Does Globalization Breed Ethnic Violence?

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The tragic events like the September 2001 attacks on the monumental embodiments of American superpower or the capture of hostages in a Moscow theater in October 2002 forced wide-ranging public debate on the darker aspects of globalization.¹ A direct causal link between globalization and ethnic/religious violence is assumed on all sides, albeit in a highly polemical fashion, as the result of either Western cultural arrogance and capitalist domination or the maladjustment of Third World societies to market discipline and liberal cosmopolitan modernity.

The focus on globalization and ethnic violence suggests that, after a hiatus of nearly a quarter century the problems of world underdevelopment and its discontents once again emerge centrally on the agenda. And once again we are confronted with essentially the old question: does modernization breed revolutions and the dangers of totalitarianism? Today, after the market optimism of the nineties has receded, it is phrased like this: does globalization breed violent anti-Enlightenment reactions? Can democracy take a root in non-Western societies? Nasty questions indeed.
Alternative Explanation

My main proposition is that the violent ethnic politics of recent years did not arise in a direct reaction to globalization. Rather, these were desperate and particularist attempts to cope with the world-wide wave of dismantling the developmental regimes (see Evans 1995 Ch.10) which in the extreme examples amounted to the collapse of states (Bunce 1998). These states became impossible to sustain because they could no longer deliver on the main legitimating promise of progress and national development, *i.e.* the fairly rapid equalization of socioeconomic conditions in their countries with those of core capitalist states.

To put it differently, the peoples of former Yugoslavia, the Chechens and Abkhazes in the Caucasus, the warlord factions in the Congo, or the Islamist radicals in Algeria went into fighting not over the ancient animosities or in defense of their cultural identities challenged by the new big “MacWorld” (see Barber 1996; and its critique by Beck, Greer, and Ragin 2000). They all fought, fight, and will fight, in different ways, over what to do about their suddenly delegitimated states and the drastically devalued modern economies that these states have once nurtured and sheltered. Moreover the conflicts are fought over the gravely serious issues of who will profit, who will bear the costs, and who will support whom in the new system of capitalist property rights (Stinchcombe forthcoming, pp. 10-11).

My further claim is that ethnic violence is neither an automatic reaction rooted in the historically consecrated collective identities nor, in fact, is it the first choice of the people who might get involved in such violence. The likelier first choice would be democratization, albeit not the “shallow” democratization limited to the electoral
procedure and competition among the elite actors. It is rather the “deep” — a hard-nosed realist would say utopian — social democratization that seeks to open a broadly equitable access to the flows of power and goods, give voice and ensure the self-management rights of the work, residential, and cultural communities. Historically, this has been a predominantly proletarian agenda of democratization in modern Western states (see Tilly 1997). In the past, it could coalesce in some political form in the situations where the wage labor, from manual workers to the educated wage-earning specialists, found themselves in a position to effectively lay claims on modern states. This became structurally possible in the late nineteenth century and especially after the depression of the 1930s and the world wars, when proletarians came to prevail among the core states’ military recruits, employees, and voting citizens (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992; Steinmetz 1993; Tilly 1997).

Even more than in the core capitalist states, analogous structural conditions for proletarian democratization were created in the Soviet Union and later in many other revolutionary industrializing states. Arguably for the time of their duration these states remained the evolving post-revolutionary dictatorships that practiced the propagandistic dissimulation of people’s democracy. Nevertheless the shortage economy of rapidly industrializing states also created constant need for worker enthusiasm and micro-group autonomy to overcome anarchy in production (or, for that matter, in fighting serious wars), while the party-state apparatus at the point of production rendered transparent the actual exercise of power and class inequalities (Burawoy and Lukács 1992; Lee 2002).
It has been a long-standing Trotskyist expectation that socialist proletarians will eventually rebel against the state bureaucracy (Deutscher 1953). This prediction, though not entirely wrong, willfully overlooked two other possibilities. First, that the less ideologically committed fractions of technocratic managers could dump the defunct ideology, turn the state assets that they administered into privately or corporate owned capital, and seek profitable alliances with the global capitalist partners (see Eyal, Szelényi, and Townsley 1998; Solnick 1998; Woodruff 1999; and King 2001). Secondly, that the industrializing state can simply collapse, which removes the main object of proletarian claim-making and the key condition of democratization. State breakdown makes likely lateral struggles among shifting coalitions of locally-embedded contenders. These are commonly viewed as ethnic conflicts because enterprising patrons, emerging from all ranks of society, advertise their intention to protect a particular community. This did the Serbian communist apparatchik Milosevic at the famous 1987 rally in Kosovo (Glenny 1999), the rogue Soviet General Dudayev in 1991 in Chechnya (Lieven 1998), and various rag-tag warlords in Africa (Reno 1998). It is a central message in Al-Qaeda’s propaganda of global jihad.

Still, why are these conflicts ethnic? Few alternatives remain after the agenda of state-bound democratization became pointless because of the evident erosion of state institutions; because the state-created industrial assets and bureaucracies, which embedded the existence of proletarian groups, turned into liability in the face of global markets; and because structural unemployment now verges on permanent lumpenization. The Serbs, Chechens, Algerians or, for that matter, the presumably quiescent Chinese, do not have much in common except that they all live in the world
locales that are incompletely industrialized and only partially and recently urbanized, and thus where the modern formal institutions are often superficial or downright superfluous (Woodruff 2000). In such locales they know from daily practice how much one’s life chances depend on the access to various patrons and informal networks (Migdal 1988; Parish and Michelson 1996). And when these people get convinced that they face the prospect of marginalization in the new, competitive-restrictive set of arrangements, they sometimes fight back — given they can find a mobilizing platform.

Marxist-Leninist Developmentalism

The Soviet trajectory presents the original and the longest sequence of antisystemic developmentalism. A strong tendency toward democratization first emerged after the death of Stalin. It was the paradoxical extension of the two concurrent processes of class formation that have originated with industrialization. The first was the growth of state-managing bureaucracy and its self-normalization achieved against the terroristic Stalinist regime. The second was the historically rapid emergence of a large and well-educated industrial proletariat including the intellectual specialists. In addition, the Soviet industrialization exerted a powerfully homogenizing effect in the fields of gender or inter-ethnic relations.

The orphaned children of peasants were not the hapless “human material” of Stalinist industrialization. Education and urbanization offered to them the best way to

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1 The peculiarity of state socialism was that the threat to civilian control was not the traditional military, but rather the secret police.
advance in the new industrial setting. In fact, expanding industry and state bureaucracies rewarded skilled labor. Taking the official communist ideology at its word, the Soviet proletarians obtained a cultural framework for their institutionalization as class and for laying claims on the ruling bureaucracy. Thus the Soviet proletarians became an active class despite the harsh ban on independent organizing. The process occurred mostly through the micro-initiatives that sprang up during the late 1950s. The younger Soviet proletarians sought to keep educational mobility open and material distribution broadly egalitarian. In effect it was the diffuse struggle of new proletarians against the formation of a new ruling class.

Still, as Perry Anderson (1974, p. 11, italics in the original) reminds us, "the secular struggle between classes is ultimately resolved at the political — not the economic or cultural — level of society". On this count, the diffuse power of the Soviet workers and specialists regularly proved weaker than the bureaucratically concentrated power of nomenklatura. The surges of Soviet proletarian contention were made possible by the conflicts within the reigning bureaucracy during de-Stalinization in the 1956-68 period or Gorbachev’s perestroika of the late 1980s.

The ruling class’s major weakness was the scandalous contradiction between the official ideology and its practice. The ruling communist parties could not afford an open class confrontation with their workers. Instead they prevented the emergence of politics through symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Urban 1997), which consisted of censorship, hypocritical dissimulation of mass politics, and the cultural and administrative controls on workers’ consumption. Nevertheless this created a durable, very broad, and homogenized structure of contention. The object of claim-
making was hypocritical bureaucracy; the key demand was to live up to the ideological promises of social justice, welfare, and rational regulation.

Thus Stalinist terror and industrialization followed by bureaucratic de-Stalinization created a broad and relatively equal citizenship (Deutscher 1953; Lewin 1988). The next step was the emergence of what Tilly (1997, p. 199) considers the two crucial aspects of democratization: a) binding consultation of citizens in regard to state personnel and policies, as well as b) protection of citizens from arbitrary state action. Already in the 1960s both criteria were met most of the time, albeit tacitly. The nomenklatura felt reluctant to use overt repression which could have re-empowered the secret police. Therefore they avoided provoking conflicts with proletarians because contentious meetings, letters of complaint, dissidence, strikes against unpopular officials and policies were not uncommon even in the tightly policed USSR, let alone in satellite Poland (Zaslavsky 1982; Ekiert 1996; Urban 1997).

A linear extrapolation of this historical trend suggested the institutionalization of democracy probably within the lifetime of a generation, the one that became politically aware and active in the 1960s. Instead, the outcome was the totally unexpected implosion of Soviet state. In the beginning of Gorbachev’s reform, the Soviet state acquiesced to all sorts of demands for social autonomy and tried to defuse them by using the standard tactic of promising an increased flow of material and symbolic benefits to the contentious groups. But the dramatic escalation of claims from all sides overwhelmed the Soviet state, whose legitimacy still depended on its redistributive power. As a result, the state lost its legitimacy, along with its ability to deliver on its promises and/or threats. In late 1989 the social-democratizing politics of perestroika
lost its relevance. The breakdown of Soviet state suddenly removed the key conditions for waging the class-based politics. Henceforth the contention became not only localized but predominantly ethnic.

The national awakening movements thus far operated only in the cultural fields of Soviet republics where they stayed firmly within the limits prescribed by the communist nationality institutions. These movements became political not due to the intrinsic evolution of their discourse or the ambition of national intellectuals, but because a possibility appeared to use these national mobilizations to influence the distribution of bureaucratic portfolios and the flow of goods through the state. In the USSR, such opportunities were pre-structured by the mechanisms of ethnoterritorial affirmative action (Brubaker 1996; Suny 1993; Martin 2001). And still it took the breakdown of central governance to void the intra-élite taboo on the use of nationalist politics.

The Soviet Union was not taken apart by the national intelligentsia who only served in the ideological vanguard. The actual destruction was carried out by mid-ranking nomenklatura who sought to escape the looming collapse of the centralized state by grabbing whatever assets lay close to them, whether they were economic enterprises or the ethnic-territorial governments of republics (Bunce 1998; Solnick 1998). This process relied heavily on the existing networks of local patronage that had to be reconfigured en marche: extended to include select intelligentsia ideologues and sub-proletarian violent entrepreneurs, and insulated to bar interventions from Moscow and from the local competitors.
Once the disintegration of the USSR undermined the all-Soviet economy and citizenship, the focus of contention shifted to membership in the polities of successor states. These struggles were acute because, in the zones that re-emerged with peripheral status, the existing ruling elites sought to reduce membership in the new polities. The political survival of dominant patronage networks hinged on their ability to control the flow of power and goods and to dispense privileges to a hierarchy of clients. There were no longer central adjudicating authorities and very few traditions of the rule of law. Therefore, sharing power appeared too dangerous, and the loss of power amounted to the loss of everything: economic privileges, clients, and personal security. For the excluded minorities caught in such struggles, secession appeared the best way to preserve their status and privileges.

If this analysis is correct, then we may expect that a robust theory of ethnic conflict would emerge from the more general theory of contemporary state-making and, given the observable trends, state-breaking. First of all, it will draw on the new understanding of revolutions and mass mobilizations (see Goodwin 2001). The readers probably noticed that this paper made no reference to the recent theorizing on nationalism. Since the late 1970s this has been a very active intellectual field dominated by such towering figures as Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Tom Nairn or John A. Hall (whose 1998 edited volume provides a good summary of the field). But the theories of nationalism are predominantly concerned with historical lineages and conditions that gave rise to modern national forms. My focus was on something quite different: the emergence of ethnic conflicts as default option in the struggles over the eroding states whose industrializing achievements have been
drastically devalued. Further research on ethnic wars might prove me wrong but this remains to be seen.

**Future Prospects**

The overall conclusion should now be clear. Globalization was not the direct cause of ethnic violence in the newly emergent post-Soviet peripheries. The common cause of post-Soviet ethnic conflicts was the breakdown of central governance occurring in the state that had historically institutionalized nationality in its affirmative action practices and used to operate through the layers of ethnically-formulated networks of bureaucratic patronage. But if market globalization was not the cause, further down the road it does become the major structural condition for the perpetuation of contention in the ethnic and fundamentalist forms.

The immediately obvious effect of globalization is to shift the wrath of the masses from their increasingly irrelevant national or local governments to the world’s dominant group construed as “American plutocrats”. The latter, due to the enormous social and physical distance, assume mythical proportions in popular imagination. Such distance makes the usual forms of contention impossible. Nonetheless, a strongly negative emotional background remains and is expressed in the recent spread of anti-Americanism and, by implication, anti-Semitism. These generally remain at the level of impotent feelings, but on September 11, 2001, a daring group of conspirators showed how ideological fantasies could materialize.

The second effect of global market restructuring on the character of peripheral contention is perhaps more consequential. The connection, however, seems less evident
because of its deeply structural nature. Additionally, it is buried under the weight of ideological clichés. I mean the social and political effects of de-industrialization in the former developmental states. Post-communist transitions were widely assumed to result in democratization by liberating the latent civil societies and creating new property-owning middle classes. This is one of the central tenets of neo-liberalism (see Eyal, Szelényi, and Townsley 1998, Ch. 3). Indeed, in past epochs the middle classes – artisans, petty bourgeoisie, entrepreneurial farmers, or autonomous professionals – often were found in the forefront of democratization in Western countries. In the capitalist core, historical conditions favored the existence of large middle classes in the first place. Yet even there, as Tilly (1997, pp. 210-211) can attest with the authority of detailed expertise, the success of democratization alliances often depended on the active support of proletarians.

In post-Soviet countries the new middle classes turned out to be not as big and autonomous.\(^2\) Not surprisingly, they feel very ambiguous about democratization in locales where wealth is linked to political patronage and foreign connections, where income disparities are large, and where the presence of underemployed workers and sub-proletarian masses perennially threatens with social problems and political unpredictability. The persistent fantasy of post-communist middle classes has been Pinochet rather than Jefferson. So far, the hegemonic vision of neo-liberalism imposes

\(^2\) Today many educated and well-placed Muscovites who, on the basis of comfortable wages paid in dollars, claim to be middle class are, in fact, privileged proletarian clerks employed by banks and other firms directly connected to global capital flows. But since their wages stand far above the low average, the dispositions of this group are very “un-proletarian”.
political conformity on the peripheral states. The result, however, is only a shallow emulation of electoral procedures and capitalist transaction technologies. David Woodruff (2000) provides an illuminating discussion of disjuncture between the veneer conformity to the hegemonic project of globalization and the profoundly different bases of social power in the realms of peripheral neo-patrimonialism.

This poses the question: what has been actually achieved by the latest world-wide wave of democratization in the 1980s and the 1990s? We need to know what the relationship was (negative, positive, or none existent?) between the actual structures of domestic politics in various countries and the new geoculture of human rights, internationally monitored elections, and their effects on the credit ratings of governments. Does the globally-induced form of democratization continue or subvert the older-running structural trends that have been engendered by developmentalist proletarianization? Can the global democratization eventually grow deeper local roots, and if so, by what social mechanisms? Or will the veneer peel off when the global climate changes again? As well, we might ask whether de-industrialization and the resulting social marginalization of the populations in so many countries makes likelier a global confrontation between the neo-nativist political forces, drawing their support from angry masses, and acting in opposition to the global capitalist forces and the peripheral compradors. In other words, through what processes the Clash of Civilizations could become a self-fulfilling prophecy?

REFERENCES


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