

Ethnic Mobilization and the Type of State Birth: Why Do Grievances Lead to Violent or Nonviolent Uprisings?

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Mobilization and Conflict in Multiethnic States, by Manuel Vogt, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019, \$74.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780190065874.

It has been more than five decades since Ted Robert Gurr asked the question, “Why Men Rebel” (1970), in the most popular scholarly work of political rebellion and protest. The subsequent research often focused on grievances as the main motivation behind collective mobilization (Collier and Hoeffler 1998; Fearon and Laitin 2003). Yet the questions of how and why grievances lead to group mobilization and violent or nonviolent conflict onset still attract much scholarly attention. Not all groups with grievances engage in violent and/or nonviolent mobilization. Some do. This is the puzzle Manuel Vogt addresses in this theoretically novel and empirically rich book. He focuses on the type of state birth, i.e. colonial settler or decolonized states, as the backbone of several causal paths from grievances to ethnic conflict onset.

The hierarchization and level of social integration among ethnic groups are the major mechanisms through which inequality, the main cause of grievances in existing research on civil conflict, leads to mobilization, argues Vogt. In colonial settler states, the influence of inequality is mitigated through stable power dominance by the major ethnic group; thus, power shift across ethnic groups is not very likely. This is accompanied by a high degree of social integration – i.e., assimilation of minority groups – which reduces the salience of ethnicity as a source of mobilization. Therefore, Vogt challenges the most established causes of ethnic conflict in a delicate manner by establishing that inequality, thus perception of relative deprivation, does not automatically transform into collective mobilization. Rather, it is about whether the political system entails an opportunity structure leaving room for violent and/or nonviolent mobilization or presents alternative ways of political organization that reduces the significance of ethnic identity as a motivating factor for collective action.

The opportunity structure, defined by the degree of hierarchization among ethnic groups, determines whether ethnic groups planning to rebel can find the necessary resources once they decide to engage in collective mobilization. Groups in colonial settler states are less likely to do so due to a high degree of inter-group hierarchization, which does not allow minority groups to get their hands into such resources. Hence, if they decide to engage in collective action, these groups are more likely to turn to nonviolent mobilization. On the other hand, in decolonized states, violent rebellion is more likely since the hierarchization among ethnic groups is unstable. This enables each group to get their hands into necessary resources for violent uprising. In addition, since social integration among groups is weak in those states, ethnicity can still serve as a politically salient factor motivating collective action. Vogt further elaborates on inter-group elite ties and power shifts among ethnic groups in constructing testable hypotheses.

The book deserves much praise for its attempt to diversify the effect of inequality on ethnic conflict onset in connection with the style of state birth. Nevertheless, it is contradictory when one thinks about the motivations of colonial settler states, such as the United States, which introduced the principle of self-determination and protection of minority rights although the dominant ethnic groups in the United States always managed to control power within the territories where they established their rule. Vogt argues that behind high levels of hierarchization and social integration in colonial settlers lies these states' ability to repress and assimilate diverse groups. Yet the theoretical story is incomplete without considering the international environment within which states exist. Most settler states are located in Latin America and North America, except Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Zimbabwe (Table 2.1., p. 31). The rough descriptive statistics about the number of armed groups that emerged within the period between 1946 and 2010 show that Latin America had very similar trends in comparison to the Middle East and North Africa, which has most of the decolonized states. When it comes to internal conflict onset, we know from existing research that third-party support is a significant predictor of violent conflict onset (Jackson, San-Akca, and Maoz 2020). Of 455 armed groups, which emerged in this period, 10.55 percent was in Latin America while 11.65 percent was in the Middle East and North Africa (San-Akca 2016, 58). Surprisingly, while the percentage of the groups in the latter, which managed to get third-party support is almost 26 percent of the total cases, the ones in the former represents only 4.9 percent of these cases.

The theoretical story is therefore incomplete without comparing the international environment of the settler and decolonized states. The armed groups fighting settler states did not receive external support from third-party states to the extent that the groups fighting decolonized states received such support. In other words, opportunity structure is not only a product of the domestic political circumstances. It is also a matter of the international environment of a state and whether there are ethnic conflicts in its neighborhood (Sambanis 2001; Hegre and Sambanis 2006; Buhaug and Gleditsch 2008). One cannot help but notice the fact that most countries in Latin America gained independence from their colonizers in the early 19th century, which gave them sufficient time for institutional consolidation. On the other hand, most decolonized states gained independence in the early 20th century, thus institutional consolidation was not completed once the ethnic conflicts broke out, such as in Lebanon, Iraq, and India.

One can also emphasize the fact that the settlers never left, while the colonizers did leave the countries that they had ruled prior to decolonization. Although Vogt acknowledges this point, he seems to ignore that this kind of settlement by colonizers led to other forms of domestic contention if not ethnic conflict. In other words, grievances in the former case emerged not in the form of ethnic-identity based grievances – because ethnicity was no longer a salient issue due to high level of social integration (i.e., assimilation) – but rather as class-based grievances stemming from their lands occupied by wealthy colonizers. In other words, colonial settler states have not been free of conflict. They often experienced other forms of contentious politics, such as revolutions and military coups, as demonstrated by numerous coups and socialist oriented revolutionary movements in many Latin American countries. Even in never-colonized states, such as China, occupation by Japan led to a socialist revolution that produced a regime still ruling the country. This is to show that whether and how grievances are transformed into collective mobilization may not have anything to do with the mode of state birth.

The book is ambiguous about the logic behind causal mechanisms when comparing settler states with titular states. For a long time, scholarship was occupied with delivering some solutions to ethnic conflict (Welsh 1993; Saideman et al. 2002). It was argued that, though democracy has a mixed effect on ethnic conflict, it often reduces the severity of such conflicts. In addition, consolidated democracies are less likely to experience internal conflict in general (Hegre 2001; Fearon and Laitin 2003). Hence, the conventional wisdom suggests that the absence of ethnic conflict in countries, such as the United States, France, and Australia, was due to the extensive democratic channels these countries present for minorities to express themselves through peaceful

channels. Nevertheless, many consolidated democracies, such as the United Kingdom and Spain, experienced ethnic conflict. Vogt's causal mechanisms, the degree of hierarchization and social integration among ethnic groups, explain this peculiar empirical observation. The question, though, still remains: why are colonial settler states, such as the United States and Australia, more successful in achieving a high degree of social integration (i.e., assimilation) than the United Kingdom, which is the most established democracy in the world to date? Why did the oppression of African Americans by the United States not lead to violent conflict onset by African Americans whereas the repression by the British state led to the Irish insurgency (Aktürk 2022 in this Symposium). My suggestion for an answer is from existing research on ethnicity regimes – i.e., policies designed to handle ethnic diversity within a country (Aktürk 2012). It is difficult to trace the source of such policies to whether a state was a settler state or a colonized one.

Furthermore, we learn from the book that China and the United States, two distinct political systems, are similar in terms of hierarchization and social integration of diverse ethnic groups that live within their borders. Vogt states,

In the titular nation states, where state power has often become relatively permanently tied to the titular core group, pronounced hierarchization should also mitigate the risk of violent challenges to the state center as the ruling regimes use their coercive power to quell any attempt of armed rebellion. For instance, despite – or precisely because of – their long-standing oppression ethnic minorities in communist Bulgaria and Romania were unable to mount a significant challenge to the ruling regime [...]. Similarly, with the exception of the Uyghur conflict, the Chinese regime remains in firm control of all (potential) mobilization attempts by ethnic minorities (51).

Indeed, both countries lack the opportunity structure for the rise of ethnic parties that would help mobilize their corresponding ethnic groups for violent rebellion. I applaud the author for going beyond the conventional democracy-autocracy dichotomy and pointing out that policies adopted by these two types of states might be similar when it comes to handling minorities. In either case, minorities lack resources to rebel violently. In the United States they had the opportunity to engage in nonviolent rebellion due to the domestic freedoms and liberties granted by the democratic norms and rules. Vogt helps identify two key variables, i.e. the diverse degrees of hierarchization and social integration regardless of a country's political regime type, thus making it possible to compare across countries with apparently diverse political systems, such as China and the United States. Grievance-based theories assume that aggrieved groups will be automatically motivated to engage in violent uprisings. Yet we now know that “motivations (grievances) alone are not sufficient to explain distinct forms of collective action” (4). Whether minorities respond through violent or nonviolent uprisings is a matter of how countries perform with respect to these two indicators.

One drawback of the theoretical argument is that it is not clear why colonial settler states is superior to titular states, which are superior to decolonized states, in achieving a higher level of social integration among diverse ethnic groups. Vogt states,

in fact, between the two key properties of ethnic group relations, social segmentation has a somewhat stronger effect on the risk of violent ethnic conflict than the stability of group hierarchies. This is precisely why the few highly hierarchical decolonized states (such as Sudan or Sri Lanka) are still more likely to experience violent ethnic conflict than the equally hierarchical, but much more integrated colonial settler states. It also explains the higher conflict rates of titular nation states, such as Turkey, Thailand, and Azerbaijan, compared to the settler states. (98)

Even if one buys into the argument about colonial settler states being more successful than titular states in achieving a high level of social integration among ethnic groups, it is not obvious why this is the case necessarily. Nevertheless, the answer can be inferred from Vogt's distinction between hierarchization and social integration being more effective for governmental and territorial conflicts, respectively (99). When a country fails in hierarchization and the power shift among ethnic groups is flexible, it is more likely to face rebellion targeted towards a change of government; whereas if social integration fails, then it is more likely to face minorities rebelling to acquire territorial autonomy or secession. This is a key point to learn from *Mobilization and Conflict in Multiethnic States*.

Using case studies, Vogt elaborates on the role of inter-group elite alliances and ethnic political parties in collective mobilization. The assumption is that in decolonized states each group strives to form a political organization on the basis of ethnic identity, whereas in colonial settler states only the marginalized groups do so (70–71). Therefore, in settler states marginalized ethnic groups are also divided among political parties, which are organized in a way to reflect the major division within the dominant group. They end up being integrated into this broader system to stop being marginalized rather than fighting against it. Although the causal ordering of exclusion and mobilization gets confusing throughout the book, one can rest assured that mobilization is not an automatic outcome of grievances. Indeed, political organization is the mediator between exclusion and ethnic mobilization. And whether political parties are organized along ethnic lines is a function of the domestic opportunity environment in settler and decolonized states. Colonial settler states are less conducive to the formation of ethnic parties, whereas decolonized states are more likely to allow such organization.

In general, one can always question the causal ordering among the key variables – hierarchization, social integration, and conflict – mostly because conflict might as well precede both. In other words, ethnic conflict might have consolidated existing hierarchization, depending on the winner, and increased the odds of assimilation if there is a decisive winner in the end. I will leave it up to the reader to decide. *Mobilization and Conflict in Multiethnic States* is unique in terms of its approach to state birth by identifying three types: 1) foreign rulers establish institutions bringing together ethnic groups under the same political authority, 2) colonizers may entirely settle in the new territories, and 3) Titular states, which are born in the territories of major empires by a core ethnic group, such as Turkey, China, and the United Kingdom. The style of birth, then, determines whether ethnicity gains salience, and grievances are addressed by the pursuit of violent or nonviolent instruments. It is a must-read book for those who are looking into the factors that influence ethnic minorities to choose between violent and nonviolent tactics in pursuit of their goals.

Disclosures. None.

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