

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

GÜNTHER SCHLEE, *How Enemies are Made: Towards A Theory of Ethnic and Religious Conflicts*. Oxford: Berghahn, 2008, x + 182 p., index.

When Samuel Huntington proclaimed in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* that an individual's culture and religious identities would be the primary source of conflict in the post-Cold War era, he was doing so from the standpoint of a very different world. Günther Schlee's text, *How Enemies are Made: Towards A Theory of Ethnic and Religious Conflicts*, seeks to contest contemporary claims by offering an alternative explanation for systemic conflict, one that does not emanate from popular perceptions. In this text, Schlee undertakes an almost Sisyphean task of deconstructing ethnicity in an attempt to frame it not as a root cause of conflict but rather as something that emerges from it. He does not want to critically assess prior assumptions but rather to wipe the slate clean and begin anew – that is to create a new theory of ethnic and religious conflict. His task has merit, especially when one is attempting to challenge pre-existing notions of ethnic conflict. However, it is a lofty goal and, unfortunately, one that falls just short of its intended result.

Günther Schlee, who is the Director of the Max Plank Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, begins his theory-building exercise by borrowing the concept of rational choice theory (RCT) from modern political science and economics. Rational choice theorists assume actors will weigh the costs and benefits of an action before making a decision. Schlee argues that RCT can result in conflict despite the fact that what is rational to one actor may not be rational to another. In other words, a rational choice is very much in the eye of the beholder. The problem with utilizing RCT to help explain conflict is simply that some conflicts are irrational, and there is little evidence to support the argument that actors in a particular conflict are governed by rational choice theory. Schlee revisits RCT later in his text in an attempt to explain alliances among African clans which presumably would not otherwise align. He suggests that since ethnic ties are fluid, the most rational choice is to support the strongest clan in a conflict. However, it may be the case that allegiances are borne out of necessity – especially if survival of the clan is at stake. It is possible that actors in a conflict are simply “keeping their friends close and their enemies closer.” To assume that actors in a given conflict are fully aware of their actions, are able to plan a coherent response, and are able to manipulate the situation to their advantage gives them too much credit. Rather tensions among groups may escalate to a point whereby the only rational (or irrational?) choice is to start a conflict.

Throughout the book, Schlee provides alternative explanations for conflict, using his vast knowledge and experience of African clans as examples. He utilizes ideas such as “crowding,” “distribution of the booty,” “minimum winning

conditions,” and “cross-cutting ties” in order to weave an alternative view of ethnic and religious conflict. Unfortunately, one of the key weaknesses of the text reflects Schlee’s failure to integrate these theories into a new theory of ethnic conflict. Throughout the book, there is an expectation that the discussion will eventually lead to something more – an integration of the theories or at least a concluding chapter.

One of the key strengths of this text is the author’s discussions of power, specifically the limitations placed on a warlord’s ability to engage in conflict. While it may be that a conflict begins in order to appease the wants or desires of a particular warlord, Schlee successfully argues that this cannot be done without the support of his clan. The clan provides the necessary tools/material for military recruitment, which limits one’s ability to choose a conflict partner. As a result, this has important consequences for exercising power. A warlord’s status, and as such, his power is governed by rules based around certain purity acts. If a warlord fails to obey those acts, then he risks losing his status, and thus his power.

This is certainly a significant text, and would be of interest to most scholars studying conflict theory. The book is divided in three distinct parts – a rationale for a new approach to conflict theory, a theoretical framework and a practical framework. However, it is the third section that detracts from the book’s success. This section includes a case study, based on the author’s personal experience of the Somali peace process, as well as a chapter on how to become a conflict analyst. While the former chapter provides important insights into the Somali peace process, Schlee’s failure to apply any of his arguments to the case study misses an excellent opportunity to marry theory and practice.

The inclusion of the second chapter in this section is equally puzzlingly. While the information is important, it is highly unlikely that readers of this text will be seeking employment in conflict resolution or attempting to negotiate a peace among warring factions. In conclusion, this text represents an interesting discussion of conflict resolution and would be most beneficial to those seeking an alternate to traditional conflict analysis. While the author does not offer his own theory, he does successfully lay the groundwork for future conflict analysts to develop their own perspectives.

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