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The literature on nationalism as root cause for violent conflicts and on violence displaying profound interethnic disparities is abundant. And yet, few specialists focus on the international relevance and global destabilizing spill over effects of intrastate ethnic conflicts. Such an approach is provided by Raymond C. Taras and Rajat Ganguly.

The book explores the interlocking venue of nationalism, ethnic conflict, religious cleavages and the international community’s responses to such internal crises. The innovative approach resides in both an in-depth investigation on the magnitude of ethnic nationalism and on the dynamics of large scale violence of certain post-cold war conflicts, as well as on the potential and actual internationalization of such intractable ethnic conflicts.

Part I of the book covers the theoretical background on inter-ethnic violence and surveys the relevant theories on nationalism. After synthesizing the three main approaches on ethnic identities (primordialist, instrumentalist and constructivist), the authors show how ethnic mobilization and polarization lead to conflict and outline the goals of ethnic political movements.

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The first part of the book also includes a pertinent conceptual analysis on the clash between two normative principles: the doctrine of non-intervention and the right to self-determination, emphasizing how the underlying principle of sovereignty (translated internationally as maintaining order between states) is invoked to withhold recognition of ethno-secessionist claims (see Chapter 2). The authors argumentatively tackle the international normative regime’s bias against ethno-nationalists, by identifying the key pillars on which the Westphalian system has been built upon, namely sovereignty, equated with state power and authority, and its corollary principles of non-intervention and non-use of force in the internal affairs of states. They proceed, then, with demonstrating how these normative enduring principles “put politically mobilized ethnic groups at a great disadvantage in acquiring external support” (p. 49) and indicating how, after World War I, the community of states witnessed an erosion of the intrinsic value of self-determination, due to the fact that “major powers used the language of national self-determination more as a principle than as a right” (see pp. 49-50). The interesting and mind-capturing emphasize of the two authors concerns the peculiar circumstances of various responses of the international community to secessionist claims. The questions they aim to raise regard the basis on which certain ethno-political movements are considered legitimate while others are not. Special attention and coherent treatment is given to the notion of morality of secession; the authors provide us with a useful insight on the moral arguments advanced in order to justify secession, but also with an overview on the scholarship problematizing and counter-arguing the legitimacy, efficiency or possibility of such claims (see pp. 52-64).

The third chapter is a pertinent examination on the relational traits of ethnic conflicts and the particularities of the new wars; salient phenomena, such as child-soldiering, refugee flows and internal displacement, humanitarian emergencies, torture, abuse and mass rape as a weapon of war, are discussed here (see pp. 69-73). The text also includes an accurate analytical inquiry into the phenomenon of state collapse leading to the emergence of ethno-terrorism. State failure or state collapse is seen as exhibiting the new intrastate warfare’s characteristics: the violent attacks of insurgent ethno-terrorists gun and drug trafficking, warlordism, the privatization and internationalization of wars and the partisan external intervention in ethnic conflicts (see pp. 74-84).
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The underlying research questions of this scientific endeavour target the spill over effect of nationalism and ethnic and religious conflicts and the challenges they generate against regional and global security. Mainly, the authors are interested in: emphasising the root causes of such conflicts, observing the manner in which the international community reacts and discussing whether external intervention is the appropriate \textit{modus operandi} of the international community, and asking why some ethnic and religious conflicts become internationalized and others do not.

Throughout Part II of the text, the authors theorize the relationship between ethnic conflicts and the international community’s reaction, which displays various forms of responses, from the (sometimes) proactive, (sometimes) incoherent intervention of a third party (USSR in Ethiopia, India in Sri Lanka, West in Yugoslavia), to the tacit acceptance of regional power arrangements and non-interference, to American intervention in ethno-religious conflicts conducing to a range of different outcomes.

The deliberate and inspired selection of case studies is meant to attain two goals: on one hand to cover different areas of the globe ranging from Asia, Europe, Africa and North America in order to capture the endemic features of the conflicts, and, on the other hand, to encompass both possible outcomes of separatist claims, namely one not leading to the legal breakup of states (Tamil struggle for Eelam in Sri Lanka, Chechnya’s attempts to separate from the Russian Federation and Quebec’s devoid of violence separatist movement), and the other conducive to secession (Eritrea) or complete disintegration (Yugoslavia).

The first case study, \textit{Nationalism and the Collapse of an Empire: the Soviet Union, Russia, and Chechnya}, relates the Chechen struggle for independence to the idea of empire dissolution which generates “an opportunity structure for the emergence of new kinds of nationalism” (p. 119). The authors briefly survey the literature on the rise and fall of empires and observe that most historians and political scientists do not focus on nationalism as pivotal factor for their dissolution. The arguments provided by Raymond C. Taras and Rajat Ganguly indicate that the collapse of the Soviet Union left behind a power vacuum which nurtured ethnic conflicts and that, in considering secessionist types of ethnic movements conducing to empire fall, ethnicity and nationalism as producing factors should not be overlooked. The text pays close attention to democratization as a source of ethnic conflict and argues that “any devolution of power that occurred
[after Gorbachev’s reforms] only reinforced emerging centrifugal tendencies” (see pp. 124-125). The non-internationalization of the Chechen conflict points to the West’s apprehension of the following principle: “that this second round of ethno-secessionist disputes was the internal affair of the new states” and that Russia would not tolerate external support to any nationalist movements for independence within the federation.

The case study on Separatist Movements in Constitutional Democracies: Canada and Quebec Nationalism examines the sources of Quebec nationalism, describes the path to, and assesses, the constitutional crisis in Canada, and considers the conditions of peaceful secession. The chapter argues that Quebec is a relevant example of “separatist movements [which] emerged from the failure to construct enduring, crosscutting identities based on a federal system” (p. 150).

The third case study, Intractable Ethnic Wars: Tamil-Sinhalese Conflict in Sri Lanka, focuses on the extreme violence and the nature and dynamics of intractable ethnic wars in South-East Asia, exemplified by the Tamil minority’s struggle for Tamil Eelam against the Sinhalese-dominated government in Sri Lanka. The text includes a pertinent analysis on India’s intervention, as form of third party mediation, outlining its flawed and incoherent strategy leading to complete disaster, larger scale violence, the exacerbation of nationalist manifestations and lamentable failure to bring about resolution.

The case study focused on African conflicts outlines the characteristics of weak states and aims to assess three distinct outcomes stemming from ethno-nationalist attempts to erode the fragile unity of the state: 1) the conditions under which ethnicity coupled with outside interference from a major power results in state fragmentation (Eritrea’s independence from Ethiopia); 2) the circumstances in which democracy is consolidated, national unity is achieved and “the threat of secessionism neutralized” (as the case of post-apartheid South Africa reveals); and 3) how exacerbated ethnic divisions, as legacy of the colonial powers, and politicized identities lead to unimaginable atrocities, humanitarian crises and profound destabilization of the state (Burundi and Rwanda).

Chapter 9 of the text examines how Western military interventions in ethno-religious conflicts produce different results: the US-led military intervention in Yugoslavia (conducing to an end of large-scale Serb-Albanian struggle), in Afghanistan (where “a stand-off among the major
ethnic groups was achieved”), and in Iraq (intervention leading “to the rise of hitherto dormant ethnic and religious movements”). The authors aim to demonstrate that certain Western military interventions, engaged in with the purpose of de-escalating violent conflicts rooted in nationalism, resulted in re-fuelled nationalististic manifestations, since they “have actually increased the salience of ethnic and religious divisions” (p. 232). The mismanagement of these interventions and a deepening of ethnic lines caused by them (rather than a weakening) are discussed at length in this chapter.

The novelty of Understanding Ethnic Conflict consists in exploring the international dimension of nationalism-driven ethnic strife and the challenges it poses to the international community in the post-cold war period. After analyzing the benefits, pitfalls and liabilities regarding forms of intervention performed by the United Nations (peacemaking, peacekeeping, peace enforcement, peace building), as well as by regional powers or international nongovernmental organizations (see Chapter 4), the authors conclude that conflict resolution proves effective when the instruments and modes of operation are adapted to the realities of each ongoing conflict, instead of remaining ossified in obsolete and inflexible parameters.

An interesting approach on “the assertive new American nationalism” is provided by the authors in the last chapter, where they analyze the post-cold war American engagement in international politics in terms of liberal internationalism (a form of internationalism pursued by the Clinton administration) or of global gendarme (contended by the Bush administration). The chapter discusses how the variant of American nationalism, even though justified in terms of human rights protection, democracy promotion, economic globalization and evidenced as such in the US-led interventions, triggered a widely spread wave of anti-Americanism based on the perception that this is a form of U.S. “civilizational chauvinism”. The authors conclude that “the challenge for the U.S. foreign policy makers is straightforward: how to engage in an internationalism that serves the interests of the community of nations as effectively as it does the United States. In no area is this challenge more put to the test than in dealing with ethnic and religious forms of nationalism.” (p. 273)
The explanatory value of this book resides in its profound and extremely well-documented analyses of the case studies. *Understanding Ethnic Conflict* is also a much recommended textbook for International Relations students, comprising an accurate and concise lexicon on IR and a conceptual framework for studying nationalism and ethnic conflicts. The authors survey the main theoretical approaches, provide us with the specific terminology, defining the relevant concepts, include a vast empirical data and resort to heuristic methods of study, by raising relevant questions for further inquiries at the end of each chapter.