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Response to John T. Sidel's review of *Cultural Contestation in Ethnic Conflict*

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— Marc Howard Ross

John T. Sidel's thoughtful review of my book raises two important, intertwined issues that I focus on here: the nature of group identity and the differences he sees between interpretivist and poststructuralist accounts of ethnic conflict. He offers two views of ethnic groups: One argues that strong identities and a sense of groupness precedes, and forms the basis for, conflict, and the other asserts that identities are necessarily incomplete, inadequate, and accompanied by anxiety, and that conflict is constitutive of ethnic identities. He attributes the former position to me while suggesting that I ignore the latter.

In establishing this apparently clear dichotomy, Sidel avoids several important issues in the study of ethnic politics and conflict. One is that while scholars increasingly understand ethnic identities as contingent, partial, and constructed, actors in conflicts are generally essentializers who see identities as objective, enduring, and fixed. Consequently, people involved in ethnic conflicts use the language of group cohesiveness, unity, and fixed boundaries, whereas scholars recognize important ways these shift over time and how external pressures and events and within-group differences rarely produce group unity across time and space. Moving between these two frames is a problem in analyzing ethnic conflict, and not only in my work. Scholarly language including Sidel's when he writes about the Chinese, Christians, and Muslims in Indonesia—as well as that of key political actors—suggests substantive within-group agreement and coordination in the name of the group that is at odds with empirical evidence.

One answer to the problem of group definition turns on what it is exactly that groups share. My answer is that people share an identity, often heightened or even formed as a result of conflict, that is primarily emotional and indeed a ready source of deep fears and perceived threats. Substantively, it is probably the case that the values and practices that people believe they hold in common with co-ethnics are often greater than what is actually shared. In addition, within identity groups there is contestation over who is the "true" defender of the group, and within-group boundaries often harden over such questions. My culturalist framework emphasizes that identity groups share a common framework for interpreting the world but not necessarily agreement on specific values or practices. Politically, then, the challenge to ethnic politicians is to transform this perceived shared identity into collective action, and as Sidel points out, often this is achieved following conflict or in response to events.

Behind Sidel's position is the argument that there are clear-cut differences between interpretivist and poststructuralist accounts in their approach to identity and conflict. Ironically, this reification of categories is precisely what Sidel has accused me of doing. Yet emphasizing interpretations makes no claim that identities necessarily precede actions, nor does it deny the importance of emotion and unconscious dynamics. Contingent context and authority structures surely frame conflicts, but saying this as Sidel does hardly settles the questions about how and why participants invest great energy, emotion, and resources in them or how cultural frames affect the intensity of conflict by defining what is at stake for the presumed group.

Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia. By John T. Sidel. Ithaca and London: Cornell University

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— Marc Howard Ross, *Bryn Mawr College*

Indonesia is a country that seems to violate a number of widely held assumptions that comparative political scientists hold. For example, under Suharto's 30-year rule, corruption soared, but so did economic growth. In *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad*, John Sidel offers another false generalization for consideration, namely, that despite the rise of ethnic and religious violence in the world since 1990, the widespread religious violence experienced in Indonesia since the mid-1990s is not best understood as part of a global trend. Rather, he argues that "such broad-brush accounts offer little to illuminate the specific modalities of religious violence observed in Indonesia or to help examine the discernable but seemingly inexplicable shifts . . . in the forms, targets, processes of mobilization, and consequences of this violence in successive periods" (p. 11).

Sidel's argument is that while ethnic and religious identities certainly matter in explaining religious violence, what is especially crucial is how and when they matter in linking microlevel perceptions and identities to political organization, opportunities, and collective actions whose forms shift over time. Religious violence, he argues in his detailed and carefully constructed account, results from heightened states of uncertainty and anxiety when identities and their boundaries are unclear and undergoing possible redefinition. Interests also matter, not in a direct causal manner as in most rational choice explanations but only as they interact with shifting identities.

Sidel considers three distinct forms of religious violence in Indonesia since the mid-1990's—riots, pogroms, and jihad—and seeks to explain the origins, locations, participants, and motivations behind each. To do this, he offers a very detailed account that requires a reader's careful attention, developing an explanation that begins with the constellation of relations during Dutch colonial rule that produced postcolonial alignments and led to the