

Soeters, J. L. (2005). *Ethnic Conflict and Terrorism: The Origins and Dynamics of Civil Wars*. London: Routledge.

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As ethnic conflicts and terrorist attacks have increased considerably the past few years, this book comes at a very timely moment. Indeed, its aims are to help us understand the origins and dynamics of this kind of collective violence and how these “new wars,” to use Mary Kaldor’s appellation,¹ have been invested by terrorist organizations at both national and international levels. To do so, the author, a sociologist at the Royal Netherlands Military Academy, presents nine basic mechanisms that have been defined and analyzed by sociologists as well as by anthropologists, political scientists, and social psychologists and that impact on the origins and dynamics of civil wars and violence. As the author readily admits, the book does not pretend to be a comprehensive treatment of this very vast subject or to present an all-encompassing theory. As he writes, “it is more a collection of bits and pieces emerging from social-scientific literature which can be linked to the origin of conflict and violence” (p. 8). It is not meant to propose recipes for preventing or allaying outbursts of violence. Although the aims are modest, the author succeeds very well in achieving them.

The book is divided into eleven chapters. The first one, the introduction, sketches the context and explains why it is important to analyze what the author calls “the violence of the ordinary human being” (p. 5). The last chapter draws the general picture emerging from the survey of the nine factors analyzed in the preceding chapters and offers eight implications of the insights gained. The remaining chapters each explore one of the nine basic mechanisms selected by the author. It should be mentioned immediately that these chapters should be read “all other things being equal”: each chapter singles out one mechanism and studies its gross contribution to collective violence, not controlling for other factors. The nine factors are divided into macro, long-term factors; that is, factors that imply “large-scale processes that engulf entire continents and therefore involve large numbers of people” (p. 8), and micro, short-term factors; that is, factors that take place in concrete interactions between individuals. The author is quick to add, however, that this distinction is somewhat artificial to the extent that the results of processes at both levels constantly interact.

Chapters 2 through 6 present the five macro, long-term factors. The first such factor is what Soeters, borrowing a typology developed by British anthropologist Mary Douglas, calls grid characteristics and group boundaries. The grid dimension refers to the social distinctions applying to individuals and can be developed either strongly or poorly. If it is strongly developed in a society, it leads to clearly defined social roles. The author contends that “in societies with a limited grid, there is relatively more political and social unrest, because then, there is room for competition and struggle between persons and for positions. Conversely, in societies with a strongly developed grid, there is more peace and harmony between people” (p. 19). Group boundary refers to the well-known idea of group cohesion. According to the

author, weak grid characteristics at the societal level combined with strong group cohesion at the subnational level are conducive to violent collective actions. He adds that ethnic or religious-group distinctions, as such, do not cause violent conflicts except in connection with the grid dimension. Together with the chapter on the cultural factor (Chapter 5), I found this chapter the most original and interesting of the book. Both chapters, indeed, cleverly apply to the analysis of conflicts concepts and mechanisms that—unhappily—tend to remain little known to mainstream sociologists, or for that matter, political scientists or social psychologists. True, since Huntington's book on the so-called "clash of civilizations,"² culture has been recognized as an important cause of conflict, violence, and terrorism in the world, but Hofstede's theory on culture, developed in his book *Culture's Consequences*,³ never had been applied to the study of conflict except by Soeters himself.⁴ According to Hofstede, differences in values between countries can be reduced to five cultural dimensions, four of which, according to Soeters, are of importance in the explanation of the rise of conflict and violence. These four dimensions are masculinity versus femininity (importance attached to achievement and material wealth), high versus low uncertainty avoidance (how people cope with uncertain and unfamiliar situations), collectivism-individualism, and high versus low power distance (relations between superiors and subordinates). The author argues that in countries with cultures characterized by a combination of masculinity (tough, achievement-oriented societies), high uncertainty avoidance (xenophobia), collectivism (group thinking), and large power distance (large social distance between superiors and subordinates), there is more violence. Such a combination of cultural aspects, argues the author, is to be found, for example, in the Balkans.

The other macro factors analyzed by the author are better known in the literature on conflict. They are (1) the existence of waning governments (the so-called "failed states"), democratic deficits, and strategic constellations (Chapter 3); (2) decivilization, the process analyzed by Norbert Elias but also much earlier by Max Weber, who spoke of the disenchantment of the world caused by the increasing rationalization of the modern world (Chapter 4); and (3) the "rationalization of evil," the process described by Hannah Arendt (Chapter 6).

Chapters 7 through 10 present the four micro, short-term factors. These micro factors have been studied thoroughly in the literature, and thus, will be relatively well known to many readers. These are group binding, stereotyping, and ideologizing (Chapter 7); social mobilization and leadership (Chapter 8); rising expectations, relative deprivation, and reduction of power distance (Chapter 9); and the dynamics of the conflict itself (Chapter 10).

Although short, the book does a very good job at dissecting and explaining the nine basic mechanisms leading to violent conflicts. For those interested in exploring these factors in more detail, the book also offers a comprehensive bibliography with many references not usually found in United States publications on this topic. The only regret one could formulate is the absence, in the overview of the micro factors

explaining the origins and dynamics of ethnic conflicts and terrorism, of a chapter on interests and rationality. As classic works such as Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action*⁵ and Oberschall's *Social Conflicts and Social Movements*,⁶ among others, have shown, social conflicts most of the time are indeed best understood not as irrational phenomena but as the result of decisions made by (partly) rational actors on the basis of cost-benefit calculations. This being said, Soeters' *Ethnic Conflict and Terrorism* is a very useful, transdisciplinary book for readers interested in this topic and especially for undergraduate students (the book is based on a course in general social sciences given by the author to students-officers of the Royal Netherlands Military Academy).

Notes

1. Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999).
2. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).
3. Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequence: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations across Nations* (London: Sage, 2001).
4. Joseph L. Soeters, "Culture and Conflict: An Application of Hofstede's Theory to the Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 2 (3): 233–244 (1996).
5. Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).
6. Anthony Oberschall, *Social Conflict and Social Movements* (Boston, MA: Prentice Hall, 1973).

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When the Cold War ended in Europe with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the nature of multinational peacekeeping changed. The number of missions authorized under United Nations auspices increased markedly. The nature of these missions increasingly changed from first-generation interposition missions that were constrained by norms of impartiality, minimum use of force, and host-nation consent to second-generation peace missions, which Dandeker¹ has referred to as strategic peacekeeping, including peace enforcement and nation building. These latter missions deviate from the traditional peacekeeping norms. Perhaps most importantly, new players have been brought into multinational peacekeeping. Where