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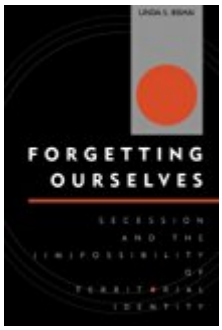

Linda S. Bishai. *Forgetting Ourselves: Secession and the (Im)possibility of Territorial Identity.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. 190 pp. $26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7391-2082-8.

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Although secessionist demands have caused or framed numerous conflicts during the postwar period, few studies have dealt directly with secession. This book places secession as the central object of its analysis, but not to justify it, discover its etiology, or to provide solutions. Linda S. Bishai explicitly questions the dominant political principles and norms that have shaped secessionist demands and that have established secession as the only path to national self-determination in the twentieth century. One purpose of *Forgetting Ourselves* is to provide a historical and conceptual account of how groups have concluded that exclusive control over a territory is the only way to secure and legitimize their identity. This conceptualization demonstrates that the constituent elements of nation-states and secessionist movements are the same. Bishai pays special attention to two such elements: "territoriality" and "identity." The former is defined as the "political legitimation of space" (p. 3), a process that binds a territory to a (national) identity. Bishai argues that it is in the twentieth century that this tie has become so powerful because a core norm of the modern international system is the inviolability of territorial sovereignty. Territorial identities "dictate personal and national identities" (p. 81).

However, this book's most striking characteristic is not the conceptual analysis of secession, but its explicit and systematic critique of secession and territoriality. Engaging with constructivist and postmodernist considerations from the literatures of political philosophy and international relations, Bishai seeks to deligitimize the normative assumptions of secession, an endeavor that could ultimately render "secession a thing of the past" (p. 5). Bishai's sharp antithesis to secession should not be equated with the statist view that regards secession as a disruption of the international order, for she questions aspects of the current international system as well. The author emphasizes that secession creates far more problems than it solves, since it solidifies division, promotes the logic of group "purity," and essentializes otherness. Rather than ending or containing conflict, secession perpetuates the very conditions that may produce conflict and secession in the first place. Moreover, secessionist demands are structured upon the false premise that a separate

state will render secure an identity perceived to be threatened. However, Bishai claims, no identity can ever be completely secure as long as diversity exists. Instead of seeking absolute security of our cultural identities within a confined territory, she calls for the recognition of difference and the realization that encounters with others are above all constitutive of ourselves. Bishai argues that the need for rendering one's identity legitimate should be valued and protected, but identity should be distinguished from exclusivist and antipluralist territorial claims (p.91). Overall, the concept of secession allows Bishai to explore a vast array of issues, such as territoriality, the function of the state system, the politics of identity, democracy and multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism.

In the first chapter, Bishai criticizes mainstream "explanatory" theories of international relations for failing to engage systematically with the theme of secession. "Constitutive" theories are better equipped to discuss the origins of the international system, which is based on the conjunction of two principles: that of popular sovereignty and the more recent one of national self-determination (p. 19). It is within this historically contingent context that secession's meaning should be grasped. In the next chapter, Bishai reviews what she terms "problem-solving" studies of secession, produced by non-international relations scholars and grouped into justification theories and causal analyses. The author criticizes such approaches for treating the concept of "secession" as given (p. 32), or even for "institutionalizing secession" (p. 52). However, the argument that "causal analysis cannot account for the contingency of ethnic or group identities" denies explanation of secession through a constructivist epistemology (p. 51). Chapter 3 discusses the history of territoriality and modern statehood to demonstrate that it is actually in the twentieth century that territory became a necessary condition for citizenship, national identity, and the application of popular sovereignty (p. 63). Towards this end, Bishai analyzes important theorists of the past, such as Niccolò Machiavelli, and critical events, such as the Treaty of Westphalia, in order to delineate the gradual politicization of identity. She illustrates how the application of territoriality has created an insider/outsider cleavage in international politics; insiders are those groups that exert sovereign rule over a territory that is considered as exclusively "theirs," whereas outsiders are the less powerful groups. Some of the latter view secession as the only way to enter the club of the privileged. Alternatively stated, territoriality makes the international system what it is through the creation of nation-states, and at the same time threatens its stability in the form of secessionist movements.

Bishai implies that territoriality is the catalyst for the "creation and maintenance of national identity" (p. 63). One might argue, however, that it was the gradual construction of supralocal identities and the appearance of the principle of popular sovereignty that created the need to politicize space. In any case, the relation between national identity and territorial state does not appear as straightforward as Bishai argues, and certainly, there is not one universal pattern. Also, the author rightly underlines the arbitrariness of state boundaries and the inequality that this produces, but downgrades the fact that territoriality, with all its negative implications, might have been necessary to legitimate an international order that is the more pluralistic and ***prima facie*** more just than the preceding one. Whether the principle of territoriality should be still upheld or not (as Bishai argues) is debatable. However, it should not be overlooked that in most cases it went hand in hand with the principle of popular sovereignty, and the expectation of democratic rule is and was used as a resource to shake off imperial rule.

In the following three chapters, Bishai shifts her attention from territoriality to identity. Territoriality has a profound impact on identities, since it is only through a sovereign territorial

state that a group identity is legitimized and recognized in the international arena. Moreover, dominant groups develop a proprietary conception of the state, excluding minorities. In turn, secessionist groups aspire to reproduce the practice of monopolizing power and ascribe territory to a single, supposedly homogeneous, and definite identity. Thus, for Bishai "by definition, secessionists must be antipluralist" (p. 109). She illustrates this in chapter 5 by scrutinizing three secessionist movements. Although secessionist discourse is beyond doubt ethnocentric and self-righteous, Bishai presents it as utterly intolerant, indeed, as invariably chauvinist. She treats "secessionists" as a homogeneous category, as if there is no variation among them; this can be assessed only through empirical analysis. Of course, Bishai's endeavor is not empirical, but this does not justify aphoristic assertions. Secessionists, moreover, reproduce the nationalist fallacy that "political rule by one's own cultural group ... is a good and fair thing" (p. 90). However, Bishai implies, the mere facts of the secessionist conflict and the exclusion that secessionists themselves have experienced demonstrate the fatal deficiencies and the wrongness of exclusivist national rule (and, therefore, of secession). The author argues that secession can be seen as either a "withdrawal" (that is a segregation from the national other) or as a "conquest" (an attempt to eliminate other identities) (p. 154). This can only mean that there is an "inherent contradiction between democracy and national self-determination" (p. 112). Secession, then, cannot be a just solution; we should adopt new nonterritorial ways to legitimize cultural identities.

This also entails an alternative way of thinking about identities, a theme that Bishai treats extensively, especially in chapters 4 and 6. Groups and individuals tend to conceive identities as natural and eternally fixed and moreover, as unquestionably incompatible with other identifications. This process of "***social*** and ***cultural*** othering" is a prerequisite to establishing "***territorial political*** othering" (p. 125). Bishai proposes to understand difference as relational, where identities and groups are mutually constituted and are conscious about the value of this relationship. Therefore, diversity should not be perceived as fragmentation, as in the current political practice, but as "diversified pluralized culture" (p. 157). In such a pluralistic environment, the perceived mutual exclusivity of identities will fade away, multiple identifications will be possible, and the importance of states as the exclusive regulators of identity will be diminished. The alternative democratic politics that Bishai envisages should not be equated with a harmony of interests and identities. They are better understood as "politics of agonism," where identity groups continue to compete, but the other is respected as necessary for the definition of the self and the function of democracy (p. 157). Alternatively, if identity groups learn to forget, secession, as well as any other attempt to impose exclusivist control, will become obsolete. Building on Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche's concept of "critical history," Bishai argues that "we must remember in order to know who we are, and forget in order to become what we may be" (p. 133).

The underlying idea binding together Bishai's complex argument is that cultural identities as performed today prioritize particularity and self-reference. In conjunction with territoriality, they rigidify social and cultural boundaries and produce exclusion. In order to escape from pathologies, like cultural domination, ethnic cleansing, and xenophobia on the one hand, we should transform our way of thinking about otherness and encourage multiple identifications. On the other hand, we should abandon territorial control as the unique source of political legitimization. Bishai's argument is undoubtedly powerful and interesting, although its normative character may attract criticism based either on a positivist, "objectivist" standpoint or on different ideological assumptions. Bishai analyzes identity and secession in terms of ideas, norms, and discourse. Although such analysis is both legitimate and desirable, it

precludes a more complete understanding of identities and secession. Bishai analyzes identities by focusing on how they are understood and perceived by individuals and groups. It can be argued that identities "consist of social relations and their representations."[1] She discusses these representations extensively, but their social foundations are almost absent. By arguing that after the radical modification of our way of thinking about identities, "secession will no longer be relevant," Bishai downgrades the role of political mediation (p. 54). Identities and norms do not operate in a social vacuum, and their change presupposes some form of change in social relations. In other words, in Bishai's analysis, it often appears as if ideas and theories operate independently of social realities and political praxis, as if identities are properties of groups and not constituted by and constitutive of group action. Secessionist movements are not simple manifestations of identities, nor do they merely seek to legitimize their identity; they are products of certain conditions and particular social relations, relations that secessionists most probably perceive as unjust or unfavorable. Building on Craig Calhoun's arguments, the assumption that identities are embedded into particular cultures, webs of belonging, and social networks has two implications. First, although identifications may be multiple, they are not infinite nor do they depend entirely on individual choice. Therefore, identities cannot be detached by particular territorial and cultural spaces as easily as Bishai claims. Second, cultural identities, as with every other identity, are a form of social solidarity. Although national identities are not devoid of internal conflicts and tensions, they are characterized by a minimum sense of common understanding and belonging. Calhoun argues that "needs for solidarities are unequally distributed;" that is, those who feel more weak and insecure are more in need of attaching to a particular identity.[2] Bishai demonstrates how dominant principles (territoriality, sovereignty) shape secessionist demands, but fails to include in her analysis the equally constitutive role of power configurations and social hierarchies. By equating nation-states and minorities, Bishai ignores the fact that more often than not secessionist movements embody social grievances and claims of social justice. In other words, her critique of secession could have been based on a better and more sensitive understanding of the social conditions of secession.

Notes

[1]. Doug McAdam, Sidney Tattow, and Charles Tilly, ***Dynamics of Contention*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[2]. Craig Calhoun, "'Belonging' in the Cosmopolitan Imaginary," ***Ethnicities*** 3, no. 4 (2003): 531-553.

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