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V. P. Gagnon, Jr. *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. xxii + 217 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4264-3.

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Identities are Contextual? Reconstructing the Identification Process of Ethnic Groups in the Former Yugoslavia

There is no doubt that study of the Balkans has fallen off the map–that scholars have moved on to other case studies and other regions. So why has V. P. Gagnon Jr. written a book on the Balkan wars? This review aims to answer that question and suggests that scholars of contemporary armed conflicts read *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s* because it goes far beyond the study of Serbia and Croatia. The main purpose of this text is to provide documentation that debunks Western political theoristsâ?? common myths about ethnic war. The earlier emergence of "culture wars," where ethnic groups perpetrated aggressive marginalization through political, ideological, religious, and economic means, ignited Western imaginations in the 1990s, and this theme has stuck with us ever since. In fact, the discourses of identity and conflict prevail as markers of the end of the twentieth century. Gagnonâ??s book re-imagines these notions of ethnicity, culture, and identity and how they inform our understanding of genocidal warfare.

In *The Myth of Ethnic War* Gagnon outlines an alternative narrative of pre-war beliefs about ethnicity and identity as held by the wider Serbian and Croatian civilian populations leading up to the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. It briefly reviews the Yugoslav political history from 1960-1989 (focusing on the League of Communists), and then, in detail, discusses the last years of the 1980s using statistical and opinion polling data. Gagnon continues through the 1990s and the challenges of understanding the causes of violence in the Balkans during a post-Cold War period. He then uses this background as the basis for re-framing commonly held Western beliefs about ethnic war.

As in other highly political arenas, there are a series of common assumptions associated with these types of wars. According to normative Western discourse, ethnic wars occur only in so-called primitive, ethnicized, underdeveloped nations that are not yet evolved (or have not yet graduated) to the ranks of civilized nation-states. These conflicts are thought to be based upon ethnic divisions and are associated with the homogenization of spaces and symbolic places–again a marker of the last centuryâ??s post-Cold War territorial re-organization–and whose citizens would stop at nothing to erase the signs and symbols of competing cultures. Such culture wars gnawed away at positive identity narratives, and what remained were the negative identity narratives manipulated by the pathologies of nationalism. As a result, the discourse of identity became a negative construct and impacted the ways in which violent conflict was codified and comprehended by the West.

V. P. Gagnon suggests that the ways in which the West imagines ethnic warfare assumes Western culture to be superior to those involved in the contemporary armed conflicts. This then simplifies and falsely categorizes the identities of those participating, either willingly or otherwise, in wars that are "named" ethnic. Moreover, he blames those in the field of political science for framing the wars in the former Yugoslavia as ethnic. Further, he accuses political scientists of continuing to intentionally overlook data that suggests these conflicts were something more than battles over ethnic regionalism and bounded homogenous territories. He goes on to illustrate that the pre-1990 ethnic spaces in the Balkans were heterogeneous, textured with multiple languages, economies, social behaviors, and forms of identification. These, though, have been left out of the simplified arguments, which suggest that clear ethnic dividing lines existed prior to the wars and that the conflicts were nothing more than tribal territorialism.

The task that Gagnon set for himself is to deconstruct the dominant political discourses of ethnic war using anthropological notions of identity and ethnicity. In this way, he attempts to indemnify the people of Serbia and Croatia who were under the purist political influ-

ence of pathological national elites. If, as Gagnon suggests, anthropological studies consider identity as a process of identification rather than an absolute, static attribute, then the story of the Yugoslav wars can be reexamined. The new evaluation considers the pathologies of nationalism rather than the common assumption that Serbian and Croatian civilians subscribed to an agreed-upon identity, culture, or homogenous nation and this then propelled them towards violence.

Two case studies are employed to accomplish Gagnonâ??s goal, Serbia and Croatia. Interestingly, Gagnon decided to use these two countries because of the Westâ??s interpretation of their so-called pathological nationalism, their seemingly paradigmatic ethnic conflicts. He traces the development of elite strategies over time, the challenges to elite interests, the discourses of threat, and the strategy of conflict. This demonstrates that the strategies of conflict were aimed at political demobilization of the wider population to preserve control over the structures of power.

Gagnon offers more attention to Croatia than Serbia, and draws upon primary source materials that, as he puts it, have not been tapped by the West. Without these materials Western theorists were led to simplify the Yugoslav wars as the "bad Serbs" against "good Croats." One such source is the Yugoslav polling data from the late 1980s. This statistical and opinion polling data offers researchers an alternative narrative devised from quantitative and qualitative sources.

Using these previously unknown materials, Gagnon proceeds to offer insight into the ethnic wars of the 1900s, proposing that nationalistic elites required some strategy to undermine the voice of its political opponents and the heterogeneous publics of both Serbia and Croatia. Gagnon offers the notion of "demobilization" as the powerful tool used to suppress opponent voices.[1] He understands demobilization to be the corollary of mobilizing the voice of a people and supporting their role as powerful agents in an inclusive society; as such, demobilization becomes the intentional silencing of a peopleâ??s voice, the undermining of their role as social agents, and their increased marginalization and exclusion from the public realm. Gagnonâ??s demobilization is part of the process that can lead to genocide. In fact, he describes in part the notion of *identicide*–the intentional destruction of material and psychic elements with which a group identifies–and the destruction of which, according to Gagnon, is the precursor to genocide. In Serbia and Croatia, the strategy of violence and demobilization became necessary because ethnic identities were not the powerful motivating forces that elites anticipated. In these two countries the regimes managed to perpetrate a strategy of violence to demobilize the people, and according to Gagnon, silence their voices and the voices of the challenging elites. It was also used to marginalize the people as well as the issues they used to oppose the status quo; portraying them and their concerns as outside the realm of legitimate political discourse (p. xviii).

Alternative frameworks for understanding contemporary armed warfare are always a welcome addition to the literature on genocide. Gagnon provides us with an alternative understanding of ethnic wars. He suggests that significant demobilization strategies, perpetrated by political elites against the wider populations, were required in order for the post-Cold War territorial, ethnic, cultural, and social reorganization to occur at a grassroots level. He illustrates that civilians were reticent to support the disruption of their own multi-ethnic communities and thus allowed the elites to manipulate their reorganization. Simply put, he shows the argument that these wars were purely ethnic in nature and violent in context to be inadequately supported.

Despite efforts to study and understand violent conflicts and their long-lasting impacts upon ethnicity, culture, and identity, there remains a dearth of multidisciplinary thinking that continues to result in the oversimplification of violent conflict within contemporary discourses. Moreover, the simple, blanket terms of *ethnicity*, *culture*, and *identity* tend to cause misinterpretations of social systems when coupled with theories of violent conflict. The political motivations, social manipulations, and pathological underpinnings of nationalism have led to deep and lasting impacts upon civilian populations, not only in Serbia and Croatia, but far beyond these bounded territories. Western scholars and policy writers have inadvertently perpetuated the myths of ethnic warfare, and as Gagnon suggests, may even be complicit in its continued misinterpretation.

This book is successful in two respects. The first is that Gagnon has introduced a series of non-Western statistical data to the West. It is important that further analysis of this data be continued by other scholars. The second is that anthropologists and cultural geographers examine ethnicity, culture, and identity in ways that political scientists do not, and Gagnon has successfully contributed to linkages between these disciplines. Gagnon is not the first to do this, but his multidisciplinary study strengthens our opportunities for understanding.

Note

[1]. Gagnon uses the term "demobilization" within

a political studies discourse. There are other common uses of the term; the most popular connects it with the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) process of military ex-combatants in post-conflict communities. This programming involves many actors, including the international community, which is deeply entrenched in the success of such programs. The DDR process actively demobilizes soldiers and is the decommissioning of former combatants, in fact, removing their military rank and membership and formally releasing them from a military group. There is no overlap between Gagnonâ??s term and the common practice of military demobilization.

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