

Book Reviews

HOMOGENEITY AND CONFLICT

David D. Laitin: *Nations, States, and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. 162. \$39.99.)

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The political art of accommodating ethnonational demands has produced a large and respected body of literature. Social scientists often converge on a few key points, like the need to strive to accommodate ethnic diversity and avoid the negative side effects of overt assimilation. But they rarely agree on methodology. Laitin belongs theoretically to a majority position, often referred to as modernist and instrumentalist, but methodologically to a minority rationalist position, gravitating around game theory and methodological individualism. To its proponents, this approach offers a solid, rigorous, mathematically grounded method to analyze and explain ethnic conflict. Its critics wonder why they should have to learn arithmetic in order to explain the primary causes of ethnic conflict.

One of the leading arguments concerns the impact of cultural homogenization on ethnic conflict. Laitin offers highly fascinating insights: from a rational-choice perspective, he demonstrates that cultural heterogeneity is not inherently conducive to violent conflict. To start with, one cannot find a statistically meaningful correlation between cultural diversity and ethnic conflict. Neither ethnic nor cultural differences can by themselves spur mass violence and civil wars. It is, rather, the contrary attempt to force homogeneity upon diverse populations that can set off civic strife and even wars, eventually leading to the break-up of countries (112).

At least at low levels of wealth, as cultural homogeneity increases, so does the probability of a civil war. Therefore, cultural diversity can be a predictor of social stability. And, contrary to popular prejudice, difference can nurture harmony. However, Laitin also considers cases in which cultural/linguistic/ethnic heterogeneity are negatively correlated to the effective provision and consumption of public goods, turning into a catalyst of conflict. By “cultural,” he implicitly means “linguistic,” but throughout the book one finds that it often also means “ethnic.” On the other hand, at the highest levels of national wealth further “homogeneity lowers the probability of a civil war onset.” Does this mean that rich countries cannot accept differences? Could they only accept cultural rather than ethnic differentiae, or the other way

around? In the latter case, is the privilege of multiculturalism reserved to regions enjoying lower levels of wealth? The persistent confusion between the concepts of ethnicity and culture makes it difficult for Laitin to respond to these questions. In general, the author argues that multicultural states are not likely to break up and “the longer term equilibrium is one that supports cultural heterogeneity within and across state boundaries” (82). This is a fully tenable proposition and deserves to be expanded in various disciplinary and methodological directions.

In order to explain that the probability of civil war shows “no consistent pattern with the ethnic configuration” of a country (15), Laitin chooses the examples of ethnically and culturally homogeneous Somalia, comparing it with Tanzania, possibly the most culturally and ethnically diverse country in the world and yet one of the most peaceful. Will Tanzania’s history of peace and harmonious relations be shattered once the country is irrevocably set on the path to economic development? Scholars often view forms of social change brought forward by industrialization and globalization as predictors of troubles to come, including genocide and mass slaughter. Laitin is in synchrony with them and implicitly answers the preceding question in the affirmative.

We occasionally find powerful generalizing statements. Some are convincing, but others can be puzzling. Here is an example of the latter: “the greater the *level of social contact* between members of the different groups, the less likely these groups hold each other in *contempt*” (16, my italics). Questions immediately pop up: how is “social contact” measured? How many sub-variables does this include? How do their interrelationships vary? Finally, how can “contempt” possibly be measured? Such a complex task can hardly be achieved in a compendium and one wonders whether similar questions have been exhaustively addressed in any other publications sharing the same method. Some additional references and footnotes would possibly have been sufficient to address the problem, at least momentarily.

While it recognizes the importance of cultural heterogeneity, the book stops short of saying that its preservation is a pillar for the maintenance of peace. And, while it addresses cultural homogenization policies, it tends to downplay the role of agency. Even in the case of Spain, the author notes, the decline of Catalan had already begun before the early eighteenth-century laws decreeing its elimination. Accordingly, the real roots of the decline are to be found in the internal dynamism of Catalan society, rather than in centralization per se. However, as Laitin knows well, this is only part of the story and more emphasis should have been given to the standardizing role of state-mandated policies. These were implemented by various agencies and institutions that discriminated both legally and arbitrarily against speakers of minority languages.

Another interesting sentence claims that “the territorial concentration of groups ... is associated with civil war violence. The more the groups are settled in a single region of the country, the more likely they will be in

rebellion against the state" (19). Again, this statement calls for some exceptions: Serbian nationalists mobilized Serbs dispersed in ethnically mixed areas while rebelling against the federal Yugoslav state. If ethnic diasporas are also included *qua* dispersed groups uprooted from their territory (although they may be well integrated into the host society), these are also able to mobilize a formidable array of ultranationalist policies, often leading to international instability (i.e., ethnic lobbies in the United States).

A "weaker" argument concerns so-called weak states. Many examples are given of the counterproductive role of state violence. For instance, Sri Lankan troops prosecuted, jailed, and killed many innocent civilians, pushing young Tamils to join the extremist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the first guerrilla group systematically to use suicide bombers (20–21). This trend has been observed elsewhere: the Turkish army's incapacity to deal with dissent led to the initial growth of Kurdish separatism, a pattern previously observed in Basque opposition to the Franco regime in Spain. In all these cases, a "weak" and oppressive state proved to be unable either to provide security to the general population or to discourage numbers of citizens from joining radical groups. Although a "strong" state can prevent ethnic conflict, its strength can also be measured by its unwillingness to embark upon self-defeating projects of assimilation. In other words, a strong state must by definition be committed to the practice of full-spectrum multiculturalism. However, the use of double-edged and uncertain concepts such as "weak state" appears to add confusion to the dynamics of center-periphery relationships. Disregarding their arsenals of destruction, can these states be defined as "weak" simply because they have been unable to produce legitimacy while impartially policing their peripheries? Laitin seems to identify such "weakness" in their inability "to distinguish law abiders from lawbreakers" (21).

In a fascinating footnote, which could be developed into a full-fledged critique, Laitin admits his disagreement with some theorists of nationalism, notably Anthony D. Smith, who see nationalism as a viable and eventually liberal practice compatible with the governance of free societies (140). Laitin therefore places himself firmly within the "cosmopolitan" field, but more as an a-nationalist or national "skeptic" than as an antinationalist.

Liberal-democratic institutions remain central to the management of ethno-cultural diversity. Indeed, Laitin proposes both institutional recognition and a fuller democratization of ethnic politics; in other words, integration without assimilation. Unfortunately, an underlying conceptual haziness can be found in the recurrent confusion and overlap of the key terms *ethnicity* and *culture*. This is baffling, given the central importance accorded to "culture" (chap. 3). As often happens with this kind of wide-ranging, highly quantitative studies, much of the rough data are taken from the *Minority at Risk* data-set.

The book ends with a rather optimistic note on the demise of the homogenizing nation-state. Laitin argues that the latter is on its way in decline, most

often without even having served its original purpose of creating cohesive, unified communities under the control of the state. Beyond Europe's cosmopolitan experiment, contemporary trends also point elsewhere: the most thriving economy of the early twenty-first century is embodied by China's totalitarian system, where patriotism is intermittently used by political elites to stem all forms of organized dissent. Among stateless actors, al-Qaeda's homogenizing vision of East vs. West has targeted religious, ideological, and also ethnic minorities. Even in the West, Italy's Silvio Berlusconi emerged as authoritarian mediator in a highly conformist society, ideologically and culturally homogenized by decades of television programming.

On one thing it is difficult to disagree with Laitin: in the twenty-first century, ethnicizing states are no longer affordable, secure, and viable. They may indeed represent a major danger for both individual freedom and global stability. As the possibility of governmental control over a nation's citizens has now increased exponentially, the consequences of patriots and ethnic lobbies seizing the levers of power could be catastrophic (we had a chilling warning after 9/11). The problem is that most states in the world are ethnically based and the postwar trend toward supra-ethnicity has partially receded after 1989. For all these reasons, it is even more important to clearly distinguish ethnicity from culture.

Despite its aspiring universalism, Rational Choice Theory is still a minority approach. Its critics, such as Anatol Lieven, go so far as to argue that it is "founded on an almost theological faith in the universal validity of a dogmatic (and in part imaginary) American-style economic individualism" (Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism*, 2004, 66). This book may certainly be exempted from such a critique.

Method aside, the questions raised in the book are the right ones, and so seem to be most of the answers. Laitin's ambitious comparative take is accompanied by depth of analysis, turning the volume into a useful tool for policymakers as well as for the average student. Yet, I am not convinced that students need to master the use of mathematical software in order to understand nationalism and ethnic conflict. In all, this easy-reading compendium is highly useful for its attempt to synthesize a broad range of literature, particularly Laitin's own studies which were hitherto dispersed in a series of more idiographic works. Finally, as this reviewer has reached many of Laitin's conclusions from an entirely different methodological path, the book's most substantial insight can be independently confirmed.

—Daniele Conversi