



Egalitarian norms, economic development, and ethnic polarization



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ABSTRACT

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Economic development generally implies that traditional egalitarian norms and beliefs are replaced by modern individualistic values. Particularly when opportunities for advancement are unequally presented to people, this transformation may be accompanied by polarization and violent conflict. We illustrate this point by describing the processes of land privatization in Sub-Saharan Africa and then present two models that capture some salient aspects of this transformation in rural communities, including the possibility of polarization. We find that the support of egalitarian norms is notably strong when new opportunities are available for only a few people or when the community is socially unstable. Moreover, in unstable communities, polarization is strongest when the group with the most lucrative opportunities comprises half the population. *Journal of Comparative Economics* 41 (3) (2013) 719–744. Department of Social Sciences, Wageningen University and Research Centre, P.O. Box 8130, 6700 EW Wageningen, The Netherlands.

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1. Introduction

Rural communities in land abundant areas are historically characterized by egalitarian norms (see, e.g., Fried, 1967; Flanagan, 1989; Boehm, 1993; Platteau, 2000). In contrast to the individualistic ideology of modern societies, these norms emphasize the reciprocal rights and obligations among community members. Communal networks of reciprocal relationships serve as a social security system and also guarantee the cooperative endeavor in the provision of public goods. The drawbacks of egalitarian norms often become apparent when the underlying stationary conditions change (Boehm, 1993; Narayan et al., 2000, Ch.4; Platteau, 2000, 2009; Hoff and Sen, 2006). The strong moral sense of reciprocity values typically tends to make communities resistant to new opportunities that may improve the lives of many. This holds especially when new opportunities are unequally distributed among the population, that is, when relative positions are at stake. In that case, any erosion of egalitarian norms and beliefs, and their replacement by modern individualistic values, bear the risk of polarization and violent conflict.

After briefly illustrating this point through an account of the processes of land privatization in Sub-Saharan Africa, this paper presents two related theoretical models of a traditional moral economy that is coping with the pressures of modernization. The first, basic model is concerned with discovering the conditions under which the support of an egalitarian norm in a traditional community is undermined in the face of new opportunities. Social tensions exist between traditionalists – for whom communal values are moral imperatives – and individualists. This distinction echoes Horowitz's (2000, p. 149)

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juxtaposition of “backward” and “advanced” groups – only the latter are really outward looking and interested in education and new opportunities. We demonstrate that the initiative to violate communal norms is not easily taken and that, when it occurs, it will mostly be taken by individualists. Yet occasional norm violations do not always undermine the support of these norms. The analysis shows that an erosion of egalitarian values over time generally depends on two opposing factors: on the one hand, how strong traditionalists are attached to egalitarian values and how severe their sanctioning of norm violators is and, on the other hand, how many members of the community actually have access to opportunities for advancement.

The second model extends the analysis to two groups, both including traditionalists and individualists, and is concerned with how the pressures of modernization may lead to ethnic polarization. Starting with group differences in alternative income opportunities, we seek to investigate how the resulting cultural insecurity may tend to enhance group identities. Our theory of polarization is essentially dynamic. Past group differences in norm compliance engender feelings of resentment that may strengthen current group identities. Growing group identification in turn causes higher degrees of sanctioning of norm violators of the other ethnic group, and thus feeds back on group differences in norm compliance. The long-run extent of group identification critically depends on the interplay of two exogenous parameters: the relative size of the group with the most lucrative opportunities and the social stability of the community. One outcome of the analysis is that in socially unstable communities, ethnic group identification is most pronounced when the group with the best options comprises half the population. Group identities are less formed when this group is a minority, and almost absent when this group is a majority. Thus the second model provides some theoretical underpinning to empirical findings that ethnic polarization fuels social tensions and that the danger of large-scale ethnic violence is maximized when there are two socially alienated groups of equal size (see [Elbadawi and Sambanis, 2001](#); [Montalvo and Reynal-Querol, 2005b](#); [Lim et al., 2007](#); [Weidmann, 2011](#)).

Polarization is often associated with a higher vulnerability to conflict. There is evidence suggesting that indicators of polarization improve upon those of fractionalization and inequality as a predictor of civil conflict.¹ Following [Esteban and Ray \(1994\)](#), polarization results from the interaction of two factors: within-group identity and inter-group alienation. In a polarized society, members of the same group identify themselves with each other, while members of different groups feel themselves socially or ideologically separated. Although research on the link between polarization and conflict is expanding, we know of only a few papers with behavioral models studying this link, notably [Esteban and Ray \(1999, 2011\)](#) and [Montalvo and Reynal-Querol \(2005a\)](#). In these papers, group identification is proxied by group size and intergroup distance by exogenous group preferences over public goods. The interaction between the two factors in relation to conflict is examined in a static framework. Our second model takes an alternative approach. The interaction between identification and alienation is studied as a dynamic process with group differences in norm compliance as the driving force. While the model has no explicit link to the degree of conflict, it is suggested that the endogenous development of group identities is closely related to the potential onset of conflict.

More generally, this paper connects to a broad literature where modernization is seen as a source of instability and conflict. Urbanization, education, and economic growth – the markers of modernity – inevitably generate unequal benefits and opportunities for people, and thus may accelerate and intensify group competition for scarce resources or over the power to control these resources. Based on Marxist and functionalist theories, it was initially expected that, with this emerging competition, ethnic boundaries would fall away and be replaced by class divisions (see e.g., [Newman, 1991](#)). When this failed to occur, new theories were advanced that see ethnic conflict as a by-product of modernization itself. For instance, [Melson and Wolpe \(1970\)](#) argued that, because some groups gain a head start in the competition, emerging class cleavages tend to overlap with ethnic cleavages. This may reinforce existing ethnic boundaries and also clear the ground for the formation of entirely new ethnic groups. [Bates \(1974, 1999\)](#) noted that, while rooted in rural areas, ethnic groups are often organized by elites in the urban sector. Particularly the elite members of less advantaged groups have an incentive to increase group solidarity in an attempt to eliminate statistical discrimination in urban labor markets (see also [Hechter, 1974](#)). These studies illustrate that the focus of modernization theories is often placed on the expanding urban sector and the ambitions of a modern urban elite. Against this view, [Horowitz \(2000, pp. 102, 103\)](#) asserted that these theories cannot convincingly explain why so much ethnic conflict has occurred in some of the least modernized regions of the world. In these regions, “social mobilization” ([Deutsch, 1961](#)) applies to relatively few people, too few, according to Horowitz, to base an explanation for an entire conflict on.

Horowitz’s criticism seems especially valid for Sub-Saharan Africa, the poorest region in the world. Here almost a third of countries were involved in active civil wars or conflicts during the mid-1990s ([Blattman and Miguel, 2010, p. 4](#)). The current paper, though not necessarily inconsistent with the above theories, shifts the focus to the rural sector. The privatization of communal land, and hence the entry into market relations and a money economy, may cause a decline in the cultural security of rural communities. Erosion of traditional sharing norms and values arouses collective fears for the future, which may lead to ethnic conflict when uneven privatization processes, intentionally manipulated or not, raise the salience of ethnic identities. As such, the analysis is in line with the general observation that perhaps the most important changes related to modernization are those involving cultural values. Since changes in norms and attitudes tend to lag behind economic and political realities, “the gap between older and newer world views causes conflicts between nations, between groups

¹ See [Reynal-Querol \(2002\)](#), [Montalvo and Reynal-Querol \(2005b\)](#) and [Esteban and Schneider \(2008\)](#). For the link between polarization and conflict, see e.g., the special issue of the *Journal of Peace Research* (2008, 45(2)), [Blattman and Miguel \(2010\)](#) and [Esteban and Ray \(1994\)](#).

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