

## Is stability possible in multi-ethnic states?

Consider with particular reference to examples from post Soviet states and Yugoslavia.

‘All who wish to go will be transported, large and small, young and old. Don’t be afraid, just take it easy. Let the women and children go first...No one will harm you.’

(Ratko Mladic)

Ethnically diverse societies carry various degrees of conflict potential. Since the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of Yugoslavia and USSR these potentialities for instability were devastatingly realised amidst a din of genocide and ethnicised violence. This paper will argue that instability precipitated from the inherited structure of these nascent democratic states. That, emerging from an ethno-federal architecture of institutionalised and politicised ethnicities, the core of the state was abruptly ruptured by secessionism and conflict. Such was the case in many inherited ethno-federal statehoods, from Bosnia and Kosovo to post-colonial Nigeria and Ethiopia. With mind to complexity, I will further argue that violent instability is not the distillation of a single impulse, but rather surfaces through the manipulated and instrumentalised politics of elite demagogues. Indeed, as Geertz writes: ‘It is the very process of the formation of a sovereign civil state that...stimulates sentiments of parochialism, communalism, racialism, and so on, because it introduces into society a valuable new prize over which to fight and a frightening new force with which to contend.’ (Geertz, 1963) Thus the possibility of stability in nascent, multi-ethnic states is rendered to a minimal, predetermined by its own divisive and affective political architecture. Finally, I suggest that the nascency of the state is significant, for the overarching focus of this paper on failed states does not wish to protract from the historical known that many multi-ethnic states are stable, the UK and Switzerland being two such. Rather, I argue that this is so because the stability of the multi-ethnic state evolves over time, as ethnicised institutions and politics dissipate and pluralistic ones usurp.

The disintegration of the socialist federations of the USSR, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia refreshed doubts about the political durability of multi-ethnic federations. The violent instability within former Yugoslavia somewhat emerged from the remnants of a decayed ethno-federal architecture in which ‘component territorial governance units were [once] intentionally associated with specific ethnic categories.’ (Sekulic, et al. 2006) As Brubaker writes, under the Titoist regime, the centralised Belgrade state ‘cynically manipulated nationalisms by the use of quasi-federal institutional devices.’ That political articulation thereafter found itself along ethnic tropes was pure corollary to this penchant for federal engineering and the ‘elevation of ethnicity to the level of the sole...principle of political organisation.’ Yugoslavian politics further dwelled upon a system of subtle reciprocity, perpetually feeding its republics a sham rhetoric of secessionist and pseudo-cultural possibilities, whilst simultaneously administering the deadening anathema to those very ends. As Hobsbawm writes, fear and coercion kept Yugoslavia together by preventing ‘ethnic and communal tensions from degenerating into mutual violence’.

Yet subsumed beneath this hollow image of communism as a ‘sentinel for self-determination’ were very much the seeds of future ethnicised violence in that, once the repressive apparatus was dissolved, the possibilities of secession and cultural autonomy became just that, possible. As such, ethnicised violence within the Balkans was firmly embedded in these ideological sentiments of possibility, to such depths that the rivalrous visions of Serb federalism and Croat nationalism would constitute war come 1991. As Hughes posits: ‘with a quarter of Serbs living outside Serbia, a centralised Yugoslav state was a guarantor of Serb security. However, for Croats and their history of opposition to Habsburg rule, a decentralised state and weak federation meant self-governance, unencumbered by the hegemony of the Serb. This universal condition of the post-Soviet state, strung in a limbo between identification with a lifeless communist past and a pubescent nationalist future, abetted the rise of the demagogue and his instrumentalised politics of primordial histories and ethnic otherness.

Yugoslavian ethno-federalism, by institutionalising the what might have been temporary or partial into permanent group identities, facilitated the creation of a distinctly ethnicised political system. Yet under the primordialist approach, these politicised ethnicities preceded even the state, historically wired within the innate biological and natural dispositions of man to remain distant and inimical to the ethnic other. Instability and conflict thus emerges as a struggle for hegemony between competing claims of identity based principally on the Stalinist doctrine of self-determination; of common descent, language, territory and common psychology. One such primordial agenda proposes that the Bosnian genocide was determined by the Slavic affinity for violence and a long-established mountain-dwelling predatory instinct. (O'Loughlin et al. 2009) The instrumentalist approach however furthers the primordial dogma to accommodate for manipulation, such that ethnicity, rather than static, becomes a changeling, subject to the political throes of its cultural elite. As Dahlman iterates, 'nationalists themselves tend to be selectively historic and essentialising primordialists.' (Dahlman et. al 2010) One such was President Tudjman who, as a means of gaining political legitimacy, stirred the collective memory of the Croats to the World War II massacre at Ustasha.

Oberschall configures this 'manipulation of ethnicity' within a cognitive frame, the frame defined itself as that 'mental structure which situates and connects events, people and groups into a meaningful narrative in which the social world that one inhabits makes sense and can be communicated and shared with others' (Snow et al. 1986) Yugoslavs experienced ethnic relations through two frames: a normal frame and a crisis frame. In peaceful times the latter remained in the collective memory yet latent at the subsurface. Oberschall posits that in the normal frame, which prevailed in Tito's Yugoslavia, ethnic relations were cooperative and neighbourly, indeed in Prijedor prior to the Bosnian genocide, the population was 42.5 % Serb and 44 % muslim and relations were congenial. However the instrumentalised disruption to this frame befell the Yugoslav republics during the demise of communism, and its subsequent ideological usurping by a nationalist crisis discourse. According to Dubrana Ugresic (1998) at the fore of this discourse was a core elite of 'great manipulators' disseminating a 'culture of lies' through the fabricated media.

One such Bosnian broadcast typified its insidious and warped logic: 'the Muslims expelled us from Kosovo with their sexual organs...they want to do the same here.' Amidst political elites these words found tragic economic justification as a means of appropriating state assets in the pseudo-privatisation orgy. The hurried elections of 1990 delved further into symbolic, primordial elements, Woodward writes: 'In a world of competing symbols and personalities, at a point of political transition, nationalism has a particular advantage. The message is simple, relies on the familiar...not having to develop a new political language or explain the complexities of democratic institutions and market economy.' Thus in the post-colonial or communist context, the political nascency of the state-individual relationship actively incentivises the former to exploit along the pre-given ethnic tropes. Normalised through repetition, these ethnicised narratives tapped into the base primacies of the Yugoslav people, and through a cascading process - those 'self-reinforcing processes that change the behaviour of a group of people through interpersonal dependencies' - created the delusional logic of the Us and the Other. Such cascades, as the Hutu-Tutsi relations of Rwanda suggest, are inflamed once the instrumental politics of ethnicity are coincided with economic, malthusian hardship.

The instability of multi-ethnic states in the Former Yugoslavia were engendered in the centrifugal forces of uneven economic development. Hechter and Levi (1979) suggest that the Yugoslav pseudo-federal, Serb hegemony created a system of internal colonialism and of exploitative core-periphery relations. At the city scale, Sarajevo experienced such relations, with highly selective streams of investment divided between its Serb and Muslim quarters based upon a hierarchical cultural division of labour. Woodward contends that the political mobilisations embedded in the eventual break-up of Yugoslavia precipitated from these schemas of spatially uneven development. His conjecture finds empirical support in the facet that the richest republics - Slovenia and Croatia - led the revolt against a re-centralisation of the federal state and obligations to redistribute income to the poorest regions of Yugoslavia. (Woodward, 1995). Yet rather than remaining an economic antagonism, the ensuing crisis found political articulation along ethnic tropes. Herschell posits this

as pure corollary to the Yugoslavian 'elevation of ethnicity to the level of the sole...principle of political organisation.' In essence, ethnic federalism accommodated the secessions of the Slovene sort because it reified and solidified ethnic cleavages and gave them political, legal, institutional and territorial foundations. Further, as liberal democratic theory suggests, the language of freedom and self-determination inherent in liberal democracy facilitated secessionism within the post-Soviet space.

The political opportunism of Chechnya relied upon distinctly masculine identities, as Flint (2005) evinces, 'the construction of a unified national ideology is frequently dependent on powerful gendered identities...of the male-dominated public sphere.' These political norms of patriarchy however contributed to instability within the multi-ethnic Chechnyan state. As Ó Tuathail (2008) posits, 'a crucial role in the institutional accommodation of separatism in Russia was played by the emergence of a strong presidential patrimonial system under Boris Yeltsin.' Yet, this system of personalised elite bargaining and institutional flexibility induced instability as 'irreconcilable personal animosities between Yeltsin and Chechnyan leader Dudaev' transpired into the sanguine, First Chechnyan War. That the Russian Federation initiated a second war in the autumn of 1999 under Putin furthers the sense of a masculine, instrumentalised politics at hand. Similarly, Saakashvili's self-constructed 'rebel style' and mired personal relationship with Putin transpired into the ethno-territorial conflict between a Russian-South Ossetian contingent and the Georgian national army. A post-Soviet space so firmly embedded in symbols and personalities reiterates the malady of the multi-ethnic state, in that, out of its inherited yet dying architecture, emerged the juvenile politics of primordialism and ethnicised slaughter.

State instability and violence was manifest in the ideological transition between the collapse of communism and Yugoslav-Soviet democratisation. The structural flaws inherited from the pre-democratic, ethno-federal system contributed to the violent and genocidal distillations within the Bosnian-Kosovan region. Elites further orchestrated political mobilisations along ethnic tropes and diffused through the media the ethnicised agenda of Us and the Other. This paper has hinged upon the premise that multi-ethnic state always inherit an ethno-federal architecture. Yet the such a theoretical premise is supported by empirical examples throughout Europe, Asia and Africa, precisely because both post-communist and colonial states inherited and were subsequently neutered by their ethno-federal predecessors. The possibility of stability in nascent, multi-ethnic states is thus rendered minimal, predetermined by an inherited divisive and affective political architecture, affective, precisely because it animates the demagogue to begin his bidding. Such political seduction is however transient, multi-ethnic states are capable of existing in stability. Frantz Fanon, the young and impressionable Algerian, would surmise the case succinctly: 'Imperialism leaves behind germs of rot which we must clinically detect and remove from our land but from our minds as well.' The institutionalised rot, that within the mind, indeed stays a while longer, till pluralism and stability return.

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