

An Inquiry into the Rationale Behind Violent Ethnic Conflicts: a Rational Choice Perspective

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Summary:

The paper examines the contribution of Rational Choice Theory (RCT) to the study and explanation of violent ethnic conflicts. It seeks to identify how RC methodological individualism applies to ethnic conflict and ethnic violence and what sorts of explanations of these phenomena could be reached through a RC approach. The analytical apparatus of Game theory is employed to model and explain individuals' reasoning and behavior in situations of mounting ethnic tension and bursting violence. The account focuses on actions of rational decision-makers in situations of pending or actual inter-group violence. Within this frame strategies that rational individuals would follow in such circumstances are examined and the aggregate effect of pursuing such strategies is presented. Building on the presentation and examination of the application of RCT (methodological individualism) to the level of individual, the analysis shows how the analytical tools provided by Game theory help to explain the dynamics of inter-group relations in cases of deepening conflict and the occurrence and

persistence of violence. Finally, an attempt is made to pinpoint the advantages and deficiencies of RC approach to phenomena of violent ethnic conflict.

Key words: rational choice theory, methodological individualism, conflicts (violent, ethnic)

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War replaced the inter-bloc confrontation between the two super powers with a multitude of interstate and intra-state conflicts.¹ Reduction in the scale of confrontation, however, has proved to be amply compensated in terms of ferocity, intensity, and bloodshed of post-Cold war conflicts. For, unlike the nuclear-hinted 'cold' confrontation, many of the subsequent small-scaled conflicts have appeared to be destructively hot. Notions of nationalism and ethnicity have been evoked and extensively applied to account for many of the post-Cold war developments and the label "ethnic" has asserted itself as a stable and preferred designation of most instances of conflict and violence.

These developments have faced social science - in a more urgent and demanding

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¹ Small-scale conflicts, internal as well as between states, did exist during the Cold war era. They were, however, many times overshadowed, both in practical terms and regarding theoretical considerations, by the latent, still overwhelmingly stronger destructive potential of the Iron-curtain confrontation. With the latter's disappearance proliferating smaller-scale conflicts have become particularly conspicuous.

way than ever - with the need to scrutinize and explain phenomena of ethnic conflict and ethnic violence. Different explanatory paradigms and different conceptual systems have been employed in search for answers to theoretical and pending practical questions of *whys* (looking for causes) and *hows* (focusing of the behavior of complex systems) of ethnic conflict and violence. Newer approaches like 'new institutionalism,' methodological individualism of rational choice, and postmodernist *discoursivism* joined forces with the traditional ones (historical, structuralist-functional, modernist, constructivist, ideological, culturalist, etc.) to analyze and account for nationalism- and ethnicity-related social and political phenomena.

The present paper deals with one of the relative 'newcomers' in the field - Rational Choice Theory (RCT) with the aim to examine RCT contribution to the study and explanation of violent ethnic conflicts. The underlying impetus behind this research stems from the perception that any account of ethnic conflict as an outcome of nationalistic irrational choices and behavior of individuals and groups is ultimately incomplete and misleading. It is claimed that methodological individualism (as in RCT) has its place and role in the explanation of violent ethnic conflict. An ensuing claim is that nationalistic and confrontational behavior of individuals in times of ethnic tensions and conflicts has its own logic and rationale and they should not be neglected in theoretically addressing or practically tackling the issue of ethnic conflict.

The paper starts with a brief presentation of the rational choice (RC) paradigm with a focus on the RC explanatory approach. Here particular attention is paid to Game theory and Prisoner's dilemma with its implications for strategic situations. The second part of the text seeks to identify how RC methodological

individualism applies to ethnic conflict and ethnic violence and what sorts of explanations of these phenomena could be reached through a RC approach. The analytical apparatus of game theory and especially Prisoner's dilemma are used to model and explain individuals' reasoning and behavior in situations of mounting ethnic tension and bursting violence. Using a modified version of Security dilemma, these situations are presented through the model of ethnic security dilemma. The conclusion pinpoints the advantages and limitations of RC approach to the study of phenomenon of violent ethnic conflict.

1. Rational Choice Paradigm: An Overview

RCT offers a formal analysis of the process of rational decision-making under the assumption that individuals are capable of making reasoned choices based on their goals and beliefs. The central premise of the theory (and consequently of the explanation it provides) is that human behavior is goal-directed and calculating (Little, 1993: 40). Rationality is understood in terms of means, not in terms of ends: people are rational not because they have rational ends, but because no matter what their ends are, people are always trying to optimize their realization through rationalization. RCT, thus, occupies with 'the making of choice' leaving the content of ends open. The theory furthermore is concerned with aggregate effect of a large number of individual decision-makings as it appears in social and political phenomena. Given that the particular setting into which the process of decision-making take place influence the rational choice in a number of ways, RC approach seeks to account also for the circumstances of the choice.

Hence, an explanation built on the RC approach should provide an account of:

- the ends that rational decision makers might have in a given situation;
- the circumstances of choice that constitute the environment of decision-making and action;
- the strategies that rational individuals would follow in such circumstances; and
- the aggregate effect of those strategies.

The last point bears on the fact that RC approach aims at providing "*aggregate explanations*", which seek to explain large-scale social-economic, and political phenomena as the aggregate and often unintended outcome of rational decision-making as individual level" (Ibid.: 42). RCT disposes of various analytical techniques of aggregation for different situations of individual rational decision-making, as for example conflict situations. The analytical techniques are provided by a set of sub-theories within RCT, which theories analyze different types of situations to which RC approach can be applied. Among these, particularly relevant for the aim of the present paper is the Game theory, accounting for a particular interactive situation of decision-making – known as the Prisoner's Dilemma- and its implications on cooperation and collective action.

RCT is based on a *formal* account of rational decision-making when the agent faces a range of options with determinate outcomes, offering a set of decision rules for making a rational choice. This is the core of Decision theory, where the concepts of utility, preference and probability are introduced. This account does not cover, however, situations of interaction in which the outcome of an agent's choice (and thus the choice itself) is dependent on the

choices other rational agents made.² Game theory therefore is introduced to account for this specific constraint on the choice, where the rational decision-maker must always consider that the outcome of the choices available to him/her is influenced by the choices of the other rational decision-makers in the given situation. Consequently, each decision-maker should choose on the basis of assumptions about the others' intentions.

There are two basic classes of games, which Game theory analyzes: zero-sum games and non-zero-sum games. The formers are zero-sum games of pure competition where there is no overlap of interests. In such a game what one player gets, the other player loses, so that the total of their gains and losses is zero. Non-zero-sum games, in contrast, allow for cooperation between the players, because there are certain outcomes that are preferred by all players over other outcomes. Prisoner's dilemma is such a non-zero-sum game, which models a number of interactive situations of strategic rationality and is embodied in many instances of social performance and interaction (see Figure 1). In a simple two-party Prisoner's dilemma, parties have two possibilities each: to cooperate among one another, or to defect from cooperation.³ Accordingly, there are four possible outcomes depending on which option would each on the parties choose⁴:

		B	
		Cooperate	Defect
A	Cooperate	1, 1	-2, 2
	Defect	2, -2	-1, -1

Figure 1. Prisoner's dilemma

² This is what Daniel Little calls a "situation of *strategic rationality*" (Little, 1993: 52).

³ It is called "prisoner's" because the classical example which represents it is a case where two suspects are questioned about a crime, which they have both committed. Separately for each one it would be better if each confesses (this is the dominant strategy of each). But if both confess, that would be worse for each than if they do not, for if both confess they would both go to prison for more years than if they keep silent. Thus, here cooperation amount for non-confession, while confession is defection.

⁴ This presentation is from Little (1993: 56), Fig. 3.4 Prisoner's dilemma.

It is obvious that the players have their dominant strategies (the best strategy no matter of the other's choice). For each of them it is better to defect (and thus get 2) than to cooperate (and gain only 1). If, however, both of them act according to each one's dominant strategy and defect, the outcome for both would be worse than if they do not opt for their respective dominant strategies and cooperate instead. This, on the one hand, each of the parties is disposed to do what is better for itself. On the other hand, it will be worse for both if each of them chooses to do what will be better for its own self. This situation exhibits what Little calls "a paradox of collective rationality": "Both players prefer the cooperative-cooperative outcome to the defect-defect outcome, but they are unable to arrive at this outcome through a rational decision-making" (Little, 1993: 56).

Prisoner's dilemma has several important implications for the conditions of interaction. In order both parties to neglect their respective most preferred options, they should first be in communication with one another, which is a way to overcome acting on assumptions about other's acting. The paradox of rationality is partly a consequence of the lack of communication between the parties and information on each others' intention.⁵ If both parties are aware of the strategic character of the situation, they need to communicate with one another in order to get information about other's intentions and possibly to cooperate. Because there are certain outcomes, which are preferred by all parties, as compared to some other outcomes, "if players are permitted to communicate with each other, they may be able to reach an agreement that enables them to coordinate their choices and arrive at one such outcome" (Little, 1993: 55).

Communication, however, is far from enough for one to abandon one's dominant strategy (defection) and go for what rationally would not lead him to his most preferred outcome. Especially in situations of single non-repeating choice, defection appears to be the optimal strategy for each of the parties since mutual interest to cooperate is seriously undermined by the cost-free incentive to defect. If A and B agree to cooperate, whether cooperation would take place depends on their respective motivation to keep the agreement. Both A and B are aware that if one is fair and the other party defect from the agreement, the fair party would end up with far worse outcome compared to if both parties defect, or if one defects while the other keeps the agreement. Similarly, both A and B are aware that if one defects, while the other is fair, the defecting party would end up with the biggest gain. Given these strong reasons for not keeping an agreement, whether one would decide to cooperate depends on the trust it has that the other would cooperate too.

The issue of trust between parties is pertinent in repeating interactions when a consequence of choices have to be made. In such situations "[D]efection is no longer the optimal strategy for each player when each knows that he confronts an open-ended series of prisoner's dilemma decisions with a given opponent" (Little, 1993: 56). An interaction involving a number of sequential choices provides mutual trust (or mistrust for that reason) with additional meaning, supplying it with the weight of experience. The question of trust in such cases implies the notion of reciprocity under the following logic:

⁵ If for both convicts confessing is better no matter what the other would do and if they do not communicate with each other so that to have a hint on other's intentions, both end up confessing and go to prison for much more years than if both would have kept silent.

In a situation of repeating choices, a defection of one of the parties would lead only to a one-time advantage over the other party. If A defects in the first round, B would respond by defecting in the second round and so on, forming a stable continuum of defections. Since in the long-run it is disadvantageous for both A and B to defect, they would either (foreseeing the possibility for this recurrent defection to appear) both refrain from defecting in the first round of choices, or they would perceive it as rational to break the defections through losing one round by playing cooperative and see how the other would respond in the next round (Ibid.: 56-57).

Cooperation, thus, can be explained in terms of reciprocity. It is a 'tit for tat' cooperation, strictly conditional upon the other's moves. There might be circumstances of interaction and conditions, under which strict reciprocity is the optimal strategy for each of the parties. Obviously, the most important conditions for reciprocity is the parties to be able to recognize and identify the opposite party in each situation of choice and to be aware and to remember the history of their mutual interaction and the other's previous choices. Furthermore, each of the parties must consider the probability of future (continuous) interaction with the other party in the context of the present interaction enough high, so that to assure abstention from defection for the sake of future advantages of cooperation. The fact that reciprocity can be the optimal strategy in situations of repeating choices make the game theory analysis useful in explaining some features of violent ethnic conflicts.

One more point that is important should be marked before proceeding further. It bears on another theory within the RC paradigm - Collective action theory - and concerns the problem of 'free-riding.' This is the problem of collective action in situations where all group members have interest in an action (or outcome), but since no single individual's contribution would make any difference in view of achieving the outcome, all members are rationally disposed to refrain from contribution, hoping that others would not. Collective action under this account can be seen as Prisoner's dilemma with multiple players. This problem has important implications for the way people act collectively in ethnic conflicts and in situations of ethnic violence.

This is the theoretical and analytical framework, within which RC approach will be applied to ethnic conflict and ethnic violence.

2. RC Approach to Ethnic Conflict and Ethnic Violence

Here under "violent ethnic conflict" are meant situations of escalating inter-group tensions, which (may) evolve into violence and into which large numbers of people are involved. This understanding covers not only situations of actual violence, but also situations where potential of inter-group violence is rapidly increasing.⁶ One should remain aware, however, that there is no a definitional relation between the ethnic conflict and violence. As Hardin writes "[C]onflict between ethnic groups is commonplace" while "[E]xtensive violence between such groups is far less common" (Hardin, 1996: 155). In other words, ethnic

⁶ Concrete examples are conflicts surrounding the dissolution of Yugoslavia, (namely Bosnia-Herzegovina, and to some extent Kosovo before KFOR and Macedonia), the Azeri-Armeni conflict in Nagorno Karabach, as well as those in Somalia and Rwanda. Other forms of ethnic violence like Basque separatist terrorism or Northern Ireland violence among paramilitary groups, or sporadic ethnic riots in India, are not covered by the current analysis.

conflict does not by definition involve or evolve to ethnic violence for violence is not a stage or a degree of conflict, "but a qualitative form of conflict with its own dynamics" (Brubaker and Laitin 1998, 432).⁷

There is a reason for focusing on *violent* ethnic conflicts while examining the applicability of RCT. On the one hand, while accounting for conflicts in general obviously falls within the reach of RC paradigm, it seems that the phenomenon of group violence defies rationality-based approaches and explanations especially when conceived from the viewpoint of individual behavior. Indeed, on the face of it, it is hard to perceive the rationale of individuals involved in ethnic-based violence. The fact that in many cases outbursts of violence are seen as outcomes of unleashed ancient ethnic hatreds contributes further to this.

On the other hand, and this is another common way of seeing them, violent ethnic conflicts are often perceived as 'constructed from above' by belligerent elites.⁸ Since violent conflicts are convenient means to hold onto or to aspire to political leadership in grim times, violence may appear as "the result of purposeful and strategic policies rather than irrational acts of masses" for it is the political actors "who actively create violent conflict" (Gagnon, 1994/95: 164).

Neither of the two approaches covers sufficiently the question about individuals involved in violence. Under the first one, people become violent because they

hate each other and they are ready to kill one another if not under control.⁹ There is little place left for individual rationality here. On the contrary, these are the accounts out of which stems the definition of ethnic violence as 'irrational.' The second approach does not explain why people are susceptible to nationalist manipulation inflaming acute inter-group confrontation. Revealing the motivation of elites to engage in 'constructing' ethnic conflicts, this approach tells nothing about the reasons of people take part in such a project.

Applying RC approach to issues of ethnic conflict and violence attempts to fill the gaps left by other approaches. Following the outlined RC explanatory strategy the account will focus on actions of rational decision-makers in situations of pending or actual inter-group violence and on the way of decision-making and action. This is the frame within which strategies that rational individuals would follow in such circumstances are examined. Finally, the aggregate effect of pursuing those strategies is presented. The account is organized so that first the application RCT (methodological individualism) to the level of individual is presented and examined. The second step is to show how the analytical tools provided by Game theory help explaining dynamics of inter-group relations in cases of deepening conflict and the occurrence and persistent of violence.

⁷ Brubaker and Laitin (Ibid.) also emphasize that "[T]he 'ethnic' quality of ethnic violence is not intrinsic to the act itself; it emerges through after-the-fact interpretative claim." The point bears on the role of social sciences for (re-)constructing of social reality through interpretation and scientific explanation. Though extremely important, the issue is not addressed here. It was introduced only as a reminder that when applied to conflict and even more to violence, the designation 'ethnic' should not be conceived in essentialist terms.

⁸ Conflict and violence under this explanation are 'ethnic' because ethnocentric identities seem especially suitable for warlike or conflict-like manipulations. I go back to this point further in the text when discussing Hardin RC explanation.

⁹ While the fact that ethnic hatreds exist could not be denied, it is not enough to account for the appearance of violence. Hardin (1995, 146) argues that "for most of the groups [that are now] in conflict, relations have generally been good through most of history." That means that hatred, when existing, needs to be regularly 'fueled,' otherwise it can hardly last over generations. Furthermore, even if there were hatred this would not necessarily express itself into violence.

The account on the first point builds on Rassel Hardin's RC explanation of violent ethnic conflicts in *One for All. The Logic of Group Conflict*. Hardin argues that ethnic violence is related but not intrinsic to one's ethnic identification. Building on the RC paradigm, he explains individual's identification with a particular group with the existence of incentives, which make it potentially beneficial to be or (as the account below shows) dangerous not to be a member of the group. Ethnic violence comes to existence as a means of protection of ethnic identification in cases of exacerbated conflicts (mostly over limited resources). Far from being natural or primordial, ethnic violence is merely potential and contingent upon certain conditions, which provide incentives for it. These conditions allow rational reasoning on the part of the individual regarding the identification with the group for both (or combination of them) make individuals' prosperity, material and even physical survival more tightly dependent on group prosperity and survival. Before proceeding, three remarks about individual rationality call for attention. People are rational not because they have rational ends, but because no matter what their ends are, people are always trying through rationalization to optimize their realization. For Hardin in majority of cases this rationalization is a kind of a tacit knowledge, acquired by people on the basis of their experience and this knowledge is psychologically motivating enough to guide further actions and judgements. This is an enlarged understanding of rationality with a strong subjective connotation. Besides, in order one to claim that people make rational choices, there is no need individuals

themselves to be conscious about the fact that they go through a process of rationalization. Many times this is a routine activity. We rationalize without thinking that we are doing it.¹⁰

Furthermore, the RC conception of individual rationality acknowledges that individual rationality is circumscribed by the fact that decision-making often takes place under conditions of uncertainty and incomplete information. The general RCT answer to the information problem is that maximization is done within the information one possesses. The problem, however, is more complex since 'the information one possess' has at least two dimensions - quantitative and qualitative and that fact bears on RC explanation of violent conflicts. The amount of information might be less than sufficient (this opens the door to how is one to estimate what is 'sufficient information'). Then especially under extraordinary circumstances, 'small amount' of information might amount to 'bad quality' information, i.e. the mere lack/insufficiency of information might distort the maximization outcomes. If we lack enough information about the present, we tend to replace it with what we have from past experiences and knowledge, which is often in the form of historically created and sustained stereotypes (this subcase complement Hardin's understanding of the role of knowledge and information for the processes of rationalization, presented below).

This is one of the reasons for violent conflicts between groups with long conflictual background of their mutual relations to look 'primordial.' The question of amount of information might be also

¹⁰ The relevance of this statement to the rational choice explanation of violent conflicts is that these are extreme, extraordinary situations make people more aware of the process of rationalization. In situations of acute or even violent conflict people abandon their 'every-day' 'routine' rationality and this mere change turn their attention to the 'hows' and 'whys' of their choices.

just the opposite: information is abundant, but distorted 'by definition' (for example, state controlled media propaganda with no alternative information sources) and therefore the outcomes of rationalization are also distorted. Hardin puts the information problem in a broader context: in the process of gathering knowledge, we are limited by our past experience and knowledge, both of which influence the quality of the new knowledge we acquire.¹¹ This reinforces the subjective connotations in his understanding of rationality.¹²

The last remark deals with the problem of rationality of beliefs. RCT either takes beliefs as given or not consider it important whether the content of a belief is true or false, given only that the agent's belief be rationally updated as he or she encounters new information.¹³ In an attempt to escape the 'psychological traps' of rationality and choice, Hardin makes a distinction between psychology of choice and the deliberate process of rational choosing. His RC explanation, thus, can be thought of as accounting for environmental constraints and their effects (as such they do not necessarily depend on psychological foundation). Hardin's explanation thus, follows RC explanatory strategy outlined above.

Now, how can violent ethnic conflicts be seen as an aggregate outcome of individual choices to partake in inter-group violence and why it can be rational for individuals to make such choices. For Hardin to explain collective actions means to address identification (conceived as the subjective component of identity), which on its turn entails motivation for actions (according to Hardin objective identity does not entails motivation). 'Identification' thus implies 'commitment' and the reason for the relative strength of such ethnic group commitments is largely a function of individual self-interest.¹⁴ The self-interest regarding the group identification is important to the extent to which it can be mobilized to support or reinforce other motivations. Beside self-interest, a successful individual's identification with a group is usually built upon on the existence of 'the other' ('alter group' in Hardin's terminology).

Generally, identification with one's ethnic group is neither the strongest nor the most essential an individual might have. In situations of sharp ethnic division, mounting inter-group tensions and/or violence the issue of identification with ethnic group becomes particularly salient. *First*, under threat individuals tend to stick to the group

¹¹ One may act rationally from the perspective of one's available knowledge even though, from the outside it might not seem to be rational or if over time one retrospectively concludes that the action was not in his/her interest. However, the action should not be considered as irrational when taken, if it was fully rational given the available knowledge at that moment. Thus, what is rational (in one's interest) to do, depends on who one is, in the sense that it depends on what knowledge one has (what is rational for me depends on what I know for myself).

¹² There is one more information-related problem: in normal situations individuals process the available information in view of both immediate perspective and far outcomes; in situations of mounting violence far outcomes become increasingly irrelevant and the available info is used by the individual for making choices for the immediate outcomes.

¹³ Obviously these considerations will meet considerable difficulties if put under empirical test. As sociological study of stereotypes shows, people are generally reluctant in changing (quickly) their attitudes, beliefs, views, once they are formed, even if/when encountered with contradicting information. What is more relevant to the present account is the fact that intergroup and interethnic relations/attitudes are one of the fields where this phenomenon is most conspicuous: ethnic, national and racial stereotypes are among the most stable ones. This is apparently one of the points, where rational choice theory is at odds with reality. However, since this is not an attempt of justifying rational choice theory as a whole, but merely to prove the validity of rational choice explanation of violent conflicts, this point is left open.

¹⁴ Hardin's main argument in *One for All* is that "self-interest can often successfully be matched with group interest. (...) The focus is on how collective action can be successful with little more than the kinds of self-interested motivations that underlie the logic of collective action" (Hardin, 1995: 5).

because under particular circumstances being part of a group provides comfort, security and even survival.¹⁵ The group becomes of supreme importance and outweighs the personal interest of the individual. What 'makes' a group, i.e. what distinguishes it from the 'other,' becomes extremely important for the members of the group, because they relate it to their survival.

But then, as Hardin points out, individuals identify with groups so strongly that they seem to forgo their personal interests while seeking their group interests.¹⁶ From a certain point on, one readily sacrifice oneself for the survival of the group. If one is ready to sacrifice one's own life, it is much easier to sacrifice the lives of others. This is how group itself and the identification with it become a source of violence. It is easy to see how in this process of total submission to what is perceived as group interest violence can turn into a tipping phenomenon (a point to be addressed further in the text).

Second, in situations of ongoing inter-group violence, it is not possible partially to identify with the group - one has

either to leave the group (and bear the consequences) or fully to identify with it.¹⁷ Once a full identification with the group is chosen and violence or apprehension of it is there, the rule of preemption becomes predominant: "If conflict can lead to violence, I can improve my prospects of surviving the conflict if I preemptively suppress those with whom I am in conflict" (Hardin, 1995: 143).¹⁸ There is even no need for actual attacks; risk aversion and self-defense against possible attacks are on their own a serious motivation for entering a conflict. The decision builds on available information (or lack of information) and previous experience (personal and group ones).¹⁹ But then once the actual conflict started violence is fueled by retaliation.

The impossibility of partial identification (and hence the imperative to identify with 'your side' of the inter-group violence) rules out the "free-rider" problem.²⁰ According to "free-rider" rule individuals' participation in group actions will only be rational if the selective incentives to participate outweigh the expected costs of participation (otherwise free-riding prevails). Accounting

¹⁵ It may sound atavistic, but similar phenomena occur even under only symbolic threats. Thus, for example, some electoral studies show that in cases of foreign policy crisis the government gets support even from its opponent (what is known as Rally-Around-the-Flag phenomenon).

¹⁶ He writes: "in our time there is massive mobilisation of groups, especially ethnic groups, for ostensibly group-level purposes. (Hardin, 1995: 145)

¹⁷ The point is discussed under the relevance of "free-rider" problem to ethnic conflicts.

¹⁸ This preemptive urge is not contingent upon the existence of 'ethnic hatreds.' There is no need any person from a group in conflict to hate personally anyone in the other group. 'Ethnic hatred' might come into the picture 'from within' (as a subjective account) to serve post factum rationalization and justification of one's partaking in ethnic violence. This post factum 'explanation' reads: 'Once upon a time (the predecessors of) your group did wrong to (the predecessors of) my group, which is the reason for my group to hate your group. This hatred is what justifies my group's violent actions (and therefore my violent actions) against your group (against you).' However, even if a person is absolutely convinced that s/he hates (the members of) the other groups it is not possible empirically to establish whether this hatred has been the main motivating force of one's actions, or the upper and most conspicuous layer of a complex combination of motivators (for example fear from the 'other' and/or scarcity of resources), or simply an elite driven propaganda aiming at mobilizing people.

¹⁹ The point bears on the relevance of nationalist manipulation of history. People are not always and by definition susceptible to this kind of manipulation, but in cases of mounting violence "past threats are merely evidence of the range of possibilities" for future threats (Hardin, 163). Another reason for people's responsiveness to this manipulation might be that nationalism and nationalist reading of history can provide groups' claims and deeds with a nimbus of rightfulness while at the same time proving the guilt of 'the other.' The belief in "others' guilt" should exist to justify 'our' actions; 'others' should be wrong so that 'we' feel right.

²⁰ Moreover, in a situation of violence the freedom of individual to free-ride can turn upside down: in stead of benefits, one can suffer for being member of group, still without the possibility to opt out.

for violent ethnic conflict, this condition should be modified, so that to cover also the reverse option, namely the incentives to participate so that to outweigh the expected costs of non-participation - both internal and external ones.²¹

Thus, "internal" reason for joining violence might be that the group itself would not to accept the individual if s/he refuses to take the responsibility and to participate in group deeds. Thus, if one wants to stay with one's group s/he should join the violence against the 'other.' 'External' constraint for opting out from the group is the fact that the members of the 'other group' might not believe or accept as true fact of 'opting-out' (for them there are no credible guarantees that you are not going to change your mind²²). Thus, one is in a situation where, no matter whether he wants to identify with his group or not, he is seen as a part of 'his' group by 'the other' group.

Third, in extreme situations there are not many options available for the individual. This 'shrinking' of choosing possibility itself makes it impossible people to use their 'routine' rationality while making choices²³ and they behave according to different type of rationality. The first difference stems from the 'time' factor - violent/extreme situations have different timing. (Different timing itself can create the illusion of shrinking of choices themselves.) The second difference is related to the fact that the 'stakes' behind the choices are of different character than those in 'normal-choice' situations. In cases of inter-group violence the choices

individuals have to make are often related to one's and one's closer people's (even physical) survival; in 'normal-choice' situation one rarely has the alternative 'death.'

Because of the different timing, limited options and the higher stakes people begin to consciously rationalize their choices and to make deliberate choices. This, however, does not mean that they make rational choices, i.e. that the alternatives they choose can be described as rational. Rather they make their choices (even the irrational ones) rationally for the mere change of conditions turns people's attention to the 'hows' and 'whys' of their choices. In other words, they become more aware of the process of rationalization and choosing and this is the third difference. Thus, on individual level one can distinguish between 'routine rationality' under 'normal' circumstances and 'deliberate rationality' under unusual circumstances; the former is usually 'automatic,' while the latter is can be described as 'sought' under mounting urge for preemption and tipping violence.

The notion of preemptiveness and the idea of violence as a tipping phenomenon, which appeared to be crucial in the explanation of individuals' strategies, are accounted for in the process of examining the aggregate effect of those individual strategies. This is related to presenting and explaining the dynamics of inter-group relations and showing how violence starts and persists.²⁴ To this end, RC approach disposes of some of the implications of repeating Prisoner's dilemma decision situation.

²¹ In conditions of intergroup ethnic violence individual freedom to choose is more restricted and the basis for getting together is not a voluntary one. The individual's costs of 'non-participation' in his/her group are getting extremely high. For example to escape being in one's group (and suffering because of this or being forced to participate in group's actions) one has either to be able with money or personalistic ties to fly away from the conflict or to stay there but out of one's group taking the risk of being morally condemned by his/her group and physically vulnerable to the other (and even to one's own) group

²² This is a sub-question of the general issue of the lack of credibility underlying the ethnic security dilemma.

²³ A general RCT assumption, stemming from RCT's affiliation to economic theory, says that one and the same man - Mr. Smith - is both customer and voter. Therefore, his behavior as a voter follows the same 'rules' as his behavior as a customer. However, in extreme situation it is not already the same man who acts; for under pressure the rules of behavior change.

²⁴ What can lead to violence is the dynamics of inter-group conflict rather than ethnic sentiments (Gagnon 1994/95, 131).

It was explained above how a pattern of reciprocity - either of cooperation or defection - can be established in the process of strategic interactions between parties. Since this reciprocity was as strictly conditional ('tit for tat') it cannot but reproduce the pattern of interaction; thus, cooperation is answered with cooperation, and defection with defection. This pattern of mutual reinforcement is represented by Security dilemma, a classic concept of International Relations theory. Collins defines it as a situation in which the "unresolvable uncertainty leads [states] to 'play safe' by pursuing policies that have the unintended effect of lessening others' security; these policies, while intended as purely defensive, indicate an aggressive ambition" (Collins, 1995: 193-4). Consequently, each party takes actions (security measures) on the bases of worst case scenarios. This leads to a spiral of increasing mutual counter-measures, which might escalate further if/when one of the sides decides to undertake a pre-emptive strike.

With the end of the Cold War the shift of attention from inter-state to intra-state (mostly ethnic) conflicts led to tailoring security dilemma to ethnic security dilemma (ESD). The concept of ESD helps analyzing the dynamics of interethnic relations in cases of conflict, the escalation of tensions and the eruption of violence. Unlike interstate relations where Security dilemma holds (under the realistic assumption of uncertainty and the anarchical structure

of the environment), in interethnic relations ESD cannot exist *a priori*.

ESD appears in situations of ethnic conflict under certain circumstances and given certain conditions (Hardin, 1995; Gagnon, 1998; Lischer, 1999; Kaufman, 1996). Without going into details, here it suffices to mention the main ones, working in various combinations: structural conditions (anarchy,²⁵ fear - a /mutually/ perceived threat to cultural or physical survival, increasing feasibility of using violent means), ethnic antagonism (related to both rational dissatisfaction and emotional discomfort created by economic pain and ethnic domination); elite motivation, willingness and ability to resort to ethnic mobilization (political space for belligerent entrepreneurs to perform the outbidding, existence of ethnic stereotypes, ethnic symbols).

In ESD interactions between groups develop in an upward spiral of mutual apprehensions and widening distrust, when choices are made under the assumption of 'other's' worse intentions and reactions. Parties interact under general uncertainty and piecemeal and/or distorted information leading to inability of the sides in a conflict to observe each other's intentions directly, and thus uncertainty about others' behavior and reactions. Moreover, there are problems identifying the 'other' in the interaction. This bears on the fact that in most cases parties cannot make credible guarantees about what it might do.²⁶ Because of this, neither

²⁵ Anarchy, understood as weakness of the central regime has a two-fold relation to the preemptiveness. On the one hand, when institutional pillars of order fell apart, there is a general disorientation and in places where cleavages among groups are already well defined and there are some reasons for group to antagonize, people tend to anticipate conflicts and to behave accordingly (Hardin 1995, 143). On the other hand, when the state is not strong enough to maintain and defend its monopoly over the use of violence, occurrence of non-legitimate (in Weberian sense) violence becomes more probable.

²⁶ In Hardin's opinion this is especially valid for groups those that are organized spontaneously. I think, however, that even if a group has been pre-hoc organized in the course of mounting tensions and violence, there might appear fragmentation within the group itself. Thus even if one of the 'fractions' within the group wants to cooperate, it is not able to speak on behalf of the group and even less to provide credible guarantees for the whole of the group. Eloquent example is the division among the Kosovo Albanian leaders and the attempts of Ibrahim Rugova, the leader of the 'peaceful wing,' to negotiate with Miloshevic; these attempts failed also because of the fact that Rugova did not have the support of all Kosovo Albanians.

of parties harbors any incentive to probe cooperation or to respond with cooperation to cooperative move from the other side. Thus, lack of credibility and impossibility to clearly identify the 'other' explain why in ESD the idea of reciprocity (described above in terms of cooperation) turns into preemptive defection so that the only reciprocity possible is that of defection.

The notion of preemption strongly bears on the tipping character of violent ethnic conflicts. ESD can be seen as brought to life by tipping phenomena. Tipping can be provided by systematic accumulation of similar events,²⁷ but also from more or less random shocks.²⁸ Moreover, violence itself is a tipping phenomenon: its development follows a step-like progression, i.e. once it begins or reaches a high enough level, it is often self-reinforcing for violence itself is what can provoke reprisals and preemptive attacks. That means that even if violent conflicts are politically constructed, when violence goes beyond some level, mechanisms for maintaining order may break down so that violence can flare out of control and fuel itself (Hardin, 1995: 155).²⁹

This is how RCT explains violent ethnic conflict as "aggregate and often unintended outcome of decision-making at individual level" (Little, 1993: 42), taking

into consideration also the dynamics of interaction and the circumstances in which choices are made. RCT offers an analyses of the underlying structures and mechanisms which produce the phenomenon of violent ethnic conflict. Hence the explanation is a deductive one and a general problem with deductive explanation is to provide empirical support for the explanatory hypothesis and its application to the particular case. The same goes for the assumptions. Little says that "to the extend the assumptions bear some relation to human behavior, they provide the basis for explaining a wide range of social phenomena" (Little, 1993: 41).

Moreover, many times individuals act without intending to provide a given effect. Consequently, it is only *post factum* that a link between the result and the individual's behavior can be observed. (The problem with post-hoc accounts is that they are of no empirical significance unless a given retrospective account is used to generate hypothesis that survive when tested against other phenomena.) Empirical research on ethnic conflict and violence shows that the assumptions on which RC explanation build are not unjustified. RC explanatory hypothesis has been successfully tested on practical cases.³⁰

²⁷ Events that can tip conflicts into violence are various. A typical tipping event, in the sense Hardin uses it, is the 1989 Kosovo speech of Miloshevic, which is thought to be his first bit to rule with the help of nationalism-driven hatreds and violence. The core point was that the interest of Kosovo Serbs would be protected and defended against the Albanians. The speech had a strong mobilization effect on Serbs in the province and thus marked the beginning of the sharp deterioration of intergroup relations, the negativism in which though abundant, till then was somewhat latent.

²⁸ According to Hardin it is plausible that spontaneous large-group conflicts that are not under the firm leadership of someone with intentions of violence are generally candidates for explanations from tipping. The combination of the two should not be excluded from consideration; the availability of violence-minded leader/s does not a priori exclude the possibility for a tipping event (unplanned and unintended from the leader/s) to occur. Then the evil-minded leadership in question can use it as a pretext.

²⁹ Precisely because violence is a tipping phenomenon, it is not indispensable and inescapable in the sense that at a certain point (or until a given moment in the development of a conflict) there are also another alternatives. (This points to the importance of political decisions and elite behavior especially in times of great changes within societies when the potentially existing violence is more probable to 'break out'.)

³⁰ Besides, Hardin's book, amply discussed in the present paper, in which he examines his theretical proposition on the basis of 6 case studies (chapter 6), another test of RC explanation of social phenomena related to ethnicity and ethnic conflict is offered by David Laitin, *Identities in Formation. The Russian Speaking Population in the Near Abroad*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press: 1998.

Conclusion

RC approach demystifies some conventional notions dominant in explaining ethnic violence. It avoids the teleological and reifying implications of macrostructuralist theories, which build their accounts on "group realism" and "group essentialism." It provides the analytical apparatus to explain human behavior complex situations and to see the link between individual rationalization and social outcomes. It emphasizes the interactive character of ethnic violence conflict and shows the logic of conflict 'reproduction' from perspective of individual rationale and action. The attention to the circumstances in which individual strategies are formed and applied shows that RCT is not incompatible and even 'calls for cooperation' with cultural analysis.³¹ The same goes for the relationship between RC approach and institutionalism.

RC approach to violent ethnic conflict has its limitations.³² More generally, the phenomena of violent ethnic conflict cannot be detached from the more general nationalism- and ethnicity-related issues. In this general realm not everything can be accounted for on the basis of the rational calculations of individuals, or even the unintended consequences of their aggregate actions. It should be a mistake to stretch too far a RC explanation of violent ethnic conflict, leaving no space for "nonlogical" or irrational actions.

To conclude, application of RCT and RC approach to studies of violent ethnic conflict offer important insights on the studied phenomena. The analytical apparatus of the theory is useful in studying the dynamics of interaction forming the environment into which individual decision-

making takes place. Explaining violent ethnic conflict as an aggregate outcome of individual actions has some empirical bearing. The examination of RCT account of violent ethnic conflict shows that its successful application is conditioned upon two things: awareness about theory's limitations and not setting huge goals of explaining everything; and attentiveness to the particularities of the phenomenon studied/ explained and its field/s.

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³¹ Both Hardin and Laitin parallel their RC account of individuals' rationalization with an analysis of the general cultural setting.

³² Hardin, for example, is explicit about the limits to the rational choice explanation. While stating that "[T]he rational choice account of ethnic, nationalist, or other group loyalty will be compelling if 1/ it often happen that self-interest and group identification are congruent and if 2/ actions that are costly to the individual but beneficial to the group or nation are increasingly less likely the higher the individual costs"(Hardin, 1995: 47) Hardin at the same time points out that "[I]n our time there is massive mobilization of groups, especially ethnic groups, for ostensibly group-level purposes. Individuals have identified with groups so strongly that they seem to forgo their personal interests while seeking their group interests" (Ibid.: 145).