



Walker Connor

Donald L. Horowitz^{a,b,*}

^aJames B. Duke Professor of Law and Political Science Emeritus, Duke University, Durham, NC, USA; ^bInternational Forum for Democratic Studies, National Endowment for Democracy, Washington, DC, USA

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I met Walker Connor in 1972 at the Glazer and Moynihan conference on ethnicity held at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Glazer and Moynihan 1975). We thought we would be intimidated by the company at the conference: Talcott Parsons, Daniel Bell, Andy Greeley, Orlando Patterson, Bill Petersen, and Lucian Pye – a good sample of the elders of social theory. By then Walker had published three articles in *World Politics* in five years – perhaps a record – including one containing his splendid deconstruction of the theories of Karl Deutsch. But I think we acquitted ourselves well enough – especially Walker did. He was the star of the show, with numerous observations on boiling or incipient conflicts across the globe that many of the elders did not know about (or did not know existed). Unfortunately, he did not submit an essay for the volume that came out of the conference (Glazer and Moynihan 1975).

We became fast friends and colleagues. We watched the 1976 Bicentennial fireworks from Walker's apartment in Arlington, Virginia, across the Potomac River, while Walker was a fellow at the Wilson Center. We also attended a 1976 conference at the University of Washington with some dour historians of Eastern Europe, including a decidedly sour Ernest Gellner. Together the late Joshua Fishman and Walker charmed them.

In later years, we arranged, with the inimitably humorous John Darby – sadly now also gone – to spend five weeks together at the Rockefeller Foundation watering hole in Bellagio on Lake Como, where, de facto, Mary Connor was in charge of problems with the printer – this was 1990, and many printers needed first aid – and she discovered that one of the novelists was writing his current work *about us!* I do not have space here to reminisce further, though there are few people I would rather reminisce about than Walker Connor. What I want to do here is focus on those three early articles because they reflect much of what Walker was and was not trying to accomplish, and then I want to rebut a pernicious allegation about his work. (And from here on, I shall refer to Professor Connor, rather than just “Walker.”)

The first article was “Self-determination: The New Phase” (1967). Connor begins with questions about the durability of multinational states, whose foundations were challenged by the rise of popular consciousness. Then he asks: “What constitutes a nation? The prime requisite is subjective and consists of the self-identification of people with a group – its past, its present, and, most important, its destiny” (Connor 1967, 30). This sounds like social

*Email: dhorowitz@law.duke.edu

construction, does it not? More on this later. Connor goes on to examine debates among John Stuart Mill, Lord Acton, and others regarding the disputed question of whether two nations could exist in the same state without giving rise to absolutism. The discussion foreshadows debates about democracy in divided societies.

From here Connor proceeds to document the degree of ethnic pluralism around the world and its contribution to conflict. He is particularly interested in confronting the idea, then current in the milieu of post-colonial optimism, that modernization had rendered (or would render) ethnic nationalism obsolete. In doing so he provides an early and convincing refutation of the contact hypothesis – that is, the notion that intergroup contact is inversely related to intergroup conflict – a hypothesis later demolished, one psychological study at a time, by Hugh Donald Forbes in *Ethnic Conflict: Commerce, Culture, and the Contact Hypothesis* (1997).

Here it is only fair to notice the issues Connor did not take on concerning the role of institutions in protecting democracy in divided societies – a subject on which there is still disagreement about particulars.

In “Ethnology and the Peace of South Asia” (1969), Connor covers territory spanning Afghanistan to Japan – and, incidentally, with extensive use of ethnic maps. He brings spatial considerations to the fore: Are groups peripheral or central? Do they live separately or together? He finds that minorities, with less population, occupy disproportionately large swathes of territory; that many countries harbor multiple minority enclaves; and that many peoples in this super-region possess cultural consciousness, a prerequisite for political consciousness, which is in turn a prerequisite for demands for autonomy or secession. Presciently, he forecasts Bangladesh’s secession, at a time when no one else did. He then proceeds to a lengthy excursus into the contradictions between ethnonationalism and Marxian socialism, using extensive evidence from Mao’s China and Ho’s Vietnam movement, citing the anti-majority antipathy of minorities, among whom the Communists had sheltered and to whom they had been obliged to offer self-determination later in the form of a nominal autonomy. Does Connor overpredict conflict? Perhaps. Does he neglect institutional mitigation? Yes, I think so. But bear in mind what he is writing against. This is a time when modernization theory was at its height and was predicting a world of new, non-ascriptive affinities. This turned out to be happy talk, and Connor, despite his sunny nature, was not buying it.

The last piece of the article concerns the implications of ethnonationalism for then-current insurgencies (especially Vietnam). Again, he shows his keen awareness of spatial distributions of groups as they relate to the prospects for separatism and other forms of insurgency – considerations mostly lost in current scholarship.

With this work under his belt, Walker is ready in “Nation-building or Nation-destroying,” which appeared in *World Politics* in 1972, to tackle the burgeoning literature of the 1960s and early 1970s on “nation-building” and to confront one of its leading exponents, Karl W. Deutsch, who was a regular speaker at the Harvard-MIT Joint Seminar on Political Development (JOSPOD). At the time I was Executive Secretary of JOSPOD, and Connor had also attended during the time he spent at the Harvard Center for International Affairs.

Attended by numerous luminaries, founded and co-chaired by Samuel Huntington and Myron Weiner, JOSPOD provided intellectual sustenance, interdisciplinary fellowship, and inebriation to the great and the good of what was then the political development field. The seminar was addressed several times, with great fluency and conviction, in perfect Sudeten-accented English, by Karl W. Deutsch, whose previous exploits at Yale had formed the basis for a thinly veiled, acerbic portrait in Helen Hudson’s novel of Deutsch’s former department at Yale, *Tell the Time to None* (Hudson 1966).

The problem with Deutsch's *Nationalism and Social Communication* (1953) was that it consisted at its heart of a contradiction – that urbanization, electrification, and newspaperization would enhance the unity of some states but strain the unity of others. But which was which? Connor said there was difficulty “defining his [Deutsch's] position with precision” – an understatement of the sort for which Connor was not generally known. Unfortunately for Deutsch, Connor did a meticulous dissection, which the patient did not survive. Connor chronicled Deutsch's swings back and forth over the years. And he did so as one striving mightily to understand the basic message. But his fidelity to Deutsch's texts produced only more questions. Deutsch's periodic optimism about state coherence in the face of ethnic differences Connor juxtaposes with uncomfortable facts on the ground of the kind Connor had canvassed in earlier works.

Connor was reacting to the prevailing literature, which by 1972 had ignored an array of ethnic movements, attempted secessions, and ethnically motivated military coups that occurred as theorists managed to get not just overall trends wrong, but even developments in the very countries they were studying in single-country volumes.

The rest of the article is a causal analysis of some widespread social scientific errors, which Connor attributed to terminological confusion; underestimates of the emotive power of ethnic affiliations; overestimates of the influence of materialism and economic aspirations as a determinative force in human affairs; again the mistaken benign assumptions of the contact hypothesis; and various faulty analogies. This was a tour de force: Connor smashed the rose-colored glasses of developmentalism.

Connor was often stigmatized as a “primordialist,” a label he refused. He repeatedly emphasized the importance of ethnic affiliations and their underrated significance in the works of most scholars, from those who hopefully – wishfully, really – believed that the emancipation of colonized peoples would also produce their emancipation from the bonds of birth-based group solidarity. He was skeptical of observers who assumed that a teleology of rationally constructed affiliations would accompany modernity.

Now “primordialism” is utilized as a stigmatizing label that enables the enlightened to dismiss those who have yet to see the sun rise. It is deployed in a non-debate – that is, a purported debate between the anointed and the innocents, in order to establish the bona fides of the writer.

A bit of unpacking would be a useful exercise. First, it would find Connor in very good company – with Clifford Geertz and Edward Shils, among others. But second, the effort to stigmatize fails the test of evidence, because, like Connor, those alleged primordialists were attempting not to establish what one of their critics called the “primeval and primitive” character of ethnic affiliations, but to establish that ethnic affiliations were, as Connor also maintained, not liable to be reduced to “a pressure group that mobilizes in order to compete for scarce resources” or to the ambitions of a few leaders or of a social class. His point was that ethnicity can reflect feelings of intense solidarity and can induce selfless behavior on the part of group members.

Of course, the antinomy between “primordialist” and “socially constructed” makes no sense, because neither term really makes any sense. All social bonds are “socially constructed,” and no human affiliation is simply given. Therefore social construction is not an explanation with any discriminating power – in this debate, it is a mere slogan, and *primordial* is a null category. Geertz (1963), for example, speaks of “the *assumed* givens” of social existence. (Critics ignore the adjective.) What I think Geertz is saying is that the participation in a group identity can impute to it, in the minds of participants, an ineluctable, unalterable quality (see Horowitz 2002). Connor himself suggests there is “a *sense* of

kinship,” “a *feeling* of consanguinity” that may be at odds with historical facts but can have powerful consequences (Connor 1993).

If I am right, there has been quite a bit of downright defamation going on. One gets to dismiss someone’s argument by applying the repugnant label and embracing the attractive one. We ought to put an end to this practice, and I think Connor would agree.

At his most argumentative, Walker Connor entertained no personal malice. To be thoroughly “primordial” about it, it was not in his nature to be malicious. He was straightforwardly decent – a splendid companion, with integrity, curiosity, and a fine sense of humor. He opened up a field in the 1960s that had been badly neglected, even rejected, and wrote about it intelligently for four decades. We should be grateful for that and, of course, grateful for his graceful presence in the academic firmament.

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