

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ROBERT LAYTON, *Order and Anarchy: Civil Society, Social Disorder and War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 172 p., index.

As I commence this review, Hamas militants have just defeated Fatah militants in Gaza, another anti-Syrian politician has been assassinated in Lebanon, and I have just skimmed a press report on Maoist guerrilla movements in poverty-stricken regions of India where the central government is “far away.” All of these examples, and tragically so many more, fit clearly into the main focus of Robert Layton’s book which is “a study of civil society, of the construction and breakdown of social order and the role of violence in human social evolution” (2). Layton is professor of anthropology at the University of Durham in Britain, well known in his field for such disparate studies as historical continuity and change in French village life, and of the anthropology of art.

Layton’s book contains a significant number of concepts which need to be carefully defined, and he is usually meticulous in so doing. Most notable is the concept of “civil society” which Alvin Gouldner defined as a medium through which people can pursue their own everyday projects, and as ways of avoiding dependence upon the state through patterns of mutual self-help. Layton himself defines civil society as “social organizations occupying the space between the household and the state that enable people to co-ordinate their management of resources and activities” (11). Note, however, that he follows Ernest Gellner (but not Gouldner) by excluding from this definition any moral requirement that civil society should work to support or oppose the state or that it should exclusively promote individual liberty and group cohesion. From this perspective, Layton observes that the term “anarchy” usually means the breakdown of authority in society leading to civil disorder. It can, however, mean the freedom of local communities to lead their lives through voluntary cooperation: the essence of civil order.

Since the issue of social order has engaged some of the greatest social theorists in western political literature, we are introduced in the first chapter – “Civil Society and Social Cohesion” – to the relevant ideas of Hobbes, Locke, Ferguson, and Rousseau as well as the ideas of such founders of the discipline of sociology as Comte, Spencer, and Weber. (Durkheim comes a bit later.) Contemporary scholars are also mentioned, although Layton is swift to criticize Gellner’s argument that only a market economy guarantees “flexible contractual associations and voluntary specific-purpose associations” so that civil society did not exist before capitalism.

The primary importance of the introductory chapter is that it contrasts two major strands of thought about individuals, social order and disorder in society. Looming over one strand is Hobbes. Having experienced the English Civil War, he became the doyen of the view that individuals are, by nature, violent. Thus he argued that unless people signed a “social contract” to give power for monarchical government to keep order, their lives would consist of random disorder and be “nasty, brutish and short.” In recent times, studies of violence amongst chimpanzees and the link between high rates of violence amongst the Yanomamö people of South America and higher fertility amongst aggressive males have also contributed to the view that humans have a natural predisposition to violence; and indeed that under certain circumstances organized violence may be an element in furthering what is euphemistically called “progress.”

The other strand, which Layton clearly favours, has its intellectual forerunners in John Locke and Adam Ferguson. Both argued that individuals originally had “natural rights” in an initial “state of nature” which, as Layton clearly shows, was not defined (as with Rousseau) as being a state of naked innocence, but rather as intrinsically social, involving contracts between man and wife and between individuals to defend property. These contracts were ultimately vested in the state as a kind of umpire; but should the state exceed its authority, they could be taken back. Using Layton’s words, “[the] possibility is that humans have always been capable of building cooperation and reciprocity through recognition that social order is in their long-term interest. The scope of social relations, however, fluctuates according to the extent to which mutual trust can be relied upon, or wellbeing (sic) increased through joint action” (169). This latter comment is vital to understanding Layton’s support for the existence of civil society in many parts of the globe before capitalism. So also is the fact that neither Locke nor Ferguson treated societies recently “discovered” through colonial expansion as intrinsically inferior to contemporary mercantile capitalism. Ferguson notably argued that the Iroquois confederacy was rationally sustained, and that “we tend to exaggerate the misery of barbarous times” because they would have been miserable for us.

In the second chapter, “Self- Interest and Social Evolution,” Layton argues that if we ask, following a Darwinian evolutionary approach, what benefits accrue to the individual by upholding conventional rules, we can fruitfully combine evolutionary theory and social science. Central to this approach, and remarkably original in this context, Layton uses elements of game theory and the famous “prisoners’ dilemma” in which two suspects isolated in separate rooms are told that if one implicates the other in the crime, s/he will be rewarded; that if they both confess, their sentence will be moderate; that if one confesses and the other does not, the hold-out will get a severe sentence: the dilemma being what each suspect should do, and really only resolvable if each has good reason, from past experience, to trust the other to keep silent. Similarly, in game theory, a zero-sum game is one where survival can be assured only through the destruction of another party; and a non-zero-sum game is one, even where there may be no umpire to enforce

an agreement, in which the players can reach an equilibrium point where they both survive through cooperation.

Towards the end of chapter 2, Layton argues that individuals can, over time, find it in their self-interest to cooperate, and benefit from working together within civil society and from the legitimate role of the state – a view which in chapter 3 he links to the work of Giddens and Bourdieu. What then of “The Breakdown of Social Order” which is the title of his third chapter, and the central core of his book? The chapter addresses two questions: “what turns civil society against the state? What causes cooperation and reciprocity within civil society to give way to competition and conflict?” (92). If we accept that social systems are created by the interaction (not necessarily conscious) of agents using cultural strategies devised over many generations, then it is evident that a loss of trust, or the fear that the strategies no longer work, may cause individuals to believe that their self-interest lies elsewhere. Layton’s initial focus is on the causes of breakdown of social order, followed by the study of violence and catastrophic change. Then strategies for redrawing the limits of civil society are discussed, notably reliance on kinship and ethnicity, with case studies of Somalia, Albania, India, and the former Yugoslavia.

The main causes of breakdowns of social order, says Layton, lie in the cost of government, globalisation, privatization and the destruction of local civil society, and competition for natural resources. With the first, his examples drawn from colonial Africa show that the imposition of heavy bureaucracies, and the undermining of traditional local modes of taxation often starved states of revenue and led people to turn for security and services to kin-based or ethnic patronage. Globalisation played a part in the collapse of Yugoslavia when the International Monetary Fund demanded that the country repay huge loans from western banks, and citizens accordingly saw massive cutbacks in domestic expenditures. As their standard of living fell, Serbs accepted Milosevic as leader, whom Layton calls “the craziest person,” because he offered simplistic solutions. His exploitation of ethnic tensions resulted in sanctions that in turn led his erstwhile opponents to become allies in the struggles for decreasing resources (a zero-sum game). The rest is tragic history. As for privatization, it was classically applied during the eighteenth century British enclosure movement, the ideology being that communal efforts encouraged lazy “free-riders” and were less profitable than private ownership. This ideology still permeates much of the thinking of the IMF and the World Bank, the actions of which, in many third-world countries, have undermined local civil society and severely weakened the power of the state. Finally, the competition for natural resources is not just a result of over-exploitation of the third-world environment as some westerners would argue, although a recent *New Scientist* article (30 May 2007) does statistically link rainfall levels, and notably drought, to the increased likelihood of warfare. However, recognition that powerful outside forces, not least western multinationals, may purposefully stimulate disorder to further exploitation of valuable resources – the classic example being diamonds in Sierra Leone – points repeatedly to the willingness of such forces to undermine long-standing cultural strategies in pursuit of profits.

Note that in most of the examples cited above, the role of the state is either weakened, or perverted to become an arm of sectarian interests, and in either case adversely-affected individuals are likely to turn to (or return to) more local kin or ethnic ties for survival. But what if at the local level long-standing cultural strategies designed to maintain peace and co-operation are replaced by the prisoners' dilemma? What if in Bosnia, Serb-Christian villagers and Muslim villagers living cheek-by-jowl no longer felt that they could be sure that "the Other" would not kill them? One outcome in this case was violence and catastrophic change. In the section of chapter 3 which focuses on this theme, Layton notes that terrorism will often be used specifically to undermine mutual trust and further violence, often in the interests of sectional elites. In the process, and not least when genocide occurs, use will frequently be made of those whom Robert Kaplan calls "loose molecules" – socially volatile young men, usually with limited educations and few employment opportunities, flocking to cities and seeking both survival and status. Layton does not deny the importance of these loose molecules, but he does suggest that to simply blame them and their controllers is to ignore the role of the global economy.

In Layton's words, "Since ethnicity and kinship both depend on exclusion, they are likely to precipitate violence. The trick performed by ethnic or nationalist extremists is to convince members of a multi-ethnic community that they can dispense with each others' help in future (the prisoner's dilemma) and instead fight for the largest share of resources (a zero-sum game)" (135). Such refocusing of civil society is, therefore, always potentially dangerous, but Layton has little good to say about the role of western countries in the process. "The West is profoundly implicated in the breakdown of order in Africa. Our refusal to acknowledge that role is symptomatic of continuing western racism" (136).

The final chapter is devoted to the theme of "warfare, biology and culture," that is, the role of violence in human social evolution. We have already referred to this theme in connection with the Hobbesian vision; and although this may seem unfair to Layton, the fact that almost one quarter of the chapter is devoted to the controversy about the warfare and reproduction of the Yanonamö lessens its interest to sociologists. But his conclusions are important, if not entirely uncontroversial. Human warfare emerges when the web of social relationships is compromised. Human societies are complex and subject to periods of disorder. At such periods, selfish leaders, unscrupulous mass media and local Big Men have maximum opportunity to violently change the course of history. Nonetheless, "violence is not inevitable, not an uncontrollable genetically programmed trait inherited from a common ancestor of humans and chimpanzees, but a response to particular conditions in the ecology of society. The desire to promote order is equally entrenched in our behaviour" (173). His final words are that when inter-ethnic violence and kin feuding occur in distant parts of the world, they are precipitated by changes in the ecology of global society, "an ecology in which we also participate and which is shaped by the policies of our governments" (173).

This volume will appeal to senior-level classes in sociology, anthropology and political science. It should also be read by anyone who wants to make some sense of the seething hatreds, attached to AK47s, which daily splatter our television. In many ways it is a profoundly humanitarian book that seeks to understand, rather than condemn, what we see. However, in his reflections on the involvement of western states and corporations, Layton might have mentioned that terrorism usually does not succeed where members of the groups whom it seeks to influence, see little justification for its actions. Hence, despite their 800 victims, the ETA Basque separatists have proved only marginally successful in soliciting support and creating ethnic division. Unfortunately, in the Middle-East the opposite applies: the West has played a major part in stirring the pot of latent religious and ethnic hatreds which have now spun off into global Islamic fundamentalism and “home-grown” terrorism which feeds off real or imagined grievances.

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