meaning, territoriality is a powerful form of world-making—both cognitive and material—shaping our thinking, acting, and ways of being in the world (Delaney 2005).

Not least of the aspects of social life of which territoriality is constitutive is the modern sovereign-state system, which is underpinned by the “political-territorial ideal” (Murphy 1996). And despite the hailing of an unbounded and borderless world, the allure and power of territory continues (Paasi 2009; Murphy 2014). However, the territorial state is a relatively recent phenomenon, replacing a medieval world of hierarchical bonds and categorical identities with a politics based upon territorial affiliation and spatially exclusive sovereignty (Ruggie 1993; Agnew 1994). The power of sovereign territoriality as an epistemological ordering frame makes it difficult to see past the historically contingent nature of the modern state. Of course, this power does not exist apart from the various territorial strategies that states pursue: nationalizing spaces through homeland discourses (Kaiser 2002), issuing passports and constructing migration and border regimes (Torpey 2000; Mountz 2010), mutually recognizing other states’ sovereign territorial claims (Bierstecker and Weber 1996), conducting censuses (Hannah 2000), and

promulgating national currencies (Helleiner 2002) to provide just a few examples.

Territoriality is also an essential component of nationalist politics. As Anthony Smith notes, "... the need for a 'homeland', a national space of one's own, is a central tenet of nationalism. Indeed, nationalism is always, whatever other aims it may have, about the possession and retention of land" (2009, 163). Homelands do not come ready-made, but are actively constructed through a variety of practices. Nationalism, in this sense, is fundamentally a "political action program to convert land into national territory" (Kaiser 2002, 231). The centrality of territory for nationalist movements is twofold. First is the perceived practical need for territory in order to promote and defend the nation's interests. With the entangling of nation and state in political thought since the nineteenth century, it is understood that only through control over its own territory can a nation achieve full political freedom and cultural expression. As Ernst Gellner wrote, nationalism is based upon the principle that "the political and the national unit should be congruent" (1983, 1). Second is the importance of territory for identity (Herb and Kaplan 1999). Nations are not just "imagined communities" of people as Benedict Anderson (1983) famously characterized them: they are imagined communities rooted in places that are also imagined as their natural homeland, the territory in which their cultural identity has developed over the centuries.

ETHNO-TERRITORIALITY: DEFINITION AND TYPOLOGY

The nexus of territoriality, state sovereignty, and nationalism is well-plowed ground in the social sciences, as is the salience of territory in ethnic conflict. What is new, as noted above, is the increasingly common use of the term ethno-territoriality by those who study nationalism and ethnic conflict. Yet despite its growing usage, ethno-territoriality remains an underdeveloped concept. One of the more common invocations of the term is to describe territorial political units designed to enhance ethnic autonomy, in particular the system developed by the U.S.S.R. (for example Kaiser 1994; Slezkine 1994). To the extent that definitions of ethno-territoriality have been offered, they tend toward descriptive shorthand, such as "territorial control linked to ethnicity" (Cornell 2002, 6) and "conflicts and political mobilizations" by "ethnic groups which possess a geographical underpinning" (Moreno 1999, 63). More useful is the framework of ethno-territorialism developed by political geographers in recent years, specifically John O'Loughlin and Gearoid O Tuathail's description of this as an "ideological aspiration for the convergence of an imagined collective identity and a territorial region" (2009, 591), and Carl Dahlman and Trent Williams' identification of it as an "ideology of purified homelands" (2010, 407) that revolves around claims that "a cultural group has patrimonial rights to a territory separate from other groups" (2010, 414).

Most research on ethno-territoriality and ethno-territorial politics highlights the machinations of political elites and the importance of control over state spaces. It focuses on, as O'Loughlin and O Tuathail put it, "grandiose projects by state elites to draw and re-draw maps and re-engineer the spaces of human settlement to conform to the seductive simplicity of ethno-territorial visions" (2009, 592). Ethno-territorial projects, however, take place at multiple scales and sites, involve a variety of actors, and are underpinned by a range of claims and practices—they may be constituted by diverse political assemblages. Ethno-territorial contention is also a central aspect of postconflict societies, as different communities and actors mobilize to maintain or challenge existing ethno-territorial orders of space, ranging down to the level of cities and neighborhoods (Graham and Nash 2006; Toal and Dahlman 2011). There is a need to unbundle the concept of ethno-territoriality from the narrow framework of violent contestation over state territory and sovereignty, driven by political elites.

At root, ethno-territoriality involves the fusion of territoriality with ethnic or national claims.² It is best understood as a social and political project the goal of which is to establish an explicitly spatial basis for claims involving ethnic identity, cultural rights, and political authority by identifying and constructing certain places or territories as belonging to or appropriate for certain ethno-national categories of people and practice, and by extension displacing other categories. Ethno-territorial displacement can take many different forms, ranging from ethnic cleansing and genocide, to forced removal of an ethnic community from a state's borderlands, to urban planning decisions restricting the use and settlement of land by a targeted category, to demands that specific cultural practices be allowed or restricted in certain neighborhoods or villages.

This is a fairly broad definition in need of empirical grounding. As an additional step toward fleshing out the concept of ethno-territoriality, it may be useful to outline a brief typology of ethno-territorial practices—that is, the avenues through which ethno-territorial projects are made manifest. I identify four general ways in which ethno-territoriality is enacted, both strategically and by more banal, everyday actions: discursively, through various forms of ethno-territorial "talk," maps, and the marking of spaces; bodily, through daily life paths and participation in public rituals and performances, including the politics of burial; materially, through urbicide and the design of built environments and infrastructure; and institutionally, through the incorporation of ethno-territorial principles in political structures.

These four forms of ethno-territoriality—discursive, embodied, material, and institutional—should be taken as heuristic approximations, not precise ideal-typical categories. In practice it is difficult to distinguish between them with analytical precision as they often blur together, overlap, or concatenate in complex ethno-territorial configurations. However I do think they provide a useful starting point for understanding the range of ethno-territorial ways of

thinking and doing. They also facilitate the disaggregation of ethno-territorial projects, both spatially—by directing attention to the different sites, scales, and actors involved in ethno-territorial contention—and temporally—by allowing us to trace changes in the salience and effects of different practices over time. In what follows below, I draw upon the work of various geographers and social scientists to illustrate these four types of ethno-territorial practice.

DISCURSIVE ETHNO-TERRITORIALITY

The connection between territory on one hand, and ethnic identity and political authority on the other, is a central facet of ethno-territorial discourses. By discourse I mean the various forms of “talk”—such as social narratives, political rhetoric, maps, graffiti, historical myths—that invoke ethno-territorial relationships. Such discourses are best understood as representational configurations that are constitutive of ethnic categorization processes: they are meant to mobilize, justify, explain, or conjure certain “categories of ethno-political practice” and their relationship with a given territory (Brubaker 2003, 166).

It is possible to identify at least three intended effects of discursive ethno-territoriality. The first is to sharpen the boundaries between supposed ethnic groups. Boundary-making practices are fundamental to the creation, maintenance, and alteration of ethnic ways of seeing (Barth 1969). Ethnic boundaries may take a variety of forms, but along with perceptible markers such as language or skin color, ethno-territorial claims are a fundamental means through which they are delineated and reproduced (Anderson and Shuttlesworth 1998). A second aim is to establish a supposed indivisible connection between a given group and a specific territory; for example, the trope of homeland and its attachment with a specific people occupies a central place in nationalist narratives. Through such representations territories come to acquire a “semantic density” in which geography and identity are fused.³ Finally, this presumed bond is used as justification for territorially based claims concerning political authority.

Consider a famous speech given by Radovan Karadžić in November 1991, five months before the war in Bosnia began:

Let us separate as many things as possible. Like in the days of the Turks. One Serbian town centre, one Turkish town centre; Serbian affairs, Turkish affairs; Serbian cafes, theatres, schools, and everything else. This is the only solution.

And continuing later,

I can tell you, whatever kind of Bosnia emerges we shall not permit a single Muslim foundation stone to be laid in the Serb areas or in any Serb village, because we shall instruct Serbs not to sell their land to Muslims. The first foundation stone they lay will be blown up. And every foundation stone they lay will be blown up...our territories are ours, we can go hungry, but we shall

remain on them. . . Because this is a fight to the finish, for our survival, a battle for our living space.⁴

The need to separate space along ethnic lines was a key element of the political narrative developed by Karadžić before the war. Underlying it was the assumption that reestablishing proper places for ethnic categories and practices would bolster and purify a Serb identity that had been eroded by ethnic mixing and the Yugoslav-era ideology of “brotherhood and unity.” But territory was not just tied to the project of ethnic homogenization; its possession as living space was also essential for the continued existence—politically and socially—of the Serb nation. The political project of territorially based ethnic cleansing set in motion by Karadžić and other leaders of the Republika Srpska in Bosnia in 1992 was thus a logical outgrowth of this ethno-territorial discourse (Toal and Dahlman 2011).

EMBODIED ETHNO-TERRITORIALITY

Ethno-territoriality is embodied in the place-making activities of individuals and social groups. Often these activities are unselfconscious, peoples’ daily-life paths—where they shop, work, eat, and socialize—a sort of socio-spatial habitus that both reflects and reproduces social structures. In other cases, ethno-territorial claims are more explicitly made through purposeful, embodied performances, such as the case with Protestant marches in divided cities of Northern Ireland like Derry/Londonderry (Cohen 2007), or violent clashes along the former wartime frontlines in the divided city of Mostar in Bosnia (Moore 2011).

Public rituals and religious activities are another means through which territory, power, and identity are fused together. For example, in British Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contestations over Hindu religious processions and the slaughter of cows during the Muslim religious holiday Eid al-Adha were central to the crystallization of territorialized communal-identity categories. In the latter instance, Hindu activists pushed landowners to ban the slaughter of cows by villagers on their estates, with the intent of establishing swathes of territory in which Hindu customs were privileged at the expense of Muslim practices. In the former, Muslim activists laid claim to public spaces by seeking to prevent Hindu religious processions, in which music was played, from being allowed to pass in front of mosques. The result of these disputes over “sacred cows” and “thumping drums” was the reification of religiously exclusive “zones of tradition” in which

the group identity categories of Hindu and Muslim were spatialized in a way that empowered and disempowered particular sectors of the population. These zones of tradition increasingly became marked as areas of either Hindu-ness or Muslim-ness, where the traditions of the other populations were no longer completely accommodated. These spatial performances of religious rituals were

disruptive to other populations and often resulted in conflict over who had the legitimate right to reside in that place. (Jones 2007, 62)

As this example makes clear, embodied ethno-territoriality is often experienced as a profoundly local phenomenon that “bridges the gap between a disembodied discourse of difference and the lived experience of everyday life” (Jones 2007, 58).

Embodied ethno-territoriality also very literally concerns the intimate relationship between territory and the “political lives of dead bodies,” as Katherine Verdery has memorably put it (Verdery 2000; see also Leshem 2015). This is especially the case with the remains of those who have fallen defending the “homeland”:

The mythic renewal of the *ethnos* is created also through the fertilisation of the native soil with native blood. This is a magic force, or rather, a sacrificial fertilisation by means of blood spilt in a war for existential space, that is for state territory understood ethnically. . . . The soil which is made fruitful by the blood of those who fell for their fatherland has the role of an ethnic womb, while the wombs of individual biological mothers are reduced to transmitting and disseminating the fruits which come *ex terra* (Čolović 2002, 18; italics in the original).⁵

In Serbia, for example, the assumed inseparability between ethnic territory and ethnic bodies is expressed through some variation of the phrase “wherever there are Serb graves is Serb territory.” This was an especially powerful rallying cry during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, as Serbian leaders made frequent reference to historical foreign domination and “genocide” against Serbs to justify their support for secessionist brethren in Croatia and Bosnia (Denich 1994; Hayden 1994).

MATERIAL ETHNO-TERRITORIALITY

Ethno-territoriality is not just a matter of discursive representations and embodied performances; it also is inscribed on the material landscape. One method is the ethnic reclassification of places through the destruction of cultural landmarks and eradication of settlements signifying shared spaces, or ethnic “others” (Riedlmayer 2003). This is often followed by the construction of new monuments or religious edifices. Another involves the development of border regimes and infrastructural assemblages—fences, roads, checkpoints—to control the movement of people and make claims over contested territories along the margins of states (Weizman 2007; Jones 2009a). Walls, fences, and mobility regimes—what Wendy Pullan terms “conflict infrastructures” (Pullan 2013)—are also often justified as necessary measures to separate and protect vulnerable populations in midst of violent urban conflict, as in Nicosia, Belfast, and Jerusalem (Calame and Charlesworth 2009). For example, the peace lines built to divide Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods in Belfast were described

by the British general that devised them as “a very, very temporary affair. We will not have a Berlin Wall or anything like that in this city.”⁶ However, more than forty years later, and over a decade since the Good Friday peace agreement, these fences still snake through the city carving up territory into a series of ethnic enclaves.

The materiality of ethno-territorial contention is perhaps most apparent in ethnically mixed cities, which are frequently epicenters of ethno-national conflict (Bollens 2007; Pullan and Baillie 2013). Martin Coward argues that cities represent “the possibility of heterogeneous existence,” thus the purposeful targeting of buildings and the built environment in ethno-national conflicts represents a distinct political project—which he calls *urbicide*—that has as its target the material conditions that support such life (Coward 2009, 38–9). In the aftermath of ethno-national violence, reconstruction of shared existence in cities is often hampered by not just physical destruction, but also the reorganization of urban infrastructure along ethno-territorial lines. In the Bosnian city of Mostar, for instance, there are now separate bus stations, theaters, universities, and football stadia, as well as water-provision and waste-disposal services for the Bosniak and Croat halves of the city. Thus, even after formal administrative unification of the city a decade ago, ethnic division continues to be produced by the built environment and infrastructure (Makaš 2007).

INSTITUTIONAL ETHNO-TERRITORIALITY

Finally, ethno-territoriality is institutionalized in political structures. The government of Israel, for example, has utilized a variety of spatial strategies to maintain control over contested urban spaces and territories in both Israel proper and the Palestinian Territories, leading the Israeli geographer Oren Yiftachel to characterize Israel as an ethnocracy: a recognizable type of state that is driven by a “concerted collective project of exerting ethno-national control over a territory perceived as the nation’s (exclusive) homeland” (Yiftachel and Ghanem 2004, 651). Yiftachel specifies six structural and ethno-territorial bases of ethnocratic regimes that enhance the political power and territorial dominance of ethno-national majorities and marginalizes minorities. They include 1) *demography*: the exercise of selective control over immigration and citizenship rights; 2) *land and settlement*: promulgation of planning policies concerning ownership, settlement, use, and development of land that systematically favor extension of ethno-national authority over (multiethnic) territories; 3) *armed forces*: ethno-national domination of military and police forces, which are used to maintain control over contested territories and resisting minorities; 4) *capital flow*: cultivation of capital and development projects governed by an “ethnic logic” that privileges the preeminent ethnic group; 5) *constitutional law*: “laws of the land” and legal rulings that legitimize practices of ethnic control by placing them outside the realm of acceptable political contention; 6) *public culture*: creation of ethnocratic public spaces through the promotion of ethnic symbols,

monuments, and practices that reinforce the cultural and territorial hegemony of the dominant ethno-nation (Yiftachel 2006, 36–7).

Yiftachel claims that ethnocratic regimes are often associated with settler states such as Israel, Sri Lanka, or Northern Ireland (pre-1972), but he also identifies ethnocratic elements in Estonia, Slovakia, and Serbia, three Eastern European countries with large minority populations and fears of uncertain control over the multiethnic territories in which minorities reside. These countries have been characterized elsewhere as nationalizing states (Brubaker 1996) or ethnic democracies (Linz and Stepan 1996; Smooha 2001). The primary difference between Yiftachel's concept of ethnocratic regimes and these two terms—and what provides analytic purchase in my view—is his identification of secure control over ethnically mixed spaces as the fundamental state project. Ethnocracies, then, can be distinguished from other regime types by their systematic privileging of the ethnos over the demos in the pursuit ethno-territorial hegemony in contested lands.

The wartime institutionalization of ethno-territorial projects often represents one of the biggest obstacles to peacebuilding in the aftermath of violent conflict. In Bosnia, for example, nationalists entrenched in governing institutions have utilized the array of resources available to them to maintain ethno-territorial division and restrict post war returns of displaced people, especially at the municipal level where a “localized geopolitics of obstructionism” prevailed for years after the war (O Tuathail and Dahlman 2004, 455). Bosnia also represents the shortcomings of ethno-federal consociational compacts—frequently promoted as political frameworks for mitigating conflict in divided societies following war—due to their tendency to institutionalize ethno-territoriality in the postwar political order, even down to the level of city neighborhoods (Moore 2013).

ETHNO-TERRITORIALITY AND THE MAKING OF ETHNIC CONFLICT

In order to develop an account of the constitutive role that ethno-territorial practices and projects play in the making of ethnic conflict, we must first dispense with two misconceptions about identity, territory, and conflict. The first concerns the indivisibility of territory. Several scholars have argued that intractable conflict occurs because competing groups see a given territory as indivisible. Monica Toft, for example, identifies indivisible territory as a root cause of intrastate ethnic war:

If an ethnic group is a majority, concentrated in a region of a state, and is located in its homeland, then it is most likely to see control over a particular territory as indivisible, demand independence, and therefore end up in violence. If a state contains two or more ethnic groups capable of seceding, then it is likely to see territory as indivisible and resort to violence to maintain its borders (2003, 11).

Ron Hassner claims that sacred spaces are another instance of indivisible territory: "...a good or issue is perceived as indivisible if it is perfectly cohesive, has unambiguous boundaries and cannot be substituted or exchanged for another good or issue. All sacred places fulfill these three conditions" (2003, 8).

In both accounts, the indivisibility of certain territories is treated as rather unproblematic. Sacred spaces, Hassner maintains, are by definition integral, bounded, and nonfungible, hence indivisible (2003, 13). Likewise, Toft defines homelands as a special category of territory, "not an object to be exchanged but an indivisible attribute of group identity" (2003, 20). Others argue that indivisibility is not an inherent property of certain territories but rather a malleable social construction. As Stacie Goddard notes, even seemingly intractable territorial conflicts, such as control of Jerusalem, were at one time viewed as amenable to negotiated division. Instead, indivisibility is created through actors' representations of socio-spatial relationships: "Whether territory appears indivisible depends upon how actors legitimate their claims to territory during negotiations" (Goddard 2009, 18). Whether constructed or inherent, these arguments rest upon the assumption that territorial indivisibility is a central element in many instances of violent ethnic conflict around the world today.

The problem, though, is not that territory itself is indivisible, but that ethnic identity and political authority come to be constructed as indivisible from territory.⁷ To provide an analogy, consider the case of child custody in divorce proceedings. The quandary is not, as portrayed in the biblical judgment of Solomon, that a child is inherently indivisible. Rather, the trouble is that for many parents, "the child is such an extension of their own persons that being denied custody would be like losing a limb or worse" (Elster 1987, 2). Likewise, the issue at stake in ethno-territorial conflicts is not that of cutting up an indivisible territorial pie, but the assumption that a putative ethnic or national group's identity and political aims can only be secured through exclusive possession or control of contested territories—a vision of ethno-spatial division and contestation that denies the possibility of shared space (Megoran 2013). What this means is that our research focus should not be the types of territories or territorial attributes—tangible or intangible—which tend to be more or less indivisible (for example, Hensel 2000; Hensel and Mitchell 2005), but how ethnic claims concerning identity and political authority come to be defined as inseparable from territory. It is the "geographical bonding agent" of territoriality (Sack 1986, 26)—not territory per se—which promises a better understanding of this dynamic of ethnic conflict.

The second mistake is what Rogers Brubaker has identified as "analytical groupism": the tendency to treat nations and ethnic groups as "substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed" (Brubaker et al 2004, 31). Even social-constructivist accounts that characterize identity as constructed, fluid, and multiple often fall into the trap of treating ethnic conflict as something that occurs between coherent groups with independent agency.

Synthesizing insights from cognitive anthropology and sociology, Brubaker conceptualizes ethnicity and nationality as social categories that are part of the cognitive schemas by which individuals perceive and interpret the world. They are “not things *in* the world, but perspectives *on* the world—not ontological but epistemological realities” (Brubaker et al 2004, 45; italics in the original). Ethnic ways of seeing involve not just people, but also events, actions and spatial relationships. This proposition is related to the observation that “a large proportion of our categories are not categories of *things*; they are categories of abstract entities. We categorize events, emotions, spatial relationships, social relationships, and abstract entities of an enormous range” (Lakoff 1987, 6 italics in the original). Consequently, what matters is not merely how people get classified, but also “how gestures, utterances, situations, events, states of affairs, actions and sequences of actions get classified (and thereby interpreted and experienced)” (Brubaker et al 2004, 43).

These insights have important implications for research on ethnic conflict. To begin, identity and conflict need to be disaggregated. Ethnic conflict should be conceptualized not as a case of conflict between autonomous and unified ethnic groups, but as violent social interaction that is framed as “ethnic.” In Brubaker and Laitin’s words,

we should seek to identify, analyze, and explain the heterogeneous processes and mechanisms involved in generating the varied instances of what we all too casually lump together—given our prevailing ethnicizing interpretive frames—as ‘ethnic violence.’ This can be accomplished only through a research strategy firmly committed to disaggregation in both data collection and theory building. (1998, 447)

This shifts emphasis away from identity toward a broader investigation of ethnic categorization, the generation of social conflict and—most importantly—the social dynamics through which these two processes are yoked together to produce ethnic conflict. Ethno-territorial practices and projects, I argue, provide one path to the emergence of ethnic conflict. This claim rests upon the application of the three core elements of territoriality identified by Robert Sack—classification by area; communication of territorial boundaries through spatial discourses and markers; enforcement of control over territory and the socio-spatial relationships within it—to the concept of ethno-territoriality (1986, 21–22).

As described above ethno-territoriality is one way ethnic identities are defined. Unlike most other elements of ethnic categorization—language, lineage, culture—ethno-territoriality entails classification by area. That is, people identify themselves and others through connection to specific places rather than nonterritorial markers. This is a particularly powerful basis for ethnic categorization. One reason is that it allows strangers to be imagined as members of the same cultural and political community based upon a shared relationship

with a given territory. It facilitates a spatialized form of groupism (Dahlman and Williams 2010). Another is that ethno-territoriality helps simplify ethnic categorization through use of a “container schema,” in which clearly delineated territorial boundaries become the basis for marking ethnic difference (Jones 2009b). As James Anderson and Ian Shuttleworth observe in the context of Northern Ireland: “Moving the sectarian discourse into the arena of territory makes it easier to express ethnic and sectarian relationships in readily comprehensible terms of ‘them’ and ‘us’” (1998, 198). Finally, ethno-territoriality defines ethnic or national identity as rooted in place from time immemorial, timeless and unchanging. For all these reasons, ethno-territoriality is an effective tool for political activists seeking to crystallize feelings of ethnic or national groupness and mobilize collective political action.

Territorially-based ethnic classifications, as all instances of ethnic categorization, must be clearly communicated. In cases where identity is grounded upon a relationship with a given territory as well as other cultural markers, the delineation of ethnic boundaries involves ethno-territorial practices; discursive, embodied, material, and institutional. As noted, these can range greatly in scale and methods: from the promotion of homeland narratives, to disputes over the paths of religious processions through particular neighborhoods, to the destruction of built environments, to the institutionalization of ethno-territorial principles.

Overlapping cultural practices and fuzzy ethnic markers make it difficult to identify and define ethnic boundaries. Therefore ethnic categorization is always also connected, to lesser and greater degrees, with the politics of ethnic purification. Of course, the entangled dynamics of ambiguity, boundaries, and purity extend well beyond the realm of identity. As observed by Mary Douglas (1996), categorical ambiguity of various types, and the cognitive anxiety it produces, is disruptive of social order, and drives the pursuit of cultural purification by sharpening symbolic boundaries and putting things and relations in their proper place.

When ethnic classification is based upon territory, purification quite literally revolves around the need to define the proper place of putative ethnic groups, and involves ethno-territorial claims and practices aimed at solidifying control over contested territories by emplacing and displacing particular group categories. In their most extreme manifestations such ethno-territorial projects involve not just claims for territorial control, but the “purification of space,”—an erasure from the cultural landscape of all traces of ethnic others (Sibley 1988). This quality can be clearly discerned in the genocide in Rwanda, in which Hutu extremists characterized Tutsi as foreign invaders from the north and *inyenzi* (cockroaches) who must be exterminated in order to purify Rwanda (Straus 2001).⁸ It was also demonstrated in the phrase “ethnic cleansing,” which came into wide circulation as a result of the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The original Serbo-Croatian *etničko čišćenje*

can be translated as either ethnic cleansing or ethnic purification, illustrating the presumed existential threat of “pollution” engendered by ethnically mixed spaces. For this reason, ethnic cleansing centered around not just “the removal of specific kinds of human matter from particular places,” as Robert Hayden (1996, 784) aptly put it, but also an ethnic reclassification of places through the destruction of cultural landmarks, such as mosques, churches, cemeteries, and memorial markers; renaming of towns and streets; eradication of settlements and houses; and destruction of prominent symbols of Bosnia’s multiethnic heritage, such as the National Library in Sarajevo (Wood 2001; Riedlmayer 2003).

Clearly, the process of ethno-territorial categorization depends upon the ability to define who and what is “in place” and “out-of-place.” This, in turn, requires the capacity to enforce some degree of control over territories and the social relationships located within them. As noted above, attempts to impose ethno-territorial control often generate social strife, especially when they engender rival ethno-territorial claims by states or other communities. “Territoriality’s very nature—symbol-laden and generating rival territorialities in a competitive space-filling process—actively encourages ethno-national conflict” (Anderson 2008, 93). When this occurs—when opposing, more or less mutually exclusive, ethno-territorial projects are pursued—the result is, all too frequently, violent and seemingly intractable conflict.

CONCLUSION

At this point one can discern how ethno-territoriality may be productive of both ethnic categorization and social conflict, yoking the two processes together in an amalgam of ethnic conflict. However I do not wish to give the impression that it is possible to construct a determinative account of ethnic conflict solely on the basis of ethno-territoriality. That people in the modern world imagine themselves as members of ethnic and national groups based upon a presumed bond with lands that they inhabit or have inhabited in the past is fairly ubiquitous; so too is the fact that territorial authority and practices are inherent to the politics of modern sovereignty. And while ethno-territorial claims are often implicated in ethnic conflict, not all instances of ethno-territoriality lead to violent clashes or ethnic cleansing. How and why certain ethno-territorial projects and practices produce ethnic conflict, and how and why some don’t is a topic in need of further research. Second, I do not find it useful to approach questions concerning ethno-politics in terms of a simple territorial/non-territorial binary. The perceived divisibility or indivisibility of ethnic identity, political authority and territory is variable across time and place. Put bluntly, the issue is not simply whether, but to what degree, ethnic identity and political authority are framed as indivisible from territory in a given situation.

What the concept ethno-territoriality offers is insight into the heterogeneous class of phenomena we refer to as ethnic conflict. It allows us to better parse social dynamics—ethnic categorization and social conflict—which are too often conflated, and offers an account of the ways in which these two processes are yoked together through rival ethno-territorial claims. It also provides insight into the relationship between symbolic and interest-based politics which shape ethnic conflict. In contrast to accounts which present these as separate realms of political contention—i.e., greed vs. grievance or mass emotions and identity vs. elite manipulation (Kaufman 2001; Collier and Hoeffler 2002; Peterson 2002; Gagnon 2004)—and attempt to demonstrate that one or the other side of this analytical dichotomy better explains ethnic conflict, ethno-territoriality illustrates how ethno-symbolism and material interests are bundled together in ethno-territorial projects. Focusing on ethno-territorial projects and practices also facilitates a more disaggregated and localizing analysis of ethnic conflict (O Tuathail 2010). It highlights the different scales, sites and actors involved in ethno-territorial contention—widening the scope beyond political elites and contestation over state spaces—as well as changes in ethno-territorial contention and sentiment over time.⁹ Finally, this conceptual framework directs attention to ethno-territorial practices—discursive, embodied, material and institutional—that transform disembodied discourses of difference into intimate instances of ethnic conflict and violence.

NOTES

¹ This includes results of searches for both “ethnoterritoriality” and “ethno-territoriality,” and “ethnoterritorial” and “ethno-territorial.”

² I follow Brubaker, et al (2004) in treating “ethnic group” and “nation” as relatively interchangeable concepts rather than distinct domains. Consequently the concept of ethno-territoriality developed here refers to territorial claims and strategies made in the name of both putative nations and ethnic groups.

³ See Entrikin (1991, 11) for more on the semantic density of places.

⁴ *Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadzic/Ratko Mladic*. ICTY. Case No. IT-95-5-R61/IT-95-18-R61, July 11 1996: P. 20.

⁵ Čolović goes on to cite a revealing example of this line of thought which was published in Serbia prior to the infamous celebration of the Battle of Kosovo in 1989 led by Slobodan Milošević: “Must we, even on the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo declare: Kosovo is Serbia and that fact does not depend on Albanian natality or Serbian mortality. There is so much Serbian blood and so many Serbian shrines there that it will still be Serbian land even if not a single Serb remains there” (2002, 27).

⁶ “Despite peace Belfast walls are growing in size and number.” *USA Today*. May 3, 2008. http://www.usatoday.com/news/topstories/2008-05-03-1826820552_x.htm

⁷ For an example of approaches that facilitate sharing territory and territorial resources see Cohen and Frank (2009)

⁸ See Timothy Cresswell (1997) for a more general account of “metaphors of displacement” such as pest, disease and plague.

⁹ For an excellent analysis of the rise of ethno-territorial nationalism among First Nations in the Yukon in recent years as a result of negotiations with the Canadian government see Nadasdy (2011).

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