

BOOKS: POLITICAL SCIENCE

Killing Other Peoples

Sudhir Kakar

Of all the forms of collective violence that plague mankind, the ethnic riot—the intense, sudden physical assault by civilians of one group on civilians of another—is one of the bloodiest and certainly the most brutal. In the just-completed century, the number of dead claimed by the primitive weaponry used on the killing fields of ethnic rioting was second only to the number of lives snuffed out by the sophisticated armaments of modern warfare. And the outlook does not seem much better, at least for the first decade of the new century. Beyond the immediate deaths, ethnic riots leave a trail of human misery and dislocation in their wake; they are frequently followed by secessionist warfare, terrorist violence, and a general undermining of democratic institutions. The form and dynamics of such ethnic violence are the focus of Donald Horowitz's latest book.

Horowitz, a professor of law and political science at Duke University, has long been interested in the problems of divided societies and ethnic conflict. This magisterial yet stimulating study is marked by the comprehensiveness of its empirical data, the author's keen analytic sensibility, and his gift for the telling phrase. Horowitz demonstrates how little we know about ethnic violence, and he shows that much of what we think we know is based on commonsense notions that are more often than not likely to be false. Consider a few of the many assumptions about ethnic riots that generally remain unchallenged in even serious discussions of the subject: Such riots are unstructured, frenzied episodes fueled by the hatred of the culturally distant, "different" groups. They are organized by manipulative leaders seeking political gain. They are motivated by envy of prosperous ethnic groups, such as a trading minority, which are then selected as targets. Their underlying causes are economic matters, such as a competition between groups for resources. Increasing prosperity undermines the occurrence of ethnic rioting.

To refute these assumptions, Horowitz marshals a wealth of evidence from studies of some 150 ethnic riots in about 50 coun-

tries around the world. He sees them as hoary myths that may lead well-meaning policy makers into costly yet ultimately futile investments in such programs as increasing intergroup contact, creating superordinate goals, or providing intercultural training. The disposition of contesting groups to engage in such activities, Horowitz trenchantly observes, is the result of a conflict already gone soft rather than the cause of diminished violence.

A major achievement of this book is its integration of the psychological and the strategic: the "primordial" (in the sense of ethnicity as a strong affiliation) and the "instrumental" approaches to ethnic violence, which have for far too long remained locked in adversarial positions. For Horowitz, "the riot involves passion and calculation"; it is a mix of impulse and instrumental thought. The riot may be a furious episode, but its passion and fury do not swamp limited, partitioned spheres of rationality in the rioters. Conversely, "riots may begin by being exemplary, but they end up being euphoric."

With a consummate mastery of the literature, both theoretical and empirical, Horowitz convincingly demonstrates that one needs to turn to both psychology and strategic behavior to explain the major elements of ethnic rioting: the participants and selection of targets; the leadership and organization; the supporting conditions and precipitating events; and also the locations, methods, and effects of violent episodes. According to Horowitz's analysis, ethnic riots erupt from the fusion of four indispensable elements: (i) a hostile relationship between two ethnic groups; (ii) a response to events that engages the emotion of one group, a response dominated by outrage or wrath; (iii) a keenly felt sense of justification for violence, such as viewing it as self-defense, part of a long drawn-out war, or punishment of the other group for wrongdoing; (iv) an assessment by the participants that the violence carries reduced risks.

As someone who lives in a riot-prone country where ethnic violence is infinitely more than a subject for scientific inquiry and scholarly disquisition, what I find especially admirable about Horowitz's achievement is his provision of guidelines to minimize the havoc wrought by these destructive episodes. In much of the West,

the declining legitimacy of ethnic animosity and an increasing aversion to mass violence in general (war, I believe, may still be an exception) have reduced the sense of justification needed by potential rioters. Moreover, the absence of this social support has considerably increased the personal risks assumed by would-be rioters. For many non-Western societies, these changes remain desirable long-term developments.

In the short term, the most effective strategy seems to be a preventive one wherein the risks of rioting behavior are considerably increased. This strategy requires an effective deployment of police force, especially during the "lull," that brief period of 12 to 24 hours between the first isolated incidents and the major outbreak of violence. Punishment after an episode is not as effective as prevention. It is undermined by difficulties in the identification of individual rioters and the high political costs if the rioters are associated (as they often are) with powerful political parties or the regime. The resulting failure to punish, then, further reduces the risks perceived by rioters and will only foster the recurrence of violence.

The Deadly Ethnic Riot is that rare combination of theoretical analysis and practical advice. It not only signals a breakthrough in our understanding of the morphology and dynamics of ethnic riots but offers eminently useful strategies for containing these deadly events.

EXHIBITS: ASTRONOMY

Painting the Skies

Virginia Trimble

Please do not go to this exhibit. For unless 90% or more of the readers of *Science* refrain, the rest of us won't be able to get in. And I, at least, want to go back. This visit, I (an astronomer) went with a cousin who is an artist. The trip was the longest time we had spent together in a decade without quarreling. Contemplating a thousand years of anything cannot help but lend perspective. At midday on a Thursday, we had the exhibit nearly to ourselves for the hour needed to see and read

Star Struck
1000 Years of the
Art and Science of
Astronomy
Ronald Brashear and
Daniel Lewis, Curators

Huntington Library, San
Marino, CA. To 13 May
2001.

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