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

— 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 accuses 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 Press. 304p. $57.95 cloth, $21.00 paper.

— 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

struggle by underrepresented Muslim groups to develop access to power in the Suharto and post-Suharto periods. He eschews an explanation rooted in identity politics as a global phenomenon, choosing instead a more domestic, path-dependent model of contextually and historically shaped identities, political organization, and interests to offer a complicated and intriguing argument—at least to someone like me who is not an expert on Indonesia. At the same time, I wish that the author would have explored the relevance of his argument comparatively, situating the dynamics he identifies in Indonesia in a regional or worldwide context.

What we learn is not only that Indonesia is a large, heterogeneous state but also that at times, within-group differences are as significant as between-group ones. Muslims are not simply united against Christians (and other non-Muslims). Nor are the Chinese and various indigenous Indonesian groups always united against one another. The pathways to power and to coalition formation are more nuanced and more complicated. Sidel describes what he terms the "matrix of class relations" rooted in the Dutch promotion of an overwhelmingly ethnic Chinese capitalist class while building strong local communities that served as the units of economic extraction. Dutch policy separated the Chinese socially and hardened the boundaries between them and the Javanese. These both privileged the Chinese economically and made them a vulnerable minority. As a result, this economic class did not become a ruling class, and the Indonesian political class that emerged was linked to specific educational and religious institutions and networks for socialization and the reproduction of power.

Sidel devotes most of his attention to the social transformation of Indonesia following the overthrow of Soekarno in 1965. Upon coming to power Suharto ruthlessly destroyed the opposition, killing perhaps 300,000 people, many of whom were associated with the PKI (Communist Party of Indonesia). The new regime combined authoritarian rule with a strong commitment to growth, and the Chinese business class soon headed the directorates, carrying out the aggressive development policy, while secular nationalists and Christians who had been educated together controlled the political arena. The regime's strong anticommunist stance drove many Indonesians toward Islam, and yet Muslims, the country's dominant religious group, were outside looking in. Throughout the period, however, despite Suharto's firm control, there were Islamic opposition movements and parties that raised populist challenges to the regime, almost all of which could not be considered hard line by contemporary standards. By the 1980s these groups were dominated by modernist elements whose leaders were tied to the Suharto regime.

Yet try as it did, the regime could not contain all the pressures that had built up in this large, diverse, and rapidly growing country, in part because of conflicts between the modernist Islamic leaders and other factions within the ruling elite, including Suharto's family members. These tensions were then played out through religious violence. From 1992 to 1997, there were some 145 attacks that targeted Christian churches, many of which were burned down. Student-led riots and attacks on Chinese residents and their businesses emerged in 1995. Sidel argues that the timing, location, mobilization processes, targets, and consequences of such rioting are related to "especially acute and unsettling urgency, anxiety, and ambiguity as to the position of Islam and those who claimed to represent Islam in Indonesian society" (p. 98).

Within a year, the form and location of Indonesian religious violence changed as part of the final push to power on the part of Muslim forces within the country. In this phase, the violence targeted specific people more than buildings and increased the tensions between elements of the political class. From 1998 to 2001, both Muslims and Christians engaged in lynchings and communal violence in the form of pogroms, spearheaded by vigilante groups, which took place in more remote regions where electoral uncertainty remained high as competing groups and local networks that were divided along religious lines orchestrated deadly intercommunal violence.

Jihad, a third form of religious violence, developed around 2000, when paramilitary units mobilized assaults on Christian neighborhoods and shifted attention to linkages on the national and international levels. Sidel views these incidents—including the highly publicized bombings in Bali—less as evidence of the spread of radical, fundamentalist Islam than as forms of a desperate acknowledgment that Suharto's overthrow had failed to bring a hard-line Islamic regime to power, lowering the sense of what Muslims could actually obtain in terms of political power and diminishing the potential for achieving Muslim unity.

Sidel concludes that an identity-based approach is required to make sense of these events. He claims that social movement theory cannot do the job as the events he describes have "neither a stable set of actors nor a discernible movement nor a consistent form of mobilization around which to organize a narrative account, much less an explanatory analysis, of the pattern of religious violence in Indonesia in this period" (p. 220). Rather, he argues, the problematic and changing nature of religious identity in Indonesia and "shifts in the discursive, political, and sociological structures of religious identity—and in *the structures of anxiety about religious identity itself*" (pp. 220–21) are most central. The events he seeks to explain are not centered on religious ideology as much as they are embedded in the worldly power relations shaped by religious authority and shifting boundaries between identity groups. The author shows how Christian groups initiated some of the worst violence, how patterns of state power in colonial Indonesia shaped political and power relations decades after it ended, and "how secular, ecumenical, or religiously neutral forces . . . have been imposed

and experienced in a religiously coded fashion in Indonesia" (p. 223).

Sidel provides an intriguing interpretation of Indonesian violence. Analytically it is interesting to consider whether there are other plausible explanations that are also consistent with these same events. While he rejects both social movement theory and explanations centering on global patterns of post–Cold War ethnic conflict, comparativists have developed many other explanatory frameworks, and it would be interesting to see how he would grapple with them.

While I am quite partial to an identity-based constructivist explanation such as the one Sidel provides, there are several ways in which his case could be further strengthened. One would be greater elaboration of the concepts of uncertainty and anxiety regarding identities and their boundaries. He makes it clear how and when these arose in Indonesia. Yet it would be good to elaborate on the mechanisms underlying their dynamics more generally. What kinds of changes in political or social relations raise (or lower) uncertainty and anxiety around identities, making certain forms of religious or ethnic violence more or less likely? Is this explanation not consistent with Richard Snyder's finding that rapid democratization often leads to violence? How are these emotions converted into political beliefs and mobilization in various cultural settings? When and why does uncertainty and anxiety produce political mobilization in some situations but political withdrawal in others?

Two suggestions about how to address these questions come to mind. One is to spell out more explicitly the kinds of evidence one needs to identify shifts in the levels of collective anxiety and uncertainty concerning identities. Knowing how Sidel decided that there were significant changes in each at various times would be very useful. The second is that Sidel consider more critically whether his wholly Indonesian-based explanation offers explanatory insight into other cases of religious violence. To answer this, we will need a clearer idea of what does and does not constitute evidence for anxiety and uncertainty surrounding identities. To the extent that there are additional situations where the theory seems useful, he will have provided an identity-based explanation for ethnic conflict that incorporates political interests but, at the same time, does not make them do all the heavy lifting that they are assigned in rational choice accounts.

Response to Marc Howard Ross's review of *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia*

— John T. Sidel

The argument that religious identities are haunted by anxieties is firmly grounded in anthropology, psychology, and social theory. The evidence for such anxieties in Indonesia comes from close reading of Islamic publications in Indonesia and of ethnographic accounts of localities that *sub-*

sequently experienced episodes of religious violence. There is abundant descriptive evidence of these anxieties in ethnographic accounts and discourse analysis, much more than what readers will find in my book.

The real question, however, is not descriptive but explanatory—how can we link these anxieties to specific episodes and forms of violence? The core puzzle animating my book is the shifting pattern of religious violence: How can we explain shifts in the locations, perpetrators, targets, and forms of violence, in the processes of violent mobilization, and in the "religious" nature of the violence? How can we explain the shift from riots in 1995–97 to pogroms in 1998–2001, to globalized jihad from 2002 through 2005?

I argue that shifts in the structure of religious identities, and the specific anxieties to which they gave rise, constituted *necessary but not sufficient* conditions for the religious violence observed: Fortunately, there is much more anxiety than actual violence. But why did certain shifts (and the specific anxieties they generated) enable certain patterns of violence, but not others? Riots—attacks on department stores, shopping malls, churches, and government buildings—unfolded in the context of specific anxieties accompanying the unprecedented ascendancy of devout Muslims into the urban middle class, the business world, and the political elite, anxieties about the moral costs and compromises of upward social mobility, anxieties disavowed in the riots through the destruction of *property.*

By contrast, pogroms—murderous attacks on individuals and communities—arose amidst uncertainties and anxieties accompanying the shift from centralized authoritarian rule to decentralized democracy and the removal of a fixed, authoritative source of recognition and reinforcement for existing hierarchies of religious authority and boundaries of religious identity in Indonesia. At their most acute, these anxieties—and the violence they inspired—focused on uncomfortably intimate religious "Others," whose forced removal worked to reaffirm religious boundaries and authority structures.

Finally, "global jihad" emerged against the backdrop of dramatic decline, disappointment, demobilization, and disentanglement from state power for forces claiming to speak in the name of Islam. Terrorist attacks on Christian and Western targets in Indonesia—as elsewhere around the world—reflected desperate efforts to rearticulate interreligious antagonisms and reignite religious struggles that had lost their capacity to inspire and animate Muslims.

Contrary to Marc Howard Ross's assertions, my book does situate these specific arguments against the backdrop of broader—and broadly parallel—trends elsewhere in the Muslim world, and within the broader intellectual context of scholarship on religious violence. In my book, my response to the important questions he raises, and in my forthcoming work, I have also tried to suggest how these arguments might be applied—through sociological, ethnographic, and