

How Political Identities Work

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Table 1: Brief Chronology of the Gaza Evacuation

1947	The United Nations votes in favor of two states, an Arab and a Jewish one, which does not include the Gaza Strip.
1948	The State of Israel is declared. Battles erupt in the south between Egyptian and Israeli forces. Thousands of Palestinians flee and settle in the Gaza Strip. The Strip's population increases more than threefold.
1949	Following the signing of the armistice, the Gaza area comes under Egyptian military rule. Egypt proclaims the Strip held in trust for the Palestinians. The residents of Gaza are not given Egyptian citizenship.
1967	Israel captures the Gaza Strip during the Six Day War. The United Nations Security Council passes Resolution 242, calling for the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the war in exchange for an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict.
1970	Kfar Darom - a Jewish community in the Strip evacuated in 1948 - is re-established as a para-military Nahal outpost.
1987	First intifada breaks out in Gaza City. Hamas founded in Gaza.
1993	Oslo Accords signed between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. End of intifada declared. Palestinian Authority created.
1994	Hamas and Islamic Jihad begin suicide bombings. Under the Gaza-Jericho Agreement Israeli military forces withdraw from Gaza and Jericho, and transfer authority to the Palestinian Authority. IDF forces leave most of the Strip's Palestinian inhabited areas. Israel maintains control of the settlements, borders, and other strategic points.
1995	Israel surrounds the Strip with a security fence. Israel and the Palestinian Authority sign the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin assassinated in Tel Aviv.
2000	Camp David Summit fails; second intifada erupts and Gaza settlements suffer constant attacks. IDF recaptures sections of the Gaza Strip in response to Palestinian attacks.
2004	Prime Minister Ariel Sharon presents a disengagement plan from Gaza and the northern West Bank.
2005	July: A nationwide anti-disengagement campaign is launched by the settlers and their allies. The Knesset ratifies the disengagement plan. Government announces August 15 as the day disengagement is set to begin. Early August: Finance Minister Netanyahu resigns from the Cabinet. Militant settlers from the West Bank infiltrate into the settlements. August 15: Unarmed IDF troops and Israeli police serve eviction notices on the settlers, most of whom leave peacefully. A minority of the settlers refuse to leave on their own and are carried out gently by IDF troops, some of whom collapse in tears. In two settlements, resisters occupy the roof of a synagogue and shower water, oil and acid on the troops below. August 22: all of the settlers and militants have been evacuated and the settlements are bulldozed. On September 12, all IDF forces leave, the Palestinian Authority troops move into Gaza and Hamas supporters jubilantly celebrate their "victory."

When a young English divinity student named Thomas Clarkson won a Latin Prize with an essay on slavery at Cambridge in 1785, neither he nor his listeners imagined the effect it would have on slavery in the British Empire. But as he sat down at the side of the road on his way to London to take up a career as a Protestant minister, Clarkson reflected that if the horrors he had uncovered about slavery were true, “it was time some person should see these calamities to their end” (Hochschild 2005: 89).

Clarkson turned out to be that person. Less than a year after Clarkson and the committee began their campaign, “Britons were challenging slavery in London debating societies, in provincial pubs, and across dinner tables throughout the country” (Hochschild 2005: 213). But there was no identity that allowed him to identify himself as “antislavery movement activist.” Together with a small band of antislavery advocates, he had to construct that identity. He wrote thousands of letters, organized petition drives, and helped to launch the world’s first successful transnational movement. That movement eventually ended the vicious violence of the slave trade and led to the abolition of slavery around the Atlantic. It allowed English reformers to claim moral superiority over the newly independent but slaveholding United States.

The antislavery movement went through many phases, suffered reversals during the repressive years of the Napoleonic wars, and required a savage civil war to bring slavery to an end in the United States. But it joined religious evangelicalism, the political emancipation of Catholics, and parliamentary reform to create the identity of the modern social movement organizer in 18th century England.

Antislavery as Identity Formation

We could tell many different stories about antislavery. We could treat it as a moral tale showing what determination can accomplish in the face of difficult odds. We could think about it as an application of enlightened values, as an expression of religious zeal, or as English capitalists’ attempt to promote free labor and free trade. We could see it as an early example of a transnational social movement, a phenomenon that has become important in this age of globalization. Different observers of European and American antislavery campaigns have told all these tales, and more. We treat it here as a case of identity formation.

Let us explain: When England’s antislavery mobilization began during the late 18th century, it was difficult for ordinary people to mobilize and make claims in any other names than those of communities already certified by the authorities: existing religious congregations, parish councils, workers in a local trade, and the like. They could not simply band together as Concerned Citizens or People Against Slavery. The 18th century’s particular, localized, direct, and sponsored repertoire built on intermittent actors’ identities.

Over the following half-century, antislavery advocates did difficult identity work. In England they signed petitions, organized boycotts, demonstrated the cruel instruments of torture used by planters to ensure obedience, and put pressure on a seagoing nation to use its navy to impede the slave trade. In America they brought resolutions to the House of Representatives, preached fiery sermons, fought elections under a variety of labels, settled "free states" in part to keep slaveholders out. They used literary documents like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to convince compatriots of the evils of slavery. They did not know it but they were doing identity work.

The word "identity" sounds tones from very interior to quite exterior. At the interior extreme we find your sense of yourself as someone unique, rich, and secret, not completely known by anyone else. At the exterior extreme we discover the identity of data-banks and identity theft, where some stranger needs no more than a name and number to place you. In contentious politics, most of the identities that count lie in between the extremes. They depend on and give meaning to relations with other people. Political identities include boundaries, relations across the boundaries, relations *within* the "us" and within the "them," plus accumulated meanings assigned to the boundaries and relations.

Linking identities to boundaries makes identities more than a property of individuals or groups: it makes them *relational*. England's antislavery advocates outraged members of the powerful sugar lobby by using the petition to defend the interests of people other than themselves. They had to establish their identity as "conscience constituents" (McCarthy and Zald 1978). America's abolitionists developed an identity based on the virtues of hard work and free labor, and complained that southern whites' gentility was founded on the exploitation of slaves. In turn, Southern apologists framed northerners as crude and materialistic. In both North and South, identity shift served as the cultural and psychological counterpart of the widening boundary between the two regions. Developing contentious identities is about both internal (cognitive) and external (relational) mechanisms. This is in part why it is so difficult. But the degree of difficulty in doing identity work varies, as the following episode suggests.

Zapatista Identities

Fast-forward over two hundred years from Clarkson's efforts to the poor southern Mexican state of Chiapas. On New Year's Day 1994, a previously unknown group startled Mexico by announcing a program of liberation for Mexico's indigenous people. Soon people all over the world were paying attention to the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. Led by a man calling himself Subcomandante Marcos, the group had seized the governmental palace in San Cristóbal, Chiapas. From the palace's balcony, they read a vivid declaration to the Mexican people. It declared that a long-suffering people had suffered centuries of oppression and deprivation, but finally *HOY DECIMOS ¡BASTA!* -- Today, we say Enough. At various points in the declaration, the authors identified themselves in these terms:

- A product of 500 years of struggle
- Poor people like us
- People used as cannon fodder
- Heirs of our nation's true makers
- Millions of dispossessed
- "The people" as described in Article 39 of the Mexican national constitution
- The Zapatista Army of National Liberation
- Responsible, free men and women
- Patriots

They denied that they were "drug traffickers, or drug guerrillas, or bandits, or whatever other characterization our enemies might use." They opposed themselves explicitly to

- The dictatorship
- The political police
- A clique of traitors who represent the most conservative and antinational groups
- The Mexican federal army
- The party in power (PRI) with its supreme and illegitimate leader, Carlos Salinas, installed in the federal executive office (Salinas was then president of Mexico)

Calling for a revolution on behalf of the poor, dispossessed, indigenous people of Mexico, they called for "us" to rise against "them."

That revolution did not take place. But the Zapatistas soon made an impact on Mexican politics. Within Chiapas, they held off a threatened suppression by the army and forced the national government to start negotiations over peasant property rights. On a national scale, they started a much more general campaign for indigenous rights. During the spring of 2001, they staged a colorful march from Chiapas – the southernmost state of Mexico – to Mexico City itself. The march publicized demands for enforcement of the local autonomy laws the legislature had passed in response to concerted pressure from organizations of indigenous people, backed by international activists.

The Zapatistas quickly acquired an impressive international reputation and following. Electronic websites and mailing lists, operated mainly by foreign supporters, broadcast their messages across North America and Europe. Those connections brought activists, funds, and enthusiastic statements of solidarity to Chiapas from as far away as Western Europe (Hellman 1999). Many outsiders interpreted the Zapatista mobilization as a form of resistance to the recently enacted North American Free Trade Agreement. For that reason, they saw it as a welcome addition to worldwide anti-globalization efforts. In 1996, it drew thousands of supporters to a "First Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and against Neoliberalism" in the jungle of Chiapas. One observer argued that "the interest and attraction generated by the EZLN beyond its national borders is matched by no other movement in the post-Cold War period" (Olesen 2005: 12).

Mexico's native peoples have not achieved the liberation their Zapatista advocates called for in 1994. Still, compared to Clarkson and his small band of antislavery activists or to America's Abolitionists, who struggled for decades to establish themselves, they were able to go from near-invisibility to significant political prominence in a very short time. They have become a weighty interest in national politics, an internationally recognized model for political mobilization, and frequent participants in contentious interaction. They created a significant political actor on regional, national, and international stages.

How do such things happen? Let us unpack that big question into three smaller, more manageable questions:

1. How do political actors form, change, and disappear?
2. How do they acquire and change their collective identities?
3. How do they interact with other political actors, including holders of power?

How Political Actors Form, Change, and Disappear

By *political actors*, let us mean recognizable sets of people who carry on collective action in which governments are directly or indirectly involved, making and/or receiving contentious claims. Political actors include governments and agents of governments such as presidents and police. But they also include a wide range of non-governmental actors, from neighborhood groups to worldwide organizations. They qualify as political actors by making claims, receiving claims, or both. Political actors regularly form, change, and disappear. How does that happen?

The most general answers are quite simple. Political actors form through mobilization, by increasing the resources available for collective making of claims. They change by participating in contention. They disappear by demobilizing. Of course, the complexities

start there: in exactly how mobilization, participation, and demobilization work and produce their effects.

The Zapatistas of 1994 did it through a combination of brokerage and diffusion. Zapatista brokers brought together a motley coalition of indigenous communities, religious activists, urban radicals, and guerrilla fighters in a coordinated large-scale actor that announced itself as the unitary Zapatista Army of National Liberation. Its language, symbols, and practices then diffused widely among opponents of the current Mexican regime. The new actor then collected allies elsewhere in Mexico for even larger-scale making of collective claims. The Zapatistas of 1994 and afterward integrated brokerage with diffusion, ultimately creating a coalition of participants, supporters, and sympathizers at a much higher scale than the jungles of Chiapas (Tarrow 2005: chapter 7).

The Zapatistas also benefited from *certification*. Certification occurs when an external authority signals its readiness to recognize and support the existence and claims of a political actor. If the authority has international visibility and heft, the signal broadcasts the likelihood that the authority would intervene to support the new actor in future claims. Certification thus changes both the new actor's strategic position and its relation to other actors that could become its oppressors, rivals, or allies. (The opposite process of decertification withdraws recognition and commitments of future support, while often threatening repression.) The Zapatistas gained leverage within Mexico from extensive certification by external organizations – NGOs, the foreign press, even some governments trying to avoid a bloodbath -- that could and did exert pressure on the Mexican state to recognize and bargain with the Zapatistas.

How Actors Acquire and Change their Identities

The Zapatista adventure calls up a rough distinction between actors that form outside of contention, those that form inside contention and those that specialize in public politics. Households, friendship networks, firms, schools, and many other organizations form outside of contentious politics, but now and then enter contention by making collective claims; at that precise point they become political actors. That was the case of the Quakers and Methodists who joined Clarkson in the antislavery campaign in Britain and of the Congregationalists who became abolitionists in the United States. In the case of the Zapatistas, indigenous communities had existed in Chiapas long before 1994; most were largely apolitical, prevented from active participation by their diverse languages, their isolation, and the domination of national politics by the *mestizo* majority. Some of them then entered contentious politics by allying themselves with Subcomandante Marcos and his fellow revolutionaries. They mobilized, making community resources such as food and manpower available for collective making of claims. At that point, they became political actors.

Other political actors form in the ebb and flow of contentious politics itself. Many American farmers who went west to settle lands in the new Free States did not go as aboli-

tionists, but the threat of slave labor undercutting their free labor turned them into "Free Soilers." They became an important component in the coalition that eventually elected Abraham Lincoln President. Marcos' creation of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation was a political act, by Mexican law a forbidden political act. No group in Mexico except the constituted government, after all, has the legal right to create its own autonomous armed force. Once the Zapatistas went into motion, furthermore, new groupings sprang up elsewhere to imitate them, ally with them, or help them. Those political actors formed in the very process of contention. They also mobilized, making resources available for collective making of claims.

Whether a political actor forms outside or inside contentious politics is not a sharp yes/no distinction, but a matter of degree. Running a neighborhood bar, for example, doesn't look much like contentious politics, even if a brawl breaks out among the drinkers now and then. In the United States, a bar that regularly serves alcoholic beverages to a paying public cannot exist legally without getting a liquor license from some governmental agency. Sometimes the only way an aspiring bar owner can get into the business is through contention, fighting off the efforts of competitors, neighbors, or anti-alcohol activists to block the license.

Professional societies such as the American Medical Association likewise occupy a middle position. They may come into being chiefly as a means of communication among professionals, but they almost inevitably get involved in political defense of the profession's interests. As they do so, they change character, becoming regular participants in contentious politics.

Activists, in contrast, specialize in contentious political participation. William Lloyd Garrison formed a well-oiled abolitionist machine in New England with a routine of lectures and public meetings and a print medium at its service. Before embedding himself in the Chiapanecan jungle, the man leading the EZLN had a long history as a political activist, apparently beginning his career as an academic and passing through a phase of more conventional leftwing politics before re-inventing himself as Subcomandante Marcos. Many supporters of the Zapatista solidarity network had long biographies as activists, either in Mexico or abroad, before embracing the movement's cause.

We can therefore mark out a range of political actors, differing in how much they specialize in contentious politics:

intermittent actors that form independently of contentious politics, carry on plenty of activity outside of contentious politics, and only sometimes engage in political contention, for example households and schools

established interests that form initially outside of contentious politics, and continue to carry on substantial activities outside of contention, but become signifi-

cantly and frequently involved in contention, for example professional societies and veterans' associations

activist groups that form within contentious politics, and exist primarily as political actors, for example labor unions, political parties, and social movement organizations

In Mexico of the 1990s, many indigenous communities had existed for centuries, but had rarely involved themselves in politics beyond the local level. They were intermittent participants in contention. Rural Mexico's established interests included peasant cooperatives and water-control associations, which sometimes had no choice but to struggle with other political interests. The Zapatistas, however, made a splashy direct entry into national politics with their declaration of New Years Day 1994. Despite their oppositional stance, with regard to Mexico's contentious politics they behaved like activist groups.

In the long run, governments and their regimes shape actors across the whole range. Political changes affect intermittent actors, established interests, and activist groups alike by altering property rights, influencing the economy, favoring different groups, and inhibiting or enhancing freedom of speech, freedom of association, and other citizen's rights. But shorter-term political shifts affect the three kinds of actors differently. Causes of the formation, change, and disappearance of intermittent actors lie mainly outside of contentious politics; they result from major processes of economic and demographic change. The formation, change, and disappearance of established interests result especially from interactions between economic and demographic processes, on one side, and changes of regimes and contentious politics, on the other. Causes of the formation, change, and disappearance of activist groups depend closely on fluctuations in regimes and their contentious politics.

How They Interact with Other Political Actors, Including Rulers

Many people regard identity claims primarily as a form of self-expression, or even of self-indulgence – what others do when they are too comfortable, too confused, or too distressed for serious politics. Scholars of contentious politics take identities more seriously but sometimes pit their view of identity against what they regard as “structural” approaches (Melucci 1995; Billig 1995). On the contrary, identity claims and their attendant stories constitute serious political business. As determined a student of culture as Ann Swidler points out that

the cultures of social movements are shaped by the institutions the movements confront. Different regime types and different forms of repression generate different kinds of social movements with differing tactics and internal cultures . . . Institutions affect the formulation of social movement identities and objectives in more central ways (1995: 37).

Swidler's is another way of saying that identities relate intimately to political opportunity structures.

Consider the components of political opportunity structure (POS): 1) the multiplicity of independent centers of power within the regime, 2) the regime's openness to new actors, 3) the instability of current political alignments, 4) the availability of influential allies or supporters for challengers, 5) the extent to which the regime represses or facilitates collective claim making and 6) decisive changes in items 1 to 5. Changes in POS affect the ease or difficulty of mobilization, the costs and benefits of collective claim making, the feasibility of various programs, the consequences of different performances in the available repertoire, and therefore the attractiveness of different collective action strategies (Tilly and Tarrow 2006: ch. 3).

Changes in POS affect activist groups strongly and immediately. They exert significant but less immediate and direct effects on established interests. Changes in POS also affect intermittent actors – for example by determining how easy it is for religious congregations or neighborhood groups to mobilize and make collective claims – but those effects operate mostly indirectly and in the long run. A regime that rapidly increases repression may aim at established interests, but it generally hits activist groups hardest, and rarely makes a large short-run difference to the survival of households, neighborhoods, and other such intermittent actors. Activist groups rise, fall, and change as a function of POS, of their programs' success or failure, and of their effectiveness in mustering support from their patrons, allies, and social bases.

Anywhere along the continuum, as a result, political actors spend some part of their time and energy doing other things than making collective claims. They gather resources, maintain solidarity, manage internal disputes, recruit followers, provide services to members, and so on through a wide variety of sustaining activities. Even activist groups devote plenty of effort to building, maintaining, and repairing their organizations. Making collective claims always depletes available resources in the short run, even if it attracts new resources in the longer run. Because of that, political organizers necessarily balance between two kinds of activity that sometimes contradict each other: on one side, making collective claims; on the other side, building up their organization and its access to sustaining resources. Struggles among activists often spring up over precisely that division of labor: are our leaders spending too much time raising money for themselves and too little on forwarding our interests? On the contrary, have they destroyed our activist group by spending all their energy making claims and not enough energy on recruiting new members and drumming up financial support?

By identifying different kinds of political actors, we can untangle complicated contentious episodes. We can detect the arrival and departure of actors from contention, trace how their claim making changed, look for coalitions and divisions among them, and see whether they moved up or down the continuum from intermittent actors to established interests to activist groups. We can even understand why groups that appeared to be

insignificant at one point in time seem unstoppable at the next and shrink to a small cadre of at a third: changes in political opportunity structure may return intermittent activists to their ordinary lives, give pause to established interests, and turn activists into a small but militant sect.

Ethnic Identities in a Disintegrating Soviet Union

Here is a simplified example from Mark Beissinger's work on nationalist activism in the former Soviet Union. Between 1987 and 1991, across the USSR many regionally organized nationalities made collective claims for autonomy or independence. By 1992, fifteen of them had managed to secede from the union and gain international certification as sovereign states. When Beissinger was analyzing event catalogs to help explain the Soviet Union's disintegration, one of the many things he did was to chart the frequency with which members of different Soviet nationalities staged protest demonstrations month by month from 1987 through 1991 (Beissinger 2002: 84). For the most active, these were the peak months:

Armenians	May 1988
Estonians	November 1988
Moldavians	February 1989
Russians	January 1990
Crimean Tatars	April 1990
Ukrainians	November 1990
Latvians	December 1990
Lithuanians	December 1990
Azerbaijanis	December 1990
Georgians	September 1991

The Soviet Union had built these categories and their boundaries into its governing structure, for example by treating Ukraine and Lithuania as distinct units of rule with some degree of autonomy on such questions as language and cultural expression. As a result, all existed as established interests. They easily created activist groups claiming to speak for all Ukrainians, all Lithuanians, and so on down the list. Brokerage brought together different clusters within a given nationality into a temporarily unified actor.

Other political actors were also at work in the disintegrating Soviet Union: Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, Russian leader (and later president) Boris Yeltsin, emerging industrial tycoons, the government's security service, and more. Yet by itself this simple chronology tells an important tale about the sequence of flight from the USSR. On the union's edge and supported by powerful neighbors, Armenians and Estonians acted early and successfully, securing quick outside support for their claims to become independent states. Then the rush began. It peaked at the end of 1990. Of these major actors, all but the Tatars of the Crimea (who ended up inside Ukraine) eventually won independence.

If we looked closer, we would distinguish many more actors, and begin to see crucial realignments among them. Within Estonia, for example, we would find a group of ethnic Russians who feared and resisted Estonian independence. We would also see multiple alliances and divisions. Starting in 1987, before either Armenia or Azerbaijan came close to independence, Armenians and Azerbaijanis were engaging in violent confrontations over the disputed territory of Karabakh, geographically inside Azerbaijan but with about three quarters of its population ethnically Armenian (Beissinger 2002: 64-69, 342-347, 375). In 1992, newly independent Armenia invaded the territory between its border and Karabakh. A 1994 ceasefire left Armenia in de facto control of the territory, but without international certification of its claims.

Boundaries and Identities

Once we turn the magnification up far enough to see individual episodes, we begin to notice that crude categories like "Armenian" and "Azerbaijani" do not capture the self-presentations of the actors or their relations to each other. In Karabakh alone, activists of Armenian heritage did not simply identify themselves as Armenians, but as Karabakh Armenians. In order to deal with that complication, we need a better understanding of political identities and the boundaries on which they build. Us-them boundaries play crucial parts in contention. Boundaries themselves commonly take shape outside of contentious politics, as a result of a complex, consequential process we call, accordingly, "boundary formation". Once they exist, however, political actors regularly use them as part of contentious politics. Then the mechanisms of boundary activation and boundary deactivation come into play.

You bump into social boundaries every day. You observe or participate in boundaries that separate newsvendors from newspaper buyers, students from teachers, owners from employees, and patients from doctors or nurses. Every one of those boundaries identifies a social relationship you have little trouble recognizing and, if necessary, negotiating. Boundaries and social relations across them form as results of five different mechanisms – encounter, imposition, borrowing, conversation, and incentive shift -- operating singly or in combination:

Encounter. When members of two previously separate or only indirectly linked networks enter the same social space and begin interacting, they commonly form a social boundary at their point of contact. To existing distinctive relations within the networks on either side of that point, encounter adds distinctive relations across the zone. Dark-skinned Puerto Ricans or Dominicans were Puerto Rican or Dominican in their countries of origin, but when they came to New York, their skin color became a more important boundary than their nationality.

Imposition. Authorities draw lines where they did not previously exist, for example distinguishing citizens from non-citizens, landowners from other users of the land, or genuine Christians from insufficiently pious persons. The Soviet Union created "certified minorities" that were given dominant status within the Republics in which they were in the majority, reducing non-certified minorities in those states to secondary status.

Borrowing. People creating a new organization emulate distinctions already visible in other organizations of the same general class, for example by instituting a division between hourly wage workers and employees drawing monthly salaries. Chiapanecans come from a multitude of indigenous groups, many of them speaking different languages and living in different villages (Hellman 1999); but when the Zapatista rebellion broke out, there was an incentive to borrow the broader label "indigenous" for across the social spectrum.

Conversation. Conversation has many other effects, but it qualifies as a boundary-causing mechanism when in the course of routine interaction participants incrementally alter relations between social sites by developing distinctive relations within at least two clusters, and establishing distinctive relations across the zone between those clusters. Rwanda's deep, eventually lethal boundary between Hutu and Tutsi grew out of long-term interaction within a population of common origin, with a shared language and culture, as some members of the population became cultivators (the Hutu) and others became herders (the Tutsi). German and Belgian colonial masters then applied imposition to the boundary as they made the Tutsi minority favored agents of colonial rule (Prunier 1995).

Incentive Shift. Participants in boundary processes receive rewards or penalties that affect their pursuit of within-boundary relations and cross-boundary relations, for example when authorities announce that anyone who fraternizes with the enemy will suffer imprisonment, death, or expulsion. The English-Only movement in the United States would provide incentives for immigrants to learn and use American English, and disincentives to continue the use of the languages of their homeland.

In all these cases, the combination of a boundary with relations inside and across it always generates some shared sense of the boundary's meaning on one side and the other. Employees and owners may not see eye to eye on the meaning of the boundary

between them, but they negotiate some common recognition of the boundary's existence and importance.

When activated, the combination of boundary, relations, and understandings attached to them constitutes a social identity. Seen from one side of the boundary or the other, it provides varying answers to the questions "Who am I?", "Who are we?", "Who are you?", and "Who are they?" The political identities that concern us here always involve plurals, especially "us" and "them."

Identities center on boundaries separating us from them. On either side of the boundary, people maintain relations with each other: relations within X and relations within Y. They also carry on relations across the boundary: relations linking X to Y. Finally, they create collective understandings about the boundary, about relations within X and Y, and relations between X and Y. Those understandings usually differ from one side of the boundary to another, and often influence each other. Together, boundary, cross-boundary relations, within-boundary relations, and shared understandings make up collective identities. Changes in any of the elements, however they occur, affect all the others. The existence of collective identities, furthermore, shapes individual experiences, for example, by providing templates for us abolitionists or those slavers, us indigenous Chiapanecans vs those blancos, distinguishing us Karabakh Armenians from those arrogant Karabakh Azerbaijanis.

Identities, then, have four components: 1) a boundary separating me from you or us from them; 2) set of relations within the boundary; 3) a set of relations *across* the boundary; and 4) shared understandings of the boundary and the relations. Through the Soviet Union's history, Karabakh Armenians and Karabakh Azerbaijanis had maintained distinctive everyday identities despite sometimes settling together, working together, and intermarrying. As the USSR fell apart, however, the paired identities politicized. As of 1992 Karabakh Armenians and Karabakh Azerbaijanis each had extensive internal relations, fought each other across the boundary between them, and offered competing accounts concerning the history of their region as well as the territorial rights that history implied.

Identities become *political* identities when governments become parties to them. In Karabakh, the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan backed the people they claimed as their countrymen, and denied the opposing claims. They manipulated and controlled permissible answers to the questions "Who are you?", "Who are we?" and "Who are they?"

These questions do not arise in remote corners of the former Soviet Union alone. After the al-Qaeda attacks of September 2001, identities of Americans as patriotic or subversive became even more political as the US government became a party to us-them boundaries separating patriots from terrorists and their sympathizers. The government activated a boundary that already existed, but now became more salient. Europeans

maneuver around similar questions not only in deciding whether to align with US military policy but also in deciding whether Turks are Europeans and whether Muslims in general lie on the opposite side of the us-them boundary. The war against terror and European Union expansion have activated new boundaries, and deactivated others.

Boundaries change and new boundaries form as a result of encounter, imposition, borrowing, conversation, and incentive shift. Most contention, however, does not create and activate new boundaries. On the contrary, most contentious politics activates or deactivates existing boundaries. Everywhere in identity politics we will meet the mechanism of *boundary activation*, in which an existing boundary becomes more salient as a reference point for collective claim making.

Boundaries between social classes, ethnic groups, religious faiths, neighborhoods, and other categories already exist. They organize some of routine social life. But contention typically activates one of these boundaries while deactivating others that could have been relevant. That activation brings a certain pair of identities into play. Ethnic conflict does not pit people who have nothing but ethnic identities. On the contrary, differences by gender, locality, class, or occupation commonly give way as ethnicity X and ethnicity Y begin attacking each other. Boundary activation regularly promotes identity conflict, as the following episode reveals.

Homeless in Gaza

In 2004 Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who had masterminded the planting of Israeli settlements among the Arab population in the 1980s, announced the evacuation of some 7-8 thousand settlers from Jewish enclaves in the Gaza strip, home to over 1.3 million Palestinians. These Israeli citizens responded to Sharon's move with a wide array of actions from the social movement repertoire. They had been intermittent political actors intersecting with established interest groups like the International Zionist movement that supported them, and with activists on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian boundary. The boundary that separated them from their Palestinian neighbors was rigid, while their identity with the Jewish population in Israel proper were ambiguous; They were Jews and Zionists, of course, but they had moved to Gaza precisely to affirm their identity as religious Zionists and their distinctiveness from the largely secular population of their homeland. "Gaza settler" became a distinct identity, with boundaries separating members from Gaza Palestinians, from other Israelis and, eventually, from the Israeli state itself. As they protested their evacuation, those identity boundaries would sharpen.

How did the boundary settlers/state activate? Under increasing international pressure and in the face of the ruinous financial and military cost of maintaining isolated settlements, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon decided, in 2004, to evacuate Gaza's 8,000-odd Jewish settlers. Table 1 summarizes the history of these settlements and the pattern of their evacuation through September 2005, when the Palestinian Authority moved pell-mell into the Gaza Strip.

Table 1 about here

While the creation of the state of Israel resulted from a policy of "settlement" that qualified as a social movement, Gaza was unusual in this respect: Israel wrested the region from Egyptian control in a 1967 war. Israel settled it largely with national-religious families, inspired both by the desire for subsidized housing and by the desire to bring redemption. Most were farmers who hired Palestinian labor to produce fruits and vegetables for the urban markets along the Mediterranean coast. Israeli authorities surrounded those prosperous enclaves with barbed wire and protected them against the surrounding Arab population with a substantial military presence. Periodically, violent Palestinian groups, both secular Marxists and Islamists like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, set off bombs and lobbed mortars into the Jewish enclaves, which led to retaliation from the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). These militants also used the southern boundary of the Strip to bring arms and ammunition across from Egypt.

By the turn of the new century, the Gaza settlements had become a running sore for Israeli rulers and for their relations with Egypt and the Palestinians. Sharon's government sympathized with the settlers' plight. But the government found itself increasingly weighed down by the cost of maintaining their enclaves, by the inability of the military to stop the attacks, and by the desire to pre-empt western pressure. As relations with the weak and divided Palestinian Authority stalled and the prospect of a general settlement retreated, the evacuation of a small number of Jewish families from the seething slum of Gaza seemed a sensible way of showing progress in relation to the Palestinians and lowering the tension between Israel and its allies.

The evacuation of the Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip led to serious contentious politics. Listen to what long-time leftwing critic of the Israeli occupation Uri Avneri had to say about it:

The present struggle is a kind of civil war, even if - miraculously, again - no blood will be spilled. The Yesha people [i.e., the settler movement] are a revolutionary movement. Their real aim is to overturn the democratic system and impose the reign of their rabbis. Anyone who has studied the history of revolutions knows that the role of the army is the decisive factor. As long as the army stands united behind the regime, the revolution is condemned to failure. Only when the army is disintegrating or joins the rebels, the revolution can win (<http://zope.gush-shalom.org/home/en/channels/avneri/1123967824>).

In its factual details, the settlers' campaign had little in common with the actors, the performances, and the targets of the social movements that have been the subject of most American or European research. But it embodied many of the properties of the identity work we have seen elsewhere. Not only did they carry Israeli flags on their way out of the settlements but some of them -- notoriously for survivors of the Holocaust -- marched out wearing yellow stars of David on their clothing like concentration camp victims going to their deaths. That gesture scandalized most Israelis by hinting that the IDF soldiers accompanying them belonged to Hitler's SS. In an act of defiance, it heightened an identity boundary that had already become painfully salient.

The stars of David were no mere costume ornaments; they were performances designed to sharpen the boundary between the majority of Israelis who supported Sharon's move and the intense minority who opposed it. Members of that minority filtered into Gaza from their West Bank settlements to help organize the resistance. The sharpening boundaries triggered the participation of regular interest groups and politicians, like Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who resigned to embarrass Sharon and stake a claim to replace him as leader of the Likud Party. As the settlers' differences from Sharon sharpened, they activated a new boundary between religious and realist conservative Zionism. The evacuation of the Gaza strip helped to activate a boundary within Israeli society that actually led to a re-alignment in its public politics.

Identities and Claims

Not all contentious politics leads to such sudden and dramatic identity shifts. But political identities take their meaning from contentious interaction: we make claims on them. They often respond with counter-claims: we demand our rights, but the government replies that we have no rights. Karabakh Armenians claimed they had rights to political autonomy, or even to annexation by the Armenian state. But Azerbaijan's leaders replied that Karabakh and its populations belonged to sovereign Azerbaijani territory. Later, the Armenian army bid up the claim-making by occupying the part of Azerbaijan between Armenia and Karabakh. It remains there under the terms of the 1994 ceasefire, with both countries claiming ownership of the border strip and of Karabakh. At the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, contentious interaction continues.

Collective claims fall into three categories: identity, standing, and program. *Identity* claims declare that an actor exists. Although political actors will often emphasize one type of claim over the others, there are few "pure" cases of identity politics, a politics of standing, or programmatic politics. The Zapatistas first caught international attention by their simple claim to existence. In the elaborate declaration of New Years Day 1994, they said, in effect, "Pay attention to us, because we're a new actor, we mean business, and the boundary between you and us matters."

Standing claims say that the actor belongs to an established category within the regime, and therefore deserves the rights and respect that members of that category receive. The Zapatistas made a number of standing claims, but the most salient was to be valid representatives of Chiapas' indigenous people. (In fact, some indigenous leaders in Chiapas itself later disputed that claim.) They underlined their standing claims, furthermore, by denying that they were "drug traffickers, or drug guerrillas, or bandits, or whatever other characterization our enemies might use."

Program claims call for their objects to act in a certain way. The Zapatistas called on the Mexican government not only to recognize their identity and their standing as valid representatives of indigenous people but also to change its policy toward indigenous people by protecting their land and defending them against rapacious outsiders. In other kinds of contentious politics programs range across an enormous variety of claims, for example:

- overthrow the present government
- support our candidate for city council
- don't build that road through our neighborhood
- give us starving people food
- make our bosses pay us a living wage
- exterminate our enemies

Claims and counter-claims do not occur randomly. Every regime limits possible claims in three different ways. First, POS affects what claims are possible. It does so by determining whether established political actors are or are not available as allies for new political actors such as the Zapatistas. If multiple independent centers of power exist within a regime (which means that POS is more open in that regard), the chances increase that at least one power center will support and certify a set of identity, standing, or program claims. If political alignments are changing fast, a claimant has more opportunities to join coalitions and to escape repression.

Second, every regime divides known claim making performances into prescribed, tolerated, and forbidden. A regime's government and other authorities enforce the prescribed performances, facilitate or at least do not block the tolerated performances, and act to suppress forbidden performances. Contained contention occurs within the limits set by prescribed and tolerated performances. Transgressive contention breaks out of those institutional limits into forbidden or previously unknown territory. Like the Mexican state, almost any state of medium or high capacity forbids the formation of actors having autonomous military power such as warlords' militias and guerrilla bands. In

most regimes in most periods, any group that decides to make independent claims by force of arms soon faces vigorous repression. Regimes also channel claims at the prescribed end of the range. Any government that requires its citizens to assemble for patriotic ceremonies, for example, runs the risk that some hardy soul will disrupt the proceedings by shouting seditious slogans or assaulting a political leader. Since regimes also vary greatly in what forms of claim making they tolerate and forbid, top-down channeling of claims occurs all the time.

Third, from the bottom up the available repertoire strongly limits the kinds of claims people can make in any particular regime. No one knew how to stage a street demonstration before social movements became standard forms of contentious politics. Although these days the news media have made the demonstration a familiar image across most of the world, even now suicide bombing only belongs to the repertoires of very small terrorist circles in a few world regions. Like the demonstration, suicide bombing depends on shared knowledge of a complex set of relations and routines. The same holds for other performances and repertoires elsewhere, even the kidnapping, bombing, and guerrilla warfare of today's Chechnya and Colombia. Participants in Chechen and Colombian contention have learned these routines, but not – at least not yet – street demonstrations and suicide bombing. Every contentious repertoire everywhere excludes most forms of claim making that would be technically possible in their settings. Contentious interaction takes place within limits set by POS, regime controls, and available repertoires.

Conclusion

From the antislavery movement that Clarkson began in the 1780s to breakup of the Soviet Union and the Zapatista campaign in the 1990s to the Gaza settlers' movement of 2005, we have seen a spectrum of identity formation and identity work. We take these lessons from our stories:

First, looking at our stories over time, we see a growing ease of creation of new identities and of transition from non-political to political identities. Where Clarkson and his colleagues had to struggle for years to create the identity of "antislavery activism," Zapatista militants, post-soviet secessionists, and Gaza settlers could quickly mobilize the symbols of, respectively, indigenous Indian groups, Caucasian ethnics, and Jewish Holocaust survivors.

Second, all four of our stories show that a focus on identities is not the obverse of a focus on "structures" but their complement. Structures of political opportunity and threat both constrain and empower identity work. By focusing on the process of identity formation, identity activation, and identity management we link structure and culture.

Third, identity politics has both an internal and a relational dimension. Every statement that begins "Speaking as a . . . ", is at the same time a statement about an existing, a hoped-for, or a dreaded boundary.

Fourth, if we want to integrate the study of identities within the study of contentious politics, we should see them in connection with political regimes, opportunity structures, and their relations to other actors within those regimes.

Much work remains to be done on how identities work.

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